

STAR WARS

A Dark Path

By Alice Hadden

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away

Chapter One

It should have been the birth of a new era for the Rebel Alliance, an altogether new Republic; but good intentions always seem to fall short.

Leia Organa Solo studied several data cards laid out before her and sipped distractedly at a cup of lukewarm coffee. She did not notice the dark, enigmatic figure that slipped into the nearly empty cafe. Within the Imperial City of the bustling planet of Coruscant, it was very quiet--far too early for anyone of sane mind to be up and working. After a full night's work, Leia felt anything but sane. She was exhausted and the bad coffee made her stomach upset. She had suffered from insomnia ever since her twins, Jaina and Jacen, had been sent to a hidden location several months ago as infants. Leia covered her eyes and tried to confine the migraine that threatened to cause her head to explode. Within a few weeks, the twins would reach their first birthday and, if things weren't as hectic as they had been, she would have a chance to visit them. She knew her loyal assistant Winter took good care of them; feeding them, watering them, loving them. But the high ranking diplomat couldn't shake the feeling of being replaced. Jaina and Jacen probably did not remember her as their true mother, but adopted Winter as their surrogate. Luke had insisted the Force-sensitive children be sent away to protect against the corrupting influences of the Dark Side; at least, he had said, until their personalities were solidly developed, perhaps two of three years. Leia was given the choice to join them or stay with the Inner Council. At the time, she felt her political responsibilities were more pressing and she would go to them as soon as things got straightened out. However, as the fledgling government became more tangled in its own ambition, increasing demands heaped upon her head like lumps of hot coal. She felt guilty, and bitter, and missed her family.

"Good morning."

Startled, Leia removed her hands from her face to see her brother seated directly before her. His handsome, but unremarkable features were hidden carefully beneath the shadows of a dark hood. Youth had long since passed them both and only the faintest glimmer of Luke Skywalker's old restlessness remained in his cool, blue eyes. He, too, carried burdens that made Leia decide her own were insignificant. The burden of unexplainable power. Sometimes he seemed less than human and sometimes more--but there was a streak of melancholy that consumed his lifespirt every day. He looked aged beyond his thirty years, more withdrawn to

meditation. Still, it was his insistence that separated her from her children and Leia was not one to hold pity.

In a not altogether friendly tone, she quipped, "Good morning yourself."

"Hard day ahead of you?" Luke asked and lowered the hood of his robe. His face was rough with stubble. A server droid lumbered over and he ordered coffee and a pastry.

"You might say that," she replied once the droid had turned away. Pessimistically, she returned her attention to the data cards on the table. The days were becoming harder.

"We've received orders from Mon Mothma to attack the Bodyn shipyards this morning," Luke stated.

"I know that. I'm a member of the Inner Council."

"Madam President didn't give a specific reason..."

Leia stopped shifting through the data cards and rubbed her pounding temples. The Jedi was fishing. She waited until the server droid returned with Luke's breakfast before responding. "Commander Skywalker, I am not at liberty to divulge the specifics of highly classified information."

"Leia, you're talking to your twin brother..."

"Suffice it to say that Madam President feels it is in the interest of New Republic security."

Luke took a bite of the pastry and mumbled, "So tell me, do all noble causes become governmental bureaucracies?"

The politician anticipated this and had prepared a diplomatic response. "It's only natural you might feel this way after we've fought so long and hard against Emperor Palpatine. But the cause we pursue now is just as noble. As we give rise to a new nation, we must govern ourselves diligently and make certain our boundaries are secure."

She had more to her speech but broke off as Luke sipped his coffee and gazed at her, unmoved.

"They don't have a prayer, you know, without the Emperor or our father to guide them. They haven't moved against us in nearly a year. Why not let them be?"

Leia arranged the data cards in neat stacks and avoided her brother's gaze for a moment. She finally conceded, "It's a matter of politics. There are those on the Inner Council who want to see the Empire ground into spacedust. I've been up all night long trying to see if we can somehow shift the balance of power back to our favor."

Luke touched a finger to his lips and studied her expression. "I see. Maybe different warlords have the same ambitions."

"Be careful what you say, Luke." Leia's eyes shifted nervously to catch nonexistent eavesdroppers.

Luke chewed on the pastry and brushed crumbs from the two days' growth on his chin. "You're right, councilor, my apologies. It is, after all, a political matter."

"Don't be sarcastic," Leia told him and leaned forward to whisper. "The Inner Council is extremely displeased with you as it is. Look at you! You really need to start taking better care of yourself, Luke."

"Appearances are not of great importance to a Jedi," he stated flatly.

"At least shave that scruff. It looks just terrible."

"A matured Jedi Knight should have a beard."

"And you just said appearances weren't important!" Leia scoffed and gestured to his monkish apparel. "Well, if the object of this is to break the military mold, you've certainly succeeded. They think you're some kind of religious fanatic."

Luke and Mon Mothma had had words over this a few days before and the debate was still unresolved. The New Republic was a secular society through and through, and Madam President could not see her way clear to follow the traditions of old, to allow the Jedi Knight to serve as counsel for the infant government. He would then be prepared to see for himself...but that was what she feared. Her spread of angst gossip was irritating, but so typical of one desperate to cling to power.

He folded his arms in defense and asked, "And what do you think?"

"Luke, I know the Force is real. I've seen you use it. I've seen Darth Vader..." She bit her tongue at the mention of their father's name, then continued. "But I also know you're not the same farmboy that came to rescue me some ten years ago."

"Of course I'm not." Luke reached over to grasp his sister's hand. "Leia, the Force has changed me in ways I can't even begin to explain."

"For the better?"

Luke had to take pause and think about this. The Force was more than a tool. The indelible mark it left on the soul of its user was certainly not all sweetness and light. Slowly, he nodded. "I believe so. And I believe it's time you learned of it as I have."

This time it was Leia who drew back and folded her arms. "I'm not sure I want to."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like breaking the laws of physics."

"But, Leia, restoring the Jedi Knighthood is so very important," he insisted. "Someday the children will need to be taught..."

"I really resent the fact that you've taken it upon yourself to get so involved. Jacen and Jaina are my children, not yours. It's bad enough you had them sent away."

"It's for their own protection against the Dark Side..."

"I know! You've told me a thousand times and I hate it!"

Luke took a deep breath. "Let it go."

"Sure." Leia bit down on a series of stinging remarks but let a few of the most pointed slip through anyway. "I think you should get married and have children of your own. Then you could raise a whole garrison of little Jedis."

Luke frowned and Leia flushed, realizing she'd placed a rather large foot in her mouth. Upon the revelation that they were twins, their relationship had evolved from one of timid infatuation to brotherly love. It could not have been easy for Luke to accept the truth and the love she had for Han Solo. It was a subject they mutually decided never to discuss. Her comments hit a little too close to the mark but she added, "It might be nice if you met someone..."

The Jedi quietly interrupted. "I think you and the twins need to learn some defensive techniques at the very least."

She retorted, "To tell you the truth, I'm much too busy at the moment to take up witchcraft. I think you'd better get ready to leave, Commander."

The Jedi let this all pass with infinite patience. "Are you all right? You seem irritable."

"I'm irritable, exhausted, sick to my stomach...I've been up all night long and I'm in no mood..."

"Leia?" Luke's brow furrowed as he leaned closer.

Leia threw down a data card which toppled one of the neat stacks in a clatter. "What! Why are you looking at me like that!"

Her twin brother took her agitated hands into his own and used the Force to touch the tiny presence growing within her. The unborn was so small, yet resilient. "Sister, you're going to have another child."

Leia closed her eyes and accepted what she had wanted to deny over the past month. To be a mother, a wife, and a leading player in New

Republic politics was becoming next to impossible. She couldn't stand this separation any longer and knew, finally, the choice would have to lie with raising the children. She could not envision her husband shirking his machismo to change diapers and play peek-a-boo. She felt cheated.

"Leia?" Her brother sounded concerned.

Leia sighed. "Han and I haven't been getting along very well lately, as if we ever really had gotten along...He mentioned something about going to the Bespin system for a while. Seems that Lando hit it big at the Sabacc tables and wants to get the Tibanna gas mines up and running again. I suppose I'll tell him if he gets back within the next eight months. Otherwise, he'll just have to be surprised."

Luke remained silent but kept her hands in his. Support for his twin was undying, despite their differences in opinion. Yet inwardly, Leia felt very alone.

The shuttle destined for Admiral Rufus Haake's fleet was filling with still grounded pilots in search of transport. Beside it, the aged Millennium Falcon belched hot steam and Han Solo cried out from beneath the dented hull.

"OW! Chewie, shut it off! Now!"

The steam subsided as Luke Skywalker poked his head through a porthole to look at his old pirate friend. Even though his smuggling days were far behind him, and Solo had gained some notoriety as a respectable, if not responsible, leader during the Battle of Endor, he was still much the swashbuckling rogue he always had been. It was an attraction of opposites for Han and Leia, hence the makings for a tumultuous marriage.

"You okay down there?"

"Fabulous," Solo grumbled. "Just fabulous. Chewie, toss Luke the fusion cutters and a hydrospanner! I think I left 'em near the port maintenance outlet!"

Luke caught the tools and handed them down to Han. "Why don't you stick around until Leia has a chance to talk to you?"

"Because I'll be near death by the time she can squeeze me into her busy schedule."

Luke rolled his eyes. "Come on..."

"Why should I? If you can think of one...solitary...good reason to give that woman the time of day after the way she's ignored me lately then...maybe I'll give it a...shot." Solo grunted as he cranked on an overhead compartment. Down poured a flood of sticky lubricant which he narrowly escaped. "Blast it! A bucket, kid! I need a bucket!"

Skywalker jogged down the landing ramp with pail in hand and Han Solo mopped grease from his face.

"For cryin' out loud, would you look at this mess? Chewie!"

"I've got a reason," Luke said as he held the bucket beneath the dwindling flow of goo.

"Oh yeah?" Han collected his tool kit and began searching for an appropriate implement. "What's that?"

"You love her." Luke watched his old friend's expression twist into something pained.

"That's not good enough," he snapped and roughly brushed the Jedi aside to tighten some fittings on the landing gear. "Nothing is ever good enough for that woman. Leave it to me to be fool enough to marry a perfectionist."

The Millennium Falcon groaned as if giving up some kind of ghost. Skywalker looked at the ship warily. "Will this thing even make it to Bespin?"

The air reeked of burning oil.

Han shrugged. "She's just settling. You just wait and see what kind of improvements I'm going to put in this baby." He patted the Falcon's hull lovingly and turned to face Luke Skywalker in all seriousness. "I've just got to get away from that sister of yours for a little while. The politics are driving me absolutely crazy. And I'm not just talkin' public politics."

"It can't be that bad."

"Kid, I know how it sounds but it's for the best, at least for right now. Trust me. Now, you'd better quit playing therapist and hop on that transport for Bodyn IV. Looks like they're about ready to take off."

"Just talk to her before you leave, okay?"

Solo frowned at the younger, more inexperienced man. With all his Jedi training, Luke had come to know a lot of things, but dealing correctly with one Councilor Leia Organa Solo was not one of them. A brief respite would be for the best and she would miss him like crazy. "We're outta here as soon as I get this thing up and running."

"I hope you don't regret this," Luke stated quietly.

Han gave him a good-natured punch. "Get outta here, farmboy. And lose the beard! It just don't look right!"

Defeated, Skywalker waved him off and dashed for the transport as it began to taxi, but paused when the pilot noticed his approach. Han

Solo came out from under the Falcon to watch the shuttle depart, straightening his cramped back muscles. A vacation would be nice.

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Life for the Empire had slowed to a crawl in the two years since the Battle of Endor. The so-called New Republic that sprouted from the Rebel Alliance had divided them, taken their territories, and run them off to the farthest reaches of the galaxy. A dozen or so factions of the Emperor's old regime rose up now and again to keep things lively; the most resent fiasco being the play for power by Grand Admiral Thrawn and others. A reckless strategy at best given the dire situation, for now the New Republic sought out Imperial remnants with renewed vengeance. The once prolific shipyards of Bodyn IV fell silent, as there were plenty of materials but very little fuel. The desolate planet in the Outer Rim was made habitable only by transparent domed biospheres that appeared like massive bubbles across the volcanic surface. The population within held its breath for fear that the slightest movement might draw unwanted scrutiny. According to an Imperial operative placed in the upper echelons of New Republic government, the Inner Council's eyebrow was raised in their direction.

A frail, old man let the disability chair he was confined to take him through the shipyard in a labyrinth of clear, tubule, environmentally sterile corridors. Airlocks separated him from gigantic vessels on either side--Star Destroyers, Super Star Destroyers; and the newest technological marvel, the Imperial Kismet. He stopped to appraise the just completed superweapon. It was a massive hulk of armor and turbolaser cannons that had the propensity of wiping out entire cities from orbit. Granted, it did not have the destructive power of the fated Death Star, but perhaps that was a blessing in disguise. Such a weapon demanded an enormous reactor core which ultimately doomed the bulk of the Empire. The Kismet was half the size of its Star Destroyer counterparts, more maneuverable, and perhaps was a model for the future of Imperial warmachines. Yet this was only a model and was far from perfect. Engineers were perplexed by a number of navigational glitches and power fluctuations that tormented the new ship. However, it was spaceworthy and would help them escape the approaching New Republic fleet. It would allow them to hold their own until new fuel could be acquisitioned. The proverbial eggs were placed in one basket.

This ancient admiral named Maxus Thorn was not the intense opportunist Thrawn was, and given New Republic vehemence as of late, he was bent solely on procuring the survival of his fleet. Thorn himself had been a survivalist all his life. His parents were killed by Old Republic soldiers and he enlisted with the blossoming Empire to avenge their deaths. During the Clone Wars, he was shot down over Sullust and lost his legs. The Empire no longer wanted him in service but he had managed to convince his superiors that a pilot didn't need legs to fly. As the years passed, Maxus Thorn proved himself over and over in campaigns against

those who would thwart Palpatine's design. Upon proving his loyalty, he had risen quickly through the ranks, scorning those who would mock him, and now he assumed the position Thrawn had left vacant. Grand Admiral Thorn smiled wanly. The dogs of war die hard.

The holocomm on the arm of his chair beeped for attention and, after receiving a terse response, a five inch hologram of Commander Storm materialized. Kayla Storm was a beautifully hardened woman after his own heart--a survivalist. It was no secret Emperor Palpatine held a general disdain for women, nonhumans, handicaps like himself. His fleet in the Outer Rim was quite a motley bunch, tolerated but sent away from the Emperor's sight. Yet it was formidable. Commander Storm was formidable. He eyed her figure and chiseled features appreciatively. At one time, many decades ago, he might have entertained the thought of romancing this aspiring, young lady. But his ninetieth year was at hand and he no longer had the patience or energy for such trifles.

"They're here, sir," she stated flatly. "The Rebel fleet has just come out of hyperspace near Bodyn III."

"Have Captains Jenkins and Saysithi prepare our retreat," Thorn rumbled softly. "Until they are vacated, the biospheres must be protected at all costs. Understood, Commander?"

"Yes, Grand Admiral."

Maxus Thorn gazed sadly upon the Kismet and sighed. "Do what you must then."

The hologram vanished. For the Empire, the objective was no longer to obtain victory, but merely to exist.

Chapter Two

The silence and solitude of space were shattered as three squadrons of New Republic X, Y, and A-wing class fighters poured out of their respective Star Cruisers and swarmed into formation. The white dwarf star rose across the ecliptic of Bodyn IV with its more ominous, red giant companion. Luke Skywalker squinted but the canopy of his fightercraft darkened automatically. Artoo-Detoo gave a nervous twitter.

Luke agreed. "Let's hope the ultra-violet rays don't fry your sensors. Hold on. This can't be right." He frowned at a response on the forward computer screen, then opened up the comlink. "Benefactor. Flagship Benefactor. This is Rogue Leader."

"Is there a problem, Rogue Leader?"

"Initial scan indicates the population is going through an evacuation procedure."

"Admiral?"

There was a brief crackle of static before Rufus Haake spoke heavily into the comlink. "Bodyn IV is to be wiped clean, Commander Skywalker. Shipyards, biospheres and all."

"The inhabitants are retreating," Luke argued. "This is genocide."

"This is war!" The admiral barked. "This mission is not like any other. Now will you submit to orders or must I relieve you of command?"

Luke was about to reply affirmatively to the latter when the transmission was interrupted by Wedge Antilles, his wing pilot.

"TIE fighters! Three o'clock!"

"We're in it now," he muttered and took a moment to watch the familiar horde of Imperial combat ships. He switched the transmitter to a short range frequency. It would be unwise to directly go against Admiral Haake's orders but, a hint could be dropped. "Destroying the shipyards is our foremost objective. Let's finish this and go home, Rogue Team."

Luke gripped the controls and guided his squadron into a vicious dogfight. The Empire had spent most of its diseased existence pillaging world of innocents. It was all too easy to slip into a desire for revenge. With the coming of a darkening age, the dwindling Empire would not be allowed to run.

Ionic blasts rained down upon the shipyards as the New Republic fighters screamed through the atmosphere. Organics and inorganics fled in every direction through the chaos. A garrison of stormtroopers attempted to direct traffic to Star Destroyers ready for take off. Commander Kayla Storm gave a silent oath as the Super Star Destroyer Nemesis exploded in a brilliant fireball. She maneuvered her TIE fighter through the flak with ease but three of her twelve-man squadron were lost.

Six of the remaining Star Destroyers and the Imperial Kismet struggled against gravity to reach the relative safety of space. One, the Antagonist, lost her lift as a squadron of X-wing class fighters pelted relentlessly against her main drive. The Star Destroyer turned downward and gracefully nose-dived into the central biosphere like a mammoth arrowhead. Storm squeezed her eyes shut against the resulting explosion and her ears rang with what seemed to be the screams of thousands. She called for vengeance against that squadron and the chase was on. The Bodyn shipyards were quickly laid to waste.

Admiral Haake watched with grim resolution as five Imperial ships escaped into the weightlessness of space only to find his New Republic fleet waiting most patiently.

His callused hands folded upon his lap and the Imperial deserter breathed, "We have them." He spoke loudly into a transmitter. "Fighters stand clear! Star Cruisers fire on my mark!"

The beams of pure energy ripped through the hulls of two escaping Star Destroyers. Their momentum curbed and they drifted silently before colliding in a resplendent fireshow. The Kismet swung about clumsily to return fire and a much thicker beam of light bore into the Star Cruiser Empower, cutting a narrow path through the melee.

The explosion blinded Luke Skywalker and he had to bank hard to avoid pummeling into the blazing debris. His throat tightened as several, in fact, nearly all of his squadron could not react so quickly and perished in the fiery holocaust. With this and the destruction of the biospheres and so much death, it was more than a day of terrible mistakes, Luke decided. There was more to this than random accident. The Jedi allowed himself to let go of the dogfighting for a moment and reached out to the Force that surrounded them, permeated them, held the universe together. There was method behind all this madness, mostly avarice on the part of Rufus Haake, and stark fear on the part of the Imperial Navy. Except for one. Someone else was out there, someone whose sense was altogether distinct from the others. He snapped back to the task at hand as the tiny fighter bucked and Artoo screamed out frantic information. The rear defense shields were nil and the leader of the TIE squadron bore down on his X-wing with deadly accuracy. The ship rolled hard but not before laser blasts ripped into the left rear engine. Luke clenched his teeth against nausea as his fighter began a tight spin. Artoo shrieked hysterically as Skywalker fought against the black dots that flooded his sight. As his vision cleared, he brought the six tons of weightless metal under control and hunted his persuers.

Commander Storm weaved through the wreckage with a handful of surviving TIE fighters, madly dashing for the flagship Zephyr before the tiny Imperial fleet jumped into hyperspace. The path cut by the Kismet was closing rapidly and it would only be a matter of seconds. Explosions rocked her fighter as four of her comrades burst into flames. The X-wing she'd disabled had them. They would never make it.

She screamed, "Zephyr! We're almost there!"

The Grand Admiral's voice was stone cold. "We cannot wait."

With that, the three Imperial warships jumped to lightspeed. Commander Storm stared at the empty space with unshed tears. Another moment and they would have been safe within the Zephyr's docking bay. Kilometers became lightyears in a nanosecond. The X-wing leader fired into her last companion and his exploding ship bumped hers into a violent spiral. She touched the eject button before losing consciousness.

"What was that!" Luke shouted but knew before Artoo gave his electronic reply. "Hold your fire! There's somebody out there and he's still alive!"

"Affirmative, Rogue Leader," crackled the voice of Wedge Antilles. "I've seen at least five others!"

"Flagship Benefactor, send out a rescue shuttle," Luke ordered. "If their lifesuits are anything like ours, they've got about fifteen minutes before they run out of oxygen"

"Affirmative." The voice sounded less than enthusiastic. "All fightercraft return to your ships."

Skywalker glided his damaged, old fighter into the Benefactor's hangar with his surviving comrades and bleakly chastised himself for letting the pilot in him take over the part that was Jedi Knight. The thrill of battle was not the glorious feeling of patriotism it disguised itself to be. There was something noticeably darker about this particular mission and his conscience bit at him. Too late, he realized. It was a brutal massacre at only the touch of a few buttons, but what was done was done. By the time he'd loosed his restraints and tended to Artoo-Detoo, Lieutenant Wedge Antilles approached and called up from the deck.

"Looks like they shot one of your engines straight to hell!"

Luke gave the rear of his fighter a cursory glance. The whole thing would have to be overhauled before the next mission, if he indeed chose to complete a next mission. "They sure did."

"Your R2 unit okay?"

"Fine." Luke grinned at the pilot and climbed down. He had flown with Antilles on more runs than he could count. Very few pilots made it through their third year, at least when the war was at its peak. While Luke Skywalker had the Force to fall back on, Wedge Antilles' piloting skills were much like Han Solo's, he flew by the seat of his pants. He was blessed by what others would call good luck, and by what Luke would call good destiny. The Force worked kindly within this man. They both watched as Artoo-Detoo was carefully lowered to the deck.

"What do you think about what we did out there?" Wedge asked.

"We caused a lot of damage." Luke knelt before Artoo and scraped off some carbon. The droid twittered gratefully.

"Obviously, but..."

Skywalker stood to face him and frowned. "I know how you feel, Lieutenant, but I think it's in our best interest if we don't say too much."

Antilles gave a curt nod. "Understood, Commander."

They both watched the rescue shuttle return like a predatory bird hoarding its prey. Luke felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as the metallic creature landed with a resounding clang. Wedge was saying something about Luke possibly getting a reprimand for questioning orders.

Luke almost didn't hear him but mumbled, "Reprimands are nothing new."

Six haggard prisoners stumbled onto the deck under heavy guard. One in particular was taking issue with the sergeant regarding their treatment. It was a woman, a commander. Her black hair was drastically short and spiked, according to Imperial code. But there was something familiar...

Kayla Storm paused in mid-tirade and shifted her gaze to look frigidly upon the Jedi Knight. The intensity of her emerald eyes faded just a bit as she perhaps recognized him in only the most basic sense. Luke Skywalker felt his blood turn to ice in response. She was a face from another lifetime, changed but much the same.

* * *

Deep within the belly of the New Republic flagship, the Imperial commander was roughly escorted to a detention cell and left to muse.

"Collect your thoughts," the arrogant guard advised. "Interrogation will be forthcoming once we reach Coruscant."

Kayla Storm forced a tight smile and watched the door shut without reprise. Crimson light flooded the tiny room but cast minimal illumination. Three meters by two--more a broom closet than a place of detainment. But then, she hardly expected an embassy suite. A small vent in the ceiling forced recycled air into the cell and she shivered from the cold. Stripped of her lifesuit, she wore a loose, gray prisoner uniform and stared down at her bare, frigid feet. The New Republic took pleasure in raping the Empire of its dignity. It was a bitter pill.

She sat on the floor with her feet crossed in front of her and tried to warm them. Grand Admiral Maxus Thorn had abandoned her when she needed him most. Someday he would regret that. She could not hold on to her anger at the moment though and closed her eyes against the buzzing pain that ricocheted within her skull.

Kayla Storm had been in the service of the Empire for over a decade. She had risen through the ranks quickly, for a woman, and crushed her competitors underfoot. Before her, a woman piloting the Twin Ion Engine fightercraft was laughable. For one to command an entire squadron was pure fantasy. Yet fantasy came to pass and the laughter had long since died away. It was the coming into that commendable service that had not been pleasant. Memories muted by years of intensive training whispered into her thoughts like a phantom. There had been much bloodshed with the acquisition of Tatooine and the enlistment of her and many. That man from the hangar had been part of that time, that place. A pilot and commander like herself. She tried to force her recollection but the pain

in her head sharpened like a metal stake being driven into her skull. He was an old acquaintance perhaps.

She opened her sharp, green eyes as the buzzing in her mind calmed. She recalled the name and smiled.

"So good to see you again, Luke."

* * *

Somewhere in the depths of space, a small Imperial fleet licked its wounds. Two damaged Star Destroyers and the flawed Kismet drifted in silence. Aboard the flagship Zephyr, the self-proclaimed Grand Admiral called a meeting with the captains of their remaining vessels. The three sat in anguish, stunned by the swift defeat. They respected their leader not out of fear as demanded by Lord Darth Vader or blind submission as demanded by Emperor Palpatine, but out of true admiration. The disabled veteran was a great strategist, a great warrior, unshakable in character. That is why they were there and not flung to the farthest corners of the galaxy where they might find safety. There was no doubt in any of their minds that they would not only survive the New Republic's persecution, but would someday restore the glory of the Empire. And it would be under the leadership of this man. If only he would tell them that it would be so. Yet, he would not.

"Has the rest of the Imperial Navy been alerted?" asked Thorn.

After clearing her throat, Captain Jenkins responded, "They are too busy skirmishing among themselves to pay any heed."

"And the Imperial Academy on Carida? Has Ambassador Furgan been informed?"

Jenkins frowned deeply. "The Ambassador expressed disdain for our fleet of 'under-trained, ill-prepared band of misfits' and stated no reinforcements would be forthcoming unless we returned to Carida."

"Idiots," Maxus Thorn grumbled. He paused for a moment. "I will not mislead you." The Grand Admiral spoke as if he were giving their eulogy. "The circumstances in which we find ourselves are dire, indeed. If we do not find fuel within the next forty-eight hours, we will be sent adrift and perish."

He looked at each of the captains in turn. They were desperate and hung on his every word for some faint glimmer of inspiration. The dogs needed a bone to be thrown. His medaled chest rose and fell before he stated off-handedly, "So we have met another loss. What of it? We must simply bend like blades of grass in the wind. Bend, not break. When the gust dies, we will be left standing upright. The Kismet has been our

salvation and in time it will be our vengeance." If only the engineers could diagnose and fix whatever was wrong with the blasted thing.

The captains seemed to relax a bit, glad to receive the gift of rhetoric.

Thorn continued, "The Besperin system is not far off. Isn't that so, Jenkins?"

The unsightly old woman nodded imperceptibly. Ugly, but perhaps one of the best captains in the Imperial Navy. This antique was but five years his younger.

"We shall set course for that system at half power. It will take nearly thirty hours but we cannot afford another lightspeed jump."

"Understood, sir," said Captain Talbot. "But Besperin is a neutral territory."

"Have you another suggestion, Captain Talbot?"

The boy fell silent. This captain was young, perhaps forty years of age, inexperienced. In effect, a moron. Thorn permitted a grandfatherly smile to forgive his stupidity as long as it didn't get in the way of his duty. When the day came that mistakes were made, the penalties would be harsh.

"Now, what has become of our comrades that have been left behind?"

Captain Saysithi stroked his gnarled fur with a third tentacle--another misfit ostracized by Palpatine's discrimination, and captain of Thorn's flagship. None were certain if Saysithi was his actual name or the title of his species, only that the Grand Admiral's confidant was the last of his kind. His voice purred like a kitten. "They are dead, sir, save a small number of pilots taken prisoner by the New Republic."

"How small is that number?" Thorn asked.

"To be exact? Six."

"We are doomed," Talbot breathed.

The Grand Admiral lifted his hand slightly and silenced him. He turned his attention back to the alien. "Captain Saysithi, was Commander Storm among the survivors?"

"Yes, she is with them. Our informant has not yet made contact with her. Do you wish him to do so?"

"I don't want him to compromise his position with the Inner Council." Thorn tried to hide the deep frown that twitched at the corners of his mouth and commanded the captains to leave him. As they went about the fulfillment of their duties, the Grand Admiral allowed himself but a moment to contemplate the problems with the introduction of a spy. Could

this spy be trusted, especially in light of Carida's disdain for the fleets in the Outer Rim? The New Republic leadership could not have the stomach for the ruthless tactics implemented at Bodyn IV. Perhaps it was a nudge from outside influence. The espionage then, had hopelessly backfired. His thin lips tightened. It was too dangerous to send a replacement. There just was no time for all this blasted rig-a-ma-roll. He needed fuel and he needed it almost immediately.

Grand Admiral Thorn pressed a series of codes into a small control panel set before him. After a moment, Lando Calrissian materialized at the center of the conference table. The baron administrator of the planet Bespin and its precious Tibanna gas mines was half a meter in height and not at all pleased.

"What do you want?"

"I have a proposition..."

"Bespin is a neutral territory." The baron folded his arms defensively. "We no longer serve the Empire."

"I am aware of that," the Grand Admiral told him. "I can assure you my intentions are not hostile."

"Then exactly what are your intentions?"

Maxus Thorn smiled graciously. "To make you rich beyond your wildest dreams."

Slowly, Lando's hands dropped to his sides. "I'm listening."

* * *

Han Solo scowled at his old gambling partner as he spoke at length with the Imperial brass in the communications room. He couldn't hear through the soundproof plastisteel but it was obvious that a deal had been struck. Nightmares reliving his imprisonment in carbon storage still troubled his sleep now and again, especially in the days since he'd returned to this place. Cloud City was no blue heaven for Solo even though Lando had managed to get it up and running for a cultic tourist gathering. Sabacc casinos, hot steam spas, women of all species...it just wasn't his cup of tea anymore. Lando had been quick to sell him out to Darth Vader so many years before. Not just him, but Luke, and Leia...

A wave of homesickness washed through him. He should have followed Luke's advice and at least talked to Leia before taking off like this. This wasn't where he was supposed to be. It was foreign. It was uncomfortable. Now matter how sick he got of the political garbage, Coruscant was home. Not even that. Leia was home. The heartache turned bitter. Leia was too busy playing diplomat with the Inner Council to give

him the attention he deserved. Big egos needed a lot of stroking. After a number of losses at the Sabacc tables, he was certain he wouldn't get any of that much needed attention here.

He angrily shoved such thoughts aside and grabbed Lando's arm as he left the room.

"What's goin' on, buddy?" he asked with a trace of resentment.

"That was Grand Admiral Maxus Thorn..."

"I don't care who that was, you swindler," Han snapped. "What are you up to?"

Lando faced him squarely. "I'm going to make it so my operation will never have to be dependent on outside contributors ever again."

The space pirate glared at Calrissian and warily tried to gauge his motivations. Ever since the fall out six years ago, he'd never been completely able to replace that lost trust.

Lando took a deep breath and explained. "He wants to contract the Tibanna mines to power his fleet. It's going to make us filthy rich, Han."

"Us?" Han shook his head and backed off a step. "I'm not involved. I can't believe you'd get into something so sleazy."

Calrissian chortled. "Listen to you, mister high and mighty! I think that politician wife of yours has scrambled your brains. Look, it's not as if the New Republic couldn't squash these guys with one hand behind their backs. What's wrong with a simple business venture?"

"Is it simple? Or are you hopping into bed with Thorn like you did with Vader?"

"You have to trust that I've learned from my mistakes, Han. Don't forget that I also helped get you out of that mess."

"No, I don't forget." You were the one to get me into it, you jerk, Han finished silently. "Are you sure it's simple?"

"Yeah!" Lando exclaimed and steered his friend down the corridor. "It's not a big thing. Now come on. I hear there's a good Sabacc game going on in the East section of town."

"I'm getting tired of playing Sabacc," Han grumbled. This vacation was not very nice at all.

The planet Coruscant was the center of the galaxy, at least politically. The giant fortress that housed the government and armed forces of the New Republic had once been the residence of the now dead Emperor Palpatine. Before that, the Senate of the Old Republic held its sessions here. Through it all, Coruscant was a beacon of trade and commerce. Its polluted highways and byways shuttled diplomats, corporate executives, and military men to and fro. Twenty billion inhabitants crowded the dying planet. Some wore gas masks as they strode the filthy streets of Imperial City. Some took their chances without.

Luke's eyes stung as he stepped out of the protected landshuttle. He covered his mouth and coughed as he jogged toward the Emperor's fortress. The Jedi did not like this place. It seemed everything the Emperor touched turned to rot. He thought it a poor choice to build here a new government supposedly devoted to change. From what he'd witnessed at the battle of Bodyn, that change seemed like only so much rhetoric. Luke Skywalker entered into an exquisite marble corridor and inhaled the canned, but at least breathable air. He walked with a quickness in his step, anxious to meet with his sister and tell her of his decision to resign from the military. He had showered and slept after the battle, but did not feel refreshed. Although a Jedi Knight should not allow himself to succumb to bad dreams, troubled, almost nightmarish thoughts still echoed freely through his conscious mind. Not only of the recent firefight and the mistakes that had been made throughout, but a feeling of dire resolution, as if forces were at work that he couldn't hope to control, as if a destiny was about to be completed. The Force is both a guide and a tool. If one is receptive to it, it can be wielded, but only if it permits you. The words of Obi-wan Kenobi were somewhat less than comforting. How much of what was happening and had happened was within his realm of control as Jedi Knight? The future was always in motion. It seemed particularly veiled from his sight as of late and this bothered him. He'd learned years ago not to take action when his premonitions were so clouded. To hinge so much anxiety on half-remembered dreams would only bring him to a fool's end. However, to disregard them completely might result in the same.

There was also the situation regarding his sister, her unborn child, and the twins Jaina and Jacen. Although Leia obviously felt otherwise, it was imperative for them to be trained in the ways of the Force. It was very possible other Jedi, other Dark Lords, existed elsewhere in the universe. It would be prudent to have some sort of defense if that were the case. But to shoulder the awesome responsibility of a Jedi Master was not something Luke felt prepared for. Old Ben had taken Anakin Skywalker as his apprentice which somehow led to the emergence of Darth Vader. His own father left his endearing wife, pregnant with twins, shed his life like snakeskin, and became a Lord of the Sith. How could such a thing have happened? Luke thought about this often and struggled against the bitter resentment that came too easily for him. It was this resentment toward Vader, toward the Empire itself, that caused revenge to come so readily to the New Republic. Still, he wished he knew more about that time so he could avoid similar mistakes when he moved forward with Leia and her children. If she would even

permit it. Perhaps it was all worry over nothing. Perhaps he truly would be the last Jedi.

And there was Kayla Storm. His recollection became perfectly clear, and poignant. The Imperial occupation of Tatooine was just getting into full swing and although nobody cared much for the presence of an Imperial garrison, no resistance was given since the New Order brought stability to a dangerous region and a nearly collapsed economy. After the long days of hot, unrewarding labor, young Luke Skywalker felt more the indentured servant and less the adopted son of Owen and Beru Lars. Very little time was left for the making of friends when the moisture farm demanded so much work. Yet before his admission into near slavery, before he was big enough, strong enough, to load and unload the heavy moisture harvesters to and from the fields, there had been a neighbor, one Maxamillian Storm, whose daughter was Luke's same age. They were allowed to play together until the children could help with the harvest of precious water. As they grew into adolescence, parental authority forbade the blossoming infatuation of reckless youth. There was a thrill in the danger of sneaking out into the cool, desert evenings, meeting at a secret rendezvous, and the dreams they shared of escaping a tedious existence. There was little solace in it, merely angry rebellion.

After one particular interlude that was not unlike all the others, young Luke escorted Kayla Storm to her father's homestead. Then her features were almost fragile in their youth, and her black hair was long and tied back into a tight braid. He parked the landspeeder behind an outcropping of sandstone to hide, not daring to draw any closer in the coming morning. An unfamiliar transport waited outside of the shack with ominous patience. Within, a dim light illuminated a tiny window.

"Blast it," Luke cursed. "He's up and waiting."

"Who could be visiting at this hour?" wondered Kayla.

The boy chewed his bottom lip as they sat in tense silence. After a moment, the girl shrugged and hopped down from the landspeeder.

"Wait. Kayla, I have a bad feeling about this."

"Skywalker, you have a bad feeling about everything!" she snapped and reached over to give his cheek a gentle pinch. "I'll steal credit from him tonight when he goes to sleep. We can run away, Luke. For good."

Luke gave her a fleeting kiss and grinned. "Send ol' Max my love."

Kayla returned the grin and left. Impishly, young Skywalker peered over the rock to watch her clothes pull in fascinating directions as she walked. It was a purposeful walk, with an extra swing in the hips, just to get him going. Sixteen never looked so good.

As she disappeared into the shack, Maxamillian shouted her name.

"Father!" she screamed.

There was laserfire. The girl bolted out the doorway with an Imperial stormtrooper half a step behind, his polished, white armor reflecting a bit of light from the lazy moon. He swung his laser rifle hard across her skull and Kayla Storm dropped to the ground.

Luke panicked. He gunned the engines of his landspeeder and fled as two more white figures emerged to join the first. They decided to allow his escape as there were other visitations to be made.

All this two years before See-Threepio and Artoo-Detoo arrived with a plea for help that would change his life so completely.

The Jedi Knight shook his head at the memory. Here, now, Kayla Storm was alive and well. It was stunning, but he wasn't sure what it mattered. She was an Imperial; through no fault of her own, but still an Imperial. And the past was a life that was no longer his.

A piercing scream jolted him out of his reverie. Luke stopped and half-turned toward its origin. So preoccupied was he that it took more than a moment to shake off the disorientation. He found himself on a security level and the scream came from somewhere down the corridor. There should be no screaming in a New Republic detention facility, no matter what the crime. Absolutely none.

Another anguished cry.

Without hesitation, the Jedi broke into a flat run and burst into the second interrogation cell on the left. The smell of fear and cold sweat attacked his Force-attuned sense.

Immediately, he was restrained by two guards while a third demanded, "This is a security zone. What business do you have here?"

Luke stared at the spheroid interrogation unit that hummed closer to Kayla Storm with a myriad of hypodermic needles. The harsh glare of florescent lighting reflected off its black case and made him wince. The woman groaned as it paused in its approach. She appeared haggard, beaten, much as Leia had when he rescued her from the first Death Star. It was common knowledge that such machines were the interrogative method of preference for Imperial warlords. But to find one here...

"What business do you have here!" the Sergeant shouted now. Luke believed his name to be Paulus.

The Jedi's shock deepened into anger but his tone remained even, layered through the Force to manipulate. "You will not use this machine."

The brutish officer approached the intruder with an air of menace and impatience. "You had better have good reason why not," he growled. "General Turchin is anxious for the interrogations to be underway."

"There will be no interrogations," Luke stated, unperturbed. "I have been sent to elicit information in a less coercive fashion."

"But the General said..."

"He has had a change of heart."

Paulus scratched his scalp for a moment and finally replied, "I see."

Luke permitted an ingratiating smile. "Then go, friends, and let us forget this incident ever took place."

The guards nodded as if that were just a dandy idea, exchanged friendly farewells, and exited, incident forgotten. Soon though, there would be hell to pay.

The green laserblade ignited with a snap-hiss and bisected the hovering torture droid in one quick slice. The unit crashed to the floor, popping and crackling as it belched blackened smoke. Luke glared at the mechanized carcass with a sense of moral outrage.

Kayla Storm gazed upon him in dazed confusion. "I don't feel very well..."

"The drugs will wear off in an hour or two." Carefully, he severed her bonds and returned the lightsaber to his belt. "I just cannot believe things have gotten so bad. How dare they..."

"I know you," she whispered.

Luke nodded, then got to one knee and took her trembling hand in his own. "Kayla, things are going terribly wrong and I don't know what I'm going to do about it."

"Help me escape, since you seem to be into this damsel in distress bit. Granted, I'm not exactly royalty..."

The smart remark trailed off as he looked into her emerald green eyes and felt compelled. To the New Republic, Kayla Storm was a war criminal deserving punishment. She had probably killed hundreds of thousands of innocents in various campaigns. Yet so had he and many of his comrades. War was a horrendous excuse for mass killings, all in the name of ideology. While the Empire promoted tyranny outright, the New Republic's claim to galactic freedom seemed more and more like a hollow joke. He felt sickened by his own response. "I can't just pick up and leave. There's too much at risk."

"Luke, you are a Jedi now." It was half a question, half a statement of fact. Luke nodded shortly. "If that were truly the case, you would not stand for what the New Republic is doing, even to the Empire."

He helped her rise to her feet but could not break eye contact. There was beauty, and fire. She was much like Leia years ago, before he knew his sister as his sister. He truly wanted to help her; an old friend, an old love. Even the years of service to the Empire had not tamed her. But mostly, he had to agree that she was in the right. He

could not allow Turchin's mistreatment. He could not allow this perpetual witchhunt, especially when the witches in question were no different than themselves. Then Luke Skywalker saw something else that made him physically startle. His pulse raced.

He used a Jedi calming technique and stepped toward the door. "You are strong with the Force, but you haven't discovered it yet."

The announcement seemed to take the Imperial Commander off guard. She straightened stiffly and responded, "I had no idea..."

"Come on," Luke told her. "I need to speak with the Inner Council. You'll stay in your cell until I get back."

* * *

The room in which the Inner Council met was a large amphitheater, complete with a prised skylight which sent a cascade of colors down upon whoever had the floor. Leia Organa Solo thought it too showy; probably designed by the Emperor as, in the dying days of the Old Republic, he always had the floor. The theater, once filled with senators from virtually every corner of the civilized galaxy, was nearly vacant save the nine individuals whose responsibility it was to govern the New Republic. The very title denoted some kind of representation, democracy. But in the infant days of government there was none. They were an oligarchy of sorts but final say always rested with the President of the New Republic, Mon Mothma. She stood the semicircular table at which the other eight councilors sat and was proud of what they had accomplished. What she had accomplished. The Rebellion had come to a glorious end. The Emperor was dead. Her leadership was the driving force in this galaxy and it would be her government that would hold things together and then thrive. She was proud, to a fault. A fault which would take the fledgling state down a dangerous path. Mon Mothma gazed coolly upon the small group and was pleased with the abundance of military attendance. Five of the eight were crucial military leaders during the war. The others, Councilors Organa Solo, Xin, and Borsch were permitted for their potential political value. It was important to keep allies on all fronts with the inevitable coming of elections.

Mon Mothma brushed a lock of graying hair from her eyes and addressed the Inner Council regally. "Now that we have all gathered, there are several propositions I wish to make. Firstly, however, I would like a report on yesterday's clean up mission. Admiral Haake?"

"The mission was a marginal success, Madam President. Three of the Imperial fleet evaded us; the flagship Zephyr, the Maelstrom, and the Imperial Kismet."

"Is this new superweapon all that it's been cracked up to be?" questioned Organa Solo.

The Imperial defector pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I would say, it is not. Incredible firepower, impenetrable shielding, but poor maneuverability."

"How do you know that is not the result of poor captaining?" asked Councilor Xin.

"Imperial flight training is the most comprehensive in the galaxy. I sincerely doubt any of Carida's graduates would perform so badly. However, the fleet in the Outer Rim Territories is not highly regarded."

"What of the prisoners?" questioned Mon Mothma.

General Turchin cleared his throat before speaking. "The Imperials are currently undergoing interrogation. I will have the results within the next two hours."

"What kind of interrogation?" Leia asked.

Turchin cast her a glowering look and replied, "Vital interrogation."

Leia was forced to give a pretense of civility to this man she disliked. He would not return the favor and she looked to Mon Mothma but found no help.

"General Turchin has things well under control, Councilor Organa Solo. Now if there is any further business, please bring it to my attention."

"There is." Leia sat forward in her chair and looked at each of the councilmembers in turn, trying to find a reaction, a flinch, a darkening of pallor. Any of these might suggest the true motivations she imagined. "I want to know when we are finally going to hold elections and fill this senate chamber. It's time we moved toward a more democratic form of government."

Mon Mothma's reaction was assuring but carefully masked. "Elections will be held as soon as the galaxy is secure. We have a long way to go before we meet that end. Do we not Admirals Haake and Ackbar?"

"Indeed," Haake replied shortly.

The Mon Calamari gave a laborious wheeze. "If the Empire is not eradicated, they will reemerge at a later date."

There was a low chuckle from General Garm Bel Iblis, the Corellian leader who provided assistance in the acquisition of the Katana fleet. He was somewhat roguish, like Han, and Leia wondered if it was a trait unique to their culture or maybe something in the water that promoted this.

"You two sound like men afraid of losing your jobs."

"I beg your pardon?" Turchin fumed.

"With no real enemy to fight, who is going to need an extensive armed forces such as ours? It seems, gentlemen, that we and the honorary medal manufacturers may be presently out of work."

Leia covered her mouth to hide a smile.

General Turchin was irate. "If we let down our defenses, the New Republic will fall in a matter of days."

"I said nothing of letting down defenses, General Turchin," said Bel Iblis, particularly pleased with ruffling the feathers of this hawk. "I am merely alluding to the fact that we are no longer faced with the intense competition of five years ago. In fact, I think it's time we struck a settlement with whoever is left out there calling themselves 'Empire', starting with the Imperial Academy on Carida."

"Carida would never surrender," muttered Rufus Haake.

"It is doubtful," agreed Leia as she recalled her last meeting with Ambassador Furgan. The warm reception had resulted in a splash of cocktail down Mon Mothma's dress. "However, General Bel Iblis has a point. Instead of hunting them down like animals, we should reach certain terms of surrender with at least the fleets not directly linked to Carida. Given, from their point of view, the dire circumstances, I would be surprised if many of them wouldn't jump at the chance for peace."

"You don't know the Empire, Councilor," Haake rumbled.

"I do know them, Admiral. I've been their prisoner, suffered through their interrogation, watched them destroy my homeworld. I know the Empire very well."

"Not well enough if you are so willing to forgive," he responded with coldness. "How can such memories fade so easily and cause your sense of duty to become lukewarm?"

Leia flushed and strove to keep her voice low. "This is not about my sense of duty but about facing up to reality. The reality is that the majority of the Imperial Navy is no longer a threat. The reality is that the Empire is comprised of people like ourselves who deserve a chance to live in peace just like any other. Didn't you leave the Empire to escape the butchery you were ordered to perform? Aren't you too looking for peace, Admiral Haake? What we are doing with these so-called clean up missions makes us no better than the enemies we deplore! And no, sir, I have not forgotten the hell my father has put me through."

Admiral Ackbar swiveled one of his bulging, fish eyes to give her a warning look. She clamped down on her tongue and cursed it for saying too much. They paused in a moment of tense silence.

Slowly, quietly, General Rieekan began to speak. "In my opinion, the Empire is receiving its just desserts. This is no time for sentiment. It is time for the Empire to be abolished just as it abolished so many of our peoples, and our planets."

"I can appreciate your convictions," said Councilor Xin, a Bothan sent to replace the somewhat shady Borsk Fey'lya. "However, such an unmerciful stance may not be prudent."

"Enough," snapped Mon Mothma. She frowned. This was the problem with committees. Too much debate and not enough action. "If I may introduce my proposals."

Councilor Borsch gave a polite nod. "Of course, Madam President. You will forgive the Inner Council."

Mon Mothma did not mince words. "Due to the lack of space on this planet and the cost of constructing a new detention facility on another, I propose we consider the taking of prisoners unacceptable."

"Here, here." Xin clinked his water glass with one long fingernail.

Councilor Borsch inhaled his methane pipe deeply and sat back in his seat, sending plumes of gas into the air. Leia looked up to see a black robed figure seated in the back row of the amphitheater and startled. Absolutely no one was allowed to sit in on sessions of the Inner Council. She glanced at the others to see they had not yet noticed him and wondered if Luke had been there from the start. He was catching quite a show. Leia tried to relax. Her brother probably had good reason to be there and she just felt better having him around.

After a tense pause, General Bel Iblis sat forward and carefully folded his hands on the table before him. "Madam President, your proposal seems to contradict the general consensus of this Council, that the Empire ought to be eradicated. Certainly with destruction on such a mass scale, there would be many prisoners."

The chief of state cast him a frigid look. "I must say, General, there will not be one more prisoner taken. The Empire will be destroyed to the last man, starting with the remnant fleets and ending with Carida."

Leia caught the approving glances of Turchin and Haake and muttered, "You can't be serious."

Mon Mothma ignored her. "Furthermore, I propose the prisoners from the battle of Bodyn be promptly executed as a message to this new Grand Admiral." A spectrum of light fell across her aged face as she stepped closer to the table. Her voice became almost too quiet to hear. "The Empire must realize their presence will not be tolerated."

Defeated, Garm Bel Iblis folded his arms and slouched in his chair. As the Council exploded in a fervor of argument, he gave Leia a long, sideways look but her gaze was elsewhere.

"May I add something to this discussion?"

All gazes lifted abruptly to fall upon Luke Skywalker standing halfway between the floor and the exit.

"You are aware this is a closed meeting, Commander Skywalker," came the low growl from General Turchin.

"Of course." Luke gave a curt nod and completed his decent to the floor. "Traditionally, the order of Jedi has always been present to not only protect the Old Republic but to give counsel to its Senate. As the last of my kind, I offer my services to you now."

"We have already discussed this..." began Mon Mothma, irate.

"Your service belongs with my fleet, Commander," interrupted Admiral Haake. "You are a pilot for the New Republic, first and foremost, not a diplomat."

"I would argue that I am a Jedi Knight, first and foremost. And I must fulfill my duties as such," he replied quietly. "I sense, Madam President, you are afraid. You are fear a loss of power and the emergence of a second Emperor...by someone such as myself." Leia noticed he'd not yet removed his cowl. The Jedi's cool gaze remained carefully hidden beneath it.

She felt a chill and questioned, "Would that be so unfounded, Luke? You have tasted the Dark Side. It was Senator Palpatine's ambition that drove him to seize power. The same could happen to any Jedi."

"I disagree, Councilor Organa Solo," he replied evenly. "My place here is not to rule, but to heal the wounds ambition has created."

"It was our foolishness to let religion mingle with government that caused the fall of the Old Republic." Mon Mothma folded her arms in a frosty appraisal. "We are all well aware of your religious fervor, Commander Skywalker. Your refusal to even consider my wish to maintain a secular state holds testimony to that. At the very least, you could have indulged me by dressing in uniform, but by now I've learned not to expect much in the way of compliance..."

General Bel Iblis pinched the bridge of his hawked nose and spoke haggardly. "If we could lay aside all this backbiting, I'd be very interested in what the Jedi has to say."

"As would I," added Leia.

The rest of the Inner Council grumbled unenthusiastically.

"I will allow it," Mon Mothma said. She strode slowly to her chair and sat, all the while glowering at Luke Skywalker. "You have the floor, Commander."

Luke finally lowered the hood of his robe and allowed his face to be seen. It was neither joyful nor angry, but placidly masked and bordering on melancholy. Leia thought this was perhaps one of his more inhuman stances and felt uncomfortable with what she saw. Only she, who knew him so well, could see the normally even-tempered Jedi was fuming inside, but was not about to let on to the other members of this beauracracy. Leia was surprised to here pointed, but eloquent words from this former rustic.

"Madam President, members of the Inner Council, I am greatly concerned with the path the New Republic is undertaking. I am concerned that we have lost the vision, as well as the virtue, that once encapsulated the Rebel Alliance. I am concerned that, just as with one man, if a society becomes obsessed with revenge and hate, the further it will fall into paths of darkness. If the New Republic continues its mindless campaign against a once powerful but defeated enemy, I predict it will lead to ruin and the Force will no longer be with you. I entreat the Inner Council to reconsider it rash course of actions before it becomes too late."

With that, Luke stepped back from the marble table and waited for a response. Long speeches had never been his strong suit. He came to say what had been said and now remained quiet. The situtation had deteriorated so, he decided against any mention of the Force-sensitive Imperial waiting for his return. It would only serve to bolster their resolve for the executions. More than a moment passed before the stunned silence dissipated.

"Strong words, Jedi," said Ackbar. "But I tend to agree, at least in part. The Empire must be dealt with at the negotiating table."

"Yes," said Xin. "We must be more cautious with the decisions we make."

"Your superstitions hold no logic," muttered Rieekan.

"We have no need for your so-called Force," spat General Turchin. "True force lies in the strength of the military."

"One day you will stand corrected," replied Luke.

"Don't underestimate my brother's words," said Leia. "You call it merely religious fervor, but Luke has powers through the Force that cannot be explained through rational means."

"If it cannot be explained, than it simply cannot be," muttered Admiral Haake, ever the scientist.

"Well, prophet," Mon Mothma commented dryly. "We will test your premonition and see if it won't come to pass. We will execute the prisoners from Bodyn IV and continue the campaign against the Empire."

"I can assure you the repercussions of your decision will be felt for generations," said Luke, his face grim.

The President was stern. "My decision is final. I will not let you cajole this ruling Council."

"Then I ask to be discharged from military service." He stepped toward Mon Mothma and spoke in earnest. "I will not pretend to be a part of such an unjust establishment."

"You can't just quit," growled Turchin.

Mon Mothma raised her hand a bit for peace. "Commander Luke Skywalker, you are discharged then, and the discharge is not honorable."

"What!" Leia was incredulous. "Do you forget Luke is one of the reasons we've gotten as far as we have?"

Madam President dismissed the outburst. "In the days of the Rebel Alliance, Skywalker was a hero's hero, entirely devoted to the war effort. Now that devotion seems to be on the wane as it with some members, even, of the Inner Council. Aside from that, his practice of this ancient witchcraft is intolerable given the modern view of things, and certainly inappropriate for use in a military setting. You will have nothing more to do with the Inner Council or the enforcement of its policies. You are dismissed, Jedi Skywalker. And I sincerely hope the days of your sorcery are numbered."

The remarks were off-handed and brutal. Luke's expression changed from one peacefully unreadable to one filled, with silent, stony resentment. For a moment, he gave his sister a look so hardened, it frightened her. Leia's mind was touched and she knew it was time to leave, at least for now.

Organa Solo caught the arm of Admiral Ackbar as the meeting adjourned.

"Admiral, may I have a moment?"

The Mon Calamari nodded his bulbous squid head. "A moment? Yes."

She glanced about and waited for the amphitheater to empty, then lowered her tone. "Who knows the location of my children?"

Ackbar blinked his large, glassy fish eyes. "Skywalker and I picked the place, of course. Your husband, Chewbacca, yourself, Winter. I believe that is all. The Jedi insisted it be kept quite confidential."

"Yes, that is very important." She paused, trying to gauge her old ally's loyalties. "I need you to contact Winter for me and inform her that I am going on an extended leave. It may be some time before I am able to see them again." Their birthday, she recalled grimly. Maybe the Admiral wouldn't remember it was next week.

Ackbar wheezed. "I am sorry to hear it, Councilor. Your absence will make it more difficult for us to keep a moderate position."

"I know. Forgive me, Admiral. Winter can contact you if she needs help?"

The squid head bobbed a second time. "Of course." His webbed hand engulfed her own. "Take care, Princess of Alderaan. These are uncertain times."

Leia grinned sadly. "Thank you, Ackbar."

The spies spoke briefly before leaving to consult with their respective superiors. Rufus Haake skulked into his private chambers and locked the door behind him. He sat before a small, but adequate desktop and sent an encrypted message through his secured communications link.

Bodyn IV successful. Salvage operation ready to proceed. Prisoners to be executed. Attacks to commence on peripheral fleets of Imperial Navy, then Carida. Division in the ranks.

A moment passed as the message took its time traveling through the HoloNet to Ambassador Furgan's communications tower on Carida. It would take another moment for the Ambassador to be notified that contact had been made, and another to receive a reply. The false Admiral glanced almost nervously at the door to his plush apartment. The comlink was secure and he was one of the highest ranking officials in the New Republic. There was no reason to be anxious. Nervousness was for amateurs and he was certainly no amateur. An amateur would never have been able to get so close to the President. It had taken years of careful fabrication, manipulation. An amateur could never have gotten so far without suspicion. But the odds of being caught at this point were very high. They had not put him under surveillance as of yet...

An encrypted code flooded onto the screen of his small computer. Haake translated the memorized code silently.

Concentrate on clean-up. Fleet will unify under Carida within two standard months. Update situation with Thorn's man.

Haake frowned. He didn't have time for the niceties of drawn out conversations, especially of this nature. He typed rapidly, in code.

Apparently trustworthy. Watching. Out.

He paused to remove a data card from his desk and slipped it into the server. A new encrypt surfaced on the monitor. Haake grinned slightly to himself. Now this was an amateur. He watched the scrolling words and checked them against the new code. It was much the same conversation he'd sent to Furgan, but of a more heated nature. Thorn was not a happy man. Accusations, denials, threats...It was a waste of airtime. HoloNet security would be on to Turchin in half a minute if he didn't log off immediately. Finally the order came from Grand Admiral Thorn's ravaged fleet.

Free Kayla Storm. Eliminate Haake.

Rufus Haake erased Turchin's encrypt code, then sat back in his chair and smiled broadly. Amateurs. He opened another comlink, short range, non-secure.

"Mon Mothma. There is reason to believe a break is about to be attempted on security block H5. Recommend General Bel Iblis be notified to confront the situation."

He couldn't help but to chuckle softly to himself. This might be fun to watch.

Chapter Four

Imperial Commander Kayla Storm paced the detention cell, trying to come to terms concerning the ordeal with Luke Skywalker and the interrogation droid. She felt drained emotionally and physically, and should have let the drugs take her into sleep. The New Republic officers had no idea how close they'd come to breaking her. Not one question had been asked, as if the implementation of torture was for its own value--a truly Imperial notion. So the New Republic condoned such methods. So the New Republic was not the holier-than-thou group that fought so long and hard to bring down the Empire. They were no better and struggled only to claim the Emperor's inheritance. So she felt she'd learned more of her inquisitors than they had of her.

And Luke Skywalker--not just your run of the mill flyboy. The power he held over those men was potent with manipulation. Not only was he a Jedi, but he was the Jedi responsible for the deaths of Emperor Palpatine and Lord Darth Vader. He was responsible for the downturn in the war. It was all but lost now and Kayla hated him for that. But she had witnessed his use of the Force and thirsted for it. The Force was strong in her, he'd surmised. On the way back to her cell, he gave not an iota of information. Kayla Storm, in a moment of clairvoyance, sensed the volatility of his emotions and questioned him on it. The Jedi Knight remained coldly silent. She smiled and thought perhaps they must have been more than acquaintances after all. This particular revelation seemed to startle Luke Skywalker more than the discovery of her Force-sensitivity, as if he was hoping she wouldn't recall any of her past. The fact was, she only made inferences from his behavior. He had left her quickly and thus confirmed her suspicions. This was a development that must be used to her full advantage.

Kayla reclined on the military issue cot in the corner of the cell and remembered an encounter several years earlier with another Jedi, a dark one.

The flagship Executor of Lord Darth Vader moved with the grace of a giant sea dragon, claiming the dark void of space as its own. Within, hundreds of pilots, stormtroopers, and officers stood on the deck of the

giant docking bay in perfect rows. A quiet mixture of fear and reverence permeated the recycled air that surrounded them. The footsteps and mechanical respirations of the giant Sith Lord were the only sounds for many moments.

The young pilot stiffened and was determined not to tremble as Lord Vader and the ship's captain turned into her row. To tremble was to show fear. To show fear was to show weakness. At this point, to show weakness was to die. If Darth Vader could not weed out the weaklings now, the growing rebellion would do so later and at greater cost.

Storm almost allowed herself to breathe as the Dark Lord passed. Her face, like those of her comrades, was hidden behind a black pilot's breathmask and should not have brought attention. Something must have been flawed. The Lord of the Sith glanced at her once in passing, then again with greater scrutiny, and finally he stopped completely.

"A problem, my lord?" asked the captain after a hard gulp.

"Remove your breathmask." Vader spoke in a low purr.

Kayla responded immediately and stared with a blank expression at the black helmet. Somewhere in there, there was a man. That man was somehow human. Do not show fear.

Vader waited for her gaze to falter and turn away. His chest rose and fell methodically, mechanically, as long moment passed between them. Finally, it was he that turned away to speak with his captain.

His voice rumbled and broke the painful silence. "This one is most unsatisfactory. I will not have this one aboard my vessel."

"But, my lord..." The captain foolishly took issue. "Private Storm has an impeccable flight record. She is valuable..."

"I will determine what is valuable," Vader growled. "Do not presume to question my authority, captain."

"Yes, sir." The captain gingerly touched his throat. The Dark Lord's temper was notorious. "I mean, I do not presume, my lord."

Lord Vader looked at Kayla Storm once again and tilted his head curiously. "Send her to the Outer Rim Territories. We have no use for her talents here."

"I will see to it immediately, my lord." Mercifully, the captain scurried away like a frightened little rodent.

Kayla's stare became a glower. Such a promising career cut short by the decisions of one over-zealous leader. Sexism was the obvious explanation for Vader's dismissal of her. The Empire was not taken to the liberalities of its Rebel adversaries. In the command structure of the Alliance, female leadership came at a dime a dozen. Here, in a darker realm, a woman had to struggle for recognition, be thrice the man of her

male counterparts. Indeed, Private Storm was gifted, but now such talents would be wasted on clearing astroid belts for hyperspace travel. It was a humiliating proposition Storm could not withhold the resentment in her voice. "You are not being fair."

Belligerence where there should be terror and from a mere girl! Vader almost laughed, were it possible, and leaned closer to softly growl, "Patience, child. Simple patience."

After one last, almost wistful glance, the Dark Lord of the Sith continued his ominous rounds.

Now her dismissal was only partially explained. Why send away such an asset? Had she known of her potential earlier, the Empire could have been saved! But this Force, these glimpses she caught now and again, deserved deeper attention. And since she had nothing but time...

Luke Skywalker slipped quietly into her cell and Kayla jumped to her feet in reflex. His demeanor seemed calm but Storm caught yet another glimpse. He was angry with the Inner Council, the Empire, the galaxy at large. It was an anger with depth, like her own, of years of work turned to failure. He shot her a quick look and she felt a mental barrier erect and hold steady. There would be no more peeking.

"The Inner Council wants the execution of you and all the prisoners taken at Bodyn IV. You will be killed if you don't do exactly as I say. Do you understand?"

She folded her arms coolly and quipped, "My Jedi Knight in shining armor. At last you've come."

Luke frowned at this but continued in a rigid tone. "In exchange for the escape of you and your comrades, you will arrange a meeting for my sister and I with the Grand Admiral of your fleet. The meeting must take place in neutral territory. Do you agree?"

The Imperial Commander grinned. "A hero of the Rebel Alliance would stoop so low...?"

"Do you agree?" Luke repeated, gripping her arm.

Kayla paused for the sake of relishing his disquiet. "Luke, if you can save our necks, I'd be happy to assist you in any way. But why in the galaxy..."

"There are delicate matters to be discussed." His grasp on her elbow slipped down to her wrist. "We'll go now."

As they moved to leave, the automatic entry slid aside to reveal General Turchin.

* * *

Leia Organa Solo walked toward the landing platform with Artoo-Detoo and See-Threepio in tow. Although she was trembling, she fought to keep her gait steady. She tried to give an air of confidence although she wanted to bolt. All the years, all the work, all the dead who died believing in a cause; it was too horrible to believe and yet it was true. Luke was right in his observations. The New Republic was rising to take the Empire's place. It was too horrible and she could not think. It was simply time to get away. Anywhere. Luke would know what to do. They just had to leave and have a chance to think about it. She wanted to be with the twins, with Han. Damn him anyway for not being there.

"Mistress Leia, I entirely don't understand why we're going..."

"Shut up, Threepio," Leia snapped. He'd been pestering her all week and she'd relieved him of being present at the Inner Council meeting. A mistake. It should have been recorded.

"But, Mistress Leia, I do not believe you have fully concidered the ramifications of deserting..."

Leia turned on the protocol droid and pushed him against the wall. Artoo squealed his surprise. "If you don't quiet down, I'll have to erase your memory and leave you behind, got it?"

Flustered, See-Threepio began to stutter wildly. "I-I-I'm terribly sorry, Mistress Leia. I'm just trying to comprehend..."

"Stop," Leia warned.

"Of course." The droid straightened himself up in an attempt at dignity. Humans were so nonsensical sometimes. But he was, as all droids were, loyal to his mistress through and through. "My apologies."

Leia hushed him with a finger at her lips and they continued down the corridor. The landing platform was in sight as they turned the corner, and Admiral Haake bumped her shoulder.

"I beg your pardon, Councilor." He asked with concern, "Are you all right?"

Color drained from her face. "Fine."

"You seem peaked."

Leia's mouth twitched into a nervous smile. "It's been a trying day."

Haake gave a refined nod. "Yes, it has. Perhaps you should rest."

"I think I will, Admiral. Excuse me."

"May I escort you to your quarters? You seem to be headed in the wrong direction."

Her heart pounded deafeningly in her ears as she tried to keep the tremor of fear from her voice. "No! Actually, I've decided to take a brief leave of absence."

"I see. To join your husband then?"

"Yes." She swallowed hard and attempted to sidle past him in the cramped hallway. "If you'll excuse me."

"Of course." Haake stood aside graciously. "I'll send an escort to accompany you straight away."

Leia froze. "I won't be requiring an escort, Admiral Haake."

Haake frowned. "Are you sure that's wise? Under the circumstances..."

"Excuse me." Organa Solo finally got past with her droids.

Furgan's agent called after her. "Your Highness, I do hope you plan on returning before the next Council session! You are travelling rather lightly!"

Her stiff walk broke into a jog as he watched her and the droids round another corner. Rufus Haake removed a small comlink from his uniform jacket and spoke softly.

"Madam President, we may have a problem..."

* * *

Turchin seemed to startle worse than the two he'd discovered, then brought his laser rifle up easily. Storm took a cautious backwards step. The man was familiar but she could not place a name with the face. Certainly he was not a member of the New Republic.

"What a surprise. Do you think this Force of yours puts you above the law, Skywalker?"

Nonplused, Luke spoke in an even tone. "There has been a misunderstanding, General Turchin. If I'm not mistaken, she is allowed counsel before the execution. I took it upon myself..."

"...to assist in her escape. Just as you aided in the evasion of her inquiry. It took some browbeating on my part, but Paulus finally recalled your interference."

"I didn't think such methods were appropriate." His hand slipped to the butt of his lightsaber.

The muzzle of Turchin's laser rifle rested neatly against the Jedi's left temple.

"Skywalker, I will hold my own counsel on what is or is not appropriate. Put your hands behind your head before I plaster it against that far wall."

Luke closed his eyes and felt relaxation course through all of his muscles. The lightsaber snapped to life in his hand and became merely an extension of his own body. He whirled and sliced the rifle in two before Turchin had a chance to trigger a laser blast. The weapon exploded in his hand and sent the general reeling into the corridor. There was a shout, an alarm was sounded.

"Come on!" Luke shouted and they bolted.

His hands worked furiously to decode the encrypt locks to the other cells. Kayla risked a backward glance. Turchin lay flat on his back. The lone security officer had probably recognized Luke Skywalker and fled for reinforcements. Idiot.

"Hurry up," she pressed.

"I wish I had Artoo. These codes are impossible." Luke bit his bottom lip. "We'll have to get out of here without them."

"Here." She ripped the Jedi's lightsaber from his belt and pressed its activation stud, nearly cauterizing her own arm in the process. A blaster would have worked so much better. The encrypt pad exploded in a shower of sparks as she pierced it with the beam of energy. The security door slid aside and its Imperial occupant rose to his feet with a quizzical, if not thoroughly confused, grin. "Come on."

"Give me that." Luke grumbled and began releasing the rest of her comrades.

Storm glanced again to General Turchin. He was gone.

"Luke." She tapped his shoulder and gestured to the empty corridor. "You should have killed him."

"Don't tell me what I should have done," Luke retorted. "Let's go."

The day was getting worse.

* * *

Leia peered through the hatchway of her small, personal shuttle, the *Mystique*. Artoo and Threepio were aboard as well, and the prissy talkdroid had briefed her in full on all the rules, regulations, laws, and ordinances they had broken in the past fifteen minutes. And the odds of successfully...Leia promptly shut him down and they waited. She took in a sharp breath as Admiral Haake wandered too casually onto the landing platform. He leaned against a scaffold, removed a small cigarra from his jacket, and lit up. Leia ducked quickly back inside and shut the hatch. She watched Haake through a small, tinted viewport. Soon Garm Bel Iblis joined him with an impressive squad of New Republic soldiers. The General spoke to the Admiral briefly as the squad settled in. The Admiral then boarded his own private shuttle and took flight.

Although the hull of the *Mystique* was undoubtedly sound proof, Leia said in a whisper, "Artoo, power up the laser cannons. Don't initiate the pre-flight sequence until my mark."

The droid twittered affirmatively and Leia scrutinized the soldiers. They too were waiting.

* * *

Luke and the escapists darted onto the landing platform and met an immediate assault of laserfire. As they dived for cover in various directions, the screams of a dying Imperial pilot echoed through the putrid air. Kayla Storm swore viciously. With no weapons, they were helpless. But perhaps it was better to die like this.

The volley of lasers paused and Bel Iblis addressed them. "Luke, it's time to come clean! You're heart may be in the right place, but this is no way to go about it! Come out of hiding!"

"You just killed one of them!" Luke shouted through gritted teeth.

"We are to stop you at any costs and I will follow my orders."

"Then you follow blindly! This is not right!"

"My allegiance is to the New Republic, as should yours be."

The General's calmness was aggravating. Luke rested his head back against the storage tanks they hid behind and tried to slow his breath, only to force air out of his lungs in quick rasps. There was no control over his anger. Anger, fear aggression...This insanity had to stop. He managed to calm the tumult until Kayla's lips fleetingly touched his own. He blinked away hot perspiration that stung his vision and glowered at the woman.

"I can feel this power," she whispered. "Death all around." ...of the Dark Side are they. His glare softened, enraptured by her closeness, her emerald eyes.

"No," he quietly refused, but it sounded feeble.

"Yes," she breathed. "Luke, you know what you must do for me."

The alternative was death; if not his own, then of Kayla Storm and the others. He rose and walked methodically into the open. Somewhere beyond, a lone siren began to wail a long, disillusioned chant. As four of the soldiers approached to arrest him, his green laserblade snapped to life and cut them down at once. There would be death regardless, he realized. It would always be so in war. They were no longer human; just the same perception he forced himself to use when battling TIE fighters and Imperial Stormtroopers. They had done heinous things, followed heinous orders, and were therefore subhuman. He wished the guards were similarly enveloped in armor. He would not look at their faces and felt cold. The Imperials scrambled for the weapons of the deceased and Bel Iblis called on the remaining soldiers to open fire. The Jedi moved fluidly to deflect every laserbolt that would have otherwise met its mark. The escapists fell in behind him and rained volley after volley of pure energy upon their sworn enemies. More screams in death. One of the shuttles awakened suddenly to send a number of laserblasts into the entry which collapsed in an avalanche of steel. No more gun fodder would be allowed to enter, but the dying would not be allowed to retreat either. The remaining soldiers yelped in surprise and scattered. The escapists ran for the shuttle. A few more meters and the hatchway would open.

Garm Bel Iblis removed a small spherical device from his pouch, charged it, and tossed it toward the shuttle's ramp. The thermal detonator exploded upon impact. The blast incinerated two of the quicker Imperials, and knocked Skywalker to the deck, his lightsaber clattering away uselessly. Luke rolled and gained his feet quickly, hand outstretched to summon his lightsaber with the Force.

"Luke!" his sister screamed as bolts of energy hit his chest squarely and he fell in a crumpled heap. She dashed down the hatchway ramp and knelt at the Jedi's side, trying to stop the blood. She reached her reddened hands toward the General and cried, "Please, Garm! Stop this!"

"Hold your fire!" he shouted. The laserfire dwindled and finally died out.

"I thought we were just going to leave! I didn't know!"

He approached. "Leia..."

"She's a good woman, isn't she?" Kayla hissed and crouched behind Leia with her blaster leveled against her skull. "She'll soon be a dead woman if you don't let us go. Of course, you killed the last Jedi, why not his sister as well?"

Garm swallowed hard and met Leia's terrified gaze. "I'm sorry, Leia."

He and his men stepped back. The two surviving Imperial pilots gathered up Skywalker's limp form and followed their leader into the shuttle. After a moment, repulsorlifts whined to life and caused the shuttle to lift precariously into the air.

"Now what?" Sergeant Paulus demanded as the vessel shot off toward the heavens.

Bel Iblis closed his eyes and sighed, "Haake's waiting. Find me Turchin. He should have arrived with reinforcements five minutes ago."

* * *

The hijacked shuttle raced past the flagship Benefactor as a twelve-man squadron of X-wing fighters poured out of their mothership like angry insects.

"Defense shields are operational," Kayla spoke to no one in particular. "Setting course to rendezvous with Grand Admiral Thorn."

Leia Organa Solo heard the last of this and staggered as the shuttle bucked under ionic blasts. "Thorn?"

"It's not up for discussion, your highness," snapped the Imperial Commander.

"You can't do this..."

Storm shot her an irritated glance. "The Jedi wanted it, councilor. Let's not lower this conversation to idle threats. Get in the hold."

Rebuffed, Leia retreated and collapsed beside her brother's prone form. His black tunic was burned through in places and crusted with blood. His chest rose and fell sporadically, as if by virtue of his own will. Leia kissed his fingers and made them wet with her tears, sick with horror.

She whispered, "Luke, what have you done?"

The response was weak as Luke's hand gently squeezed hers, but almost tangible as he again touched her mind.

It will be all right.

Leia's hands moved to her slightly bulging abdomen. "She will kill us!"

Leave Kayla Storm to me.

* * *

Wedge Antilles watched through the canopy of his cockpit as the shuttle *Mystique* jumped mercifully into hyperspace.

"They just made the leap, sir. Shall we follow?"

There was a pause before Haake's response. "Negative. Return to docking bay Five."

Wedge took a moment to stare at the empty space. He had wanted to consider Luke Skywalker his friend, not just his commander. From the little he knew about Jedi Knighthood, he thought they were supposed to be a noble bunch and Luke fit the mold. Such a person would need a good reason to turn from a hero to a traitor. There had to be good reason.

"I said come home, Rogue Leader."

Commander Antilles blinked twice, unaccustomed to his new title. He flipped on his short range transmitter. "Return to mother, Rogue Team. Dock Five."

He sighed heavily and decided he could better serve his friend here, if need be.

Chapter Five

Han Solo and his Wookiee companion strode quickly through the labyrinth corridors of Cloud City, having heard from Lando Calrissian that the President of the New Republic was anxious to speak with them. A small gathering of stormtroopers watched them pass but moved not a muscle. The space pirate stiffened in reflex and let his right hand slide to the comforting blaster at his hip. Thorn's fleet had arrived already to refuel. Seemed they were behaving well enough. Han forced himself to relax.

"Ahr Rahr roor ra ahr?" Chewie asked.

"I don't know, Chewie," he frowned deeply. "Just having these guys around makes me nervous."

The Wookiee grumbled agreement.

Baron Administrator Calrissian met the ex-smugglers just outside the communications room.

"Han, ol' buddy, about this deal with Grand Admiral Thorn...You'll keep it quiet, won't ya?"

Solo pursed his lips for a moment, as if contemplating the great social ailments of the galaxy--of which Lando was a part. Leia might have his head for this, but Han finally smirked. "Not a word."

He patted the nervous conman on the back and they entered to sit at one of the conference tables. Han straightened his vest a little as Mon Mothma's half-meter hologram materialized at the table's center.

He nodded briefly. "Hi ya."

A deep frown etched the President's sixty-ish complexion. She still hated them for leaving the military. "Mister Solo, this may be the darkest day in the galaxy's history."

"Sounds pretty heavy," he commented with the usual sarcasm. There was nothing he liked better than watching Madam President get her panties tied up in a knot. But her expression showed more than the usual annoyance. His throat tightened as he thought of his wife. "What's happened to Leia?"

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "She hasn't made contact with you yet?"

"No." Han loosened his constricting collar. "What's goin' on?"

"Mister Solo," her voice became scornful, "Leia Organa Solo and Luke Skywalker are wanted for high treason."

The Wookiee uttered a low growl.

Han's face twitched. "You've got to be kidding."

"Late this evening, several prisoners marked for execution were freed from a high security detention area and General Turchin was attacked by lightsaber in the process. Soon after, the ensuing battle between the escapists and several of General Bel Ibli s' ground squads nearly destroyed the entire landing platform and resulted in heavy casualties. Skywalker ensured the escape of the Imperial prisoners and Organa Solo provided transport with her private shuttle. They are traitors, Mister Solo."

Han gaped at the hologram, for once speechless.

Lando spoke for him. "They just wouldn't do something like that. There must be a mistake..."

"The only mistake made was on their part, and they must be held responsible for their actions." Mon Mothma looked at him frigidly. "Baron

Administrator Calrissian, the system of Bespin is placed under martial law until further notice."

Calrissian nearly jumped out of his chair. "I've sunk millions of credits into this outfit. You can't do this to me!"

"The situation may be remedied with the return of Skywalker and Organa Solo. Until then, Admiral Haake's fleet will arrive to enforce order." She paused as Chewbacca roared deafeningly and turned her attention to the pirate Han Solo. "Do not attempt to harbor criminals, my friends. I can assure you the penalties are most harsh."

The threat hung in the air almost tangibly as the hologram vanished. The Wookiee, clearly agitated, began to pace the room.

"I just don't get it," Han mumbled in shock.

"Whatever made them do this, they had to have damn good reason," snapped Lando as he briskly punched in a memorized code. "If any two people were loyal to the Rebel Alliance, they were Luke and Leia."

"But this is the New Republic now. Obviously, Mon Mothma has decided to make a few changes in her style of governing. I can see how'd they get fed up with the whole thing, but this is pretty drastic." Han rubbed the scruff on his chin and grumbled, "Sounds like something I woulda done, not Luke."

Lando was about to make some smart remark when the image of Grand Admiral Thorn materialized before them.

"Good day, Baron Calrissian," he said graciously.

"Bespin has been placed under martial law and Admiral Haake is on his way to clean things up around here."

Maxus Thorn shook his head disparagingly. "Tsk, tsk. Violated another fire code, have we?"

"Never mind that," he fumed. "I want you out of here and I want you out now. The deal is off."

Thorn spoke soothingly. "Now, Lando, the refueling is nearly complete. Perhaps we can simply postpone the transaction until a later date. We have enough now to hold us over for at least two weeks."

"Fine," Lando growled. "I want your payment deposited into my account at Greater Intergalactic Bank in the Anorak system. You'd better take what you have and get out of here now."

The old man smiled like a doting grandfather. "You will have the payment in full within two standard days. Thank you for your consideration."

The image disappeared.

Lando couldn't resist grumbling, "That's guy's a real thorn in my side."

Realization struck Han between the eyes and he was headed for the door. "Come on, Chewie!"

"Wait!"

Lando stopped them in the middle of the busy corridor and lowered his tone as a number of nonhuman tourists passed by. "How do you think you're going to find them?"

"I dunno," Han muttered. "I'm sorta makin' this thing up as I go. For starters, I wanna talk to Garm Bel Iblis. I got a hunch things are worse with the New Republic than Mon Mothma is letting on."

"Han!" He grabbed the smuggler's arm and Chewbacca stepped between them to give a dangerous threat.

"Don't touch," Han loosely translated.

Lando released him and said, "Look. Luke and Leia are on the run. They are not going to be found easily and I don't think it's wise to go snooping around where you don't belong. They're in enough trouble as it is."

Solo didn't know whether to laugh or tear his friends head off. "You expect us to just sit here?"

"They know where we are. We should lay low until they decide to make contact. And you have your kids to think about."

Han conceded to this with a brief nod. "Chewie, I want you to go and check up on them for me. I'll hang out here in case Luke and Leia decide to show up."

The Wookiee acquiesced with a low grumble.

"Right," Han agreed. "And if they do show up I want you to get them and the kids as far away as you can get. Ackbar's on the Inner Council and he knows exactly where the kids are being kept."

"I'll find you a small ship," offered Calrissian.

Small wasn't the word for it. Chewbacca complained bitterly after being poked and prodded, and finally stuffed into the cockpit of an A-wing class fighter.

"I know it's cramped, Chewie," said Han. "But I might need the Falcon later on. Besides, you don't want anyone following you, right? Nobody'll give this rat trap a second glance."

The Wookiee whined plaintively.

"Oh, knock it off and get outta here, ya big baby!"

Han closed the cockpit and climbed down to the deck and joined Lando. After a final roar of complaint, the A-wing came to life and bolted for space.

The smuggler scratched his scalp. "I sure hope Luke knows what he's doing, whatever it is."

But the reality was, he wasn't certain of that at all.

* * *

Overcome with exhaustion, Leia dropped to her brother's side and listened to See-Threepio ramble on and on about their predicament.

"I am sure I do not understand it, Mistress Leia," he said primly. Leia rolled her eyes. It was hard to put up with but the talkdroid had to be turned back on for the sake of memory retention. "I do not understand why the Inner Council passed such brutish resolutions."

"We didn't exactly vote on it, Threepio. Mon Mothma just made the decision."

"And stripping Master Luke of his rank? How humiliating. Oh...poor Master Luke. Do you think he'll resume his normal functioning soon?"

"I hope so." She clasped her twin's hand in her own. "I thought we were just going to leave...I never thought he'd help those prisoners escape..."

"And now things are worse. Oh dear..." Threepio emitted an electronic sigh.

The R2 unit emitted a series of chirps.

"Oh, that doesn't matter now. It was probably just a glitch in the HoloNet."

Leia straightened up. "What's wrong with the HoloNet?"

Artoo whistled.

"Nothing now," explained Threepio. "Artoo noted two sets of encrypt codes sent out yesterday at 1200 hours."

"Encrypt codes? From who?"

Artoo whistled a second time.

"He's uncertain at this point, but the destination of one of the transmissions was the Imperial Academy on Carida," the talkdroid translated. "Why would...?"

Leia's expression became sullen. "This may explain the immoderacy of the Inner Council. Perhaps Mon Mothma has been receiving influences of Imperial origin."

"If the Empire has indeed infiltrated the New Republic Inner Council, why would it want to bring so much destruction on itself?"

Leia smiled a bit. Threepio's programming had never allowed for such a human trait as curiosity but somehow it came through in strange glitches. His insight was almost remarkable sometimes, when he wasn't whining about this or that. Luke had probably tinkered with his cerebral conduits again, trying to build the better droid.

She shrugged. "I don't know, Threepio. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe they were trying to cause a division and Mon Mothma took it the wrong way."

"They have certainly succeeded in that. I just don't know how my logic circuits are going to hold up under all this stress. Good Maker, help us!"

"Why don't you and Artoo go shut down for a while. You need to start reserving your power packs. It might be a long time before we find a maintenance outlet."

"Oh dear, you're quite right. Come along, Artoo."

Leia grinned as the two droids waddled off to the rear of the ship. "Sweet dreams."

She pulled a thermal blanket over the fallen Jedi and wiped drenched hair from his forehead. He seemed to alternate between profuse perspiration and violent shivers. Leia was a diplomat, not a doctor, but thought it best to keep him warm.

"Thorn probably knows all about this, Luke," she said in a hushed whisper. "I don't know how these negotiations are going to work. I don't think it was a very good idea."

"We need to be heard." Luke's voice was raspy, the phrases broken with pain. "Leia, Kayla Storm has some influence on me... The Dark Side beckons." He gripped her hand and grimaced. "Leia, soon light must fall..."

"No, you have to fight this," Leia insisted, feeling dread tighten in her chest. "We need you, Luke. I don't know what to do!"

"Quiet," he whispered and silenced the increasing pitch of her voice. "I need rest."

His eyes closed and the rise and fall of his chest became shallow. Without knowing what else to do, Leia bent to place a kiss on her brother's forehead. She looked up as Kayla Storm entered the hold.

Leia rose and cautiously gauged the commander's expression. Rage had passed and her face had returned to its apathetic coldness. It was the calculation of that frigidity that caused Leia to shudder involuntarily.

"We will be coming out of hyperspace shortly," Kayla told her and looked at the fallen Jedi Knight. "Is he going to live?"

The princess of Alderaan kept her tone short. "Perhaps."

Storm approached and crouched beside him. Organa Solo tensed as she stroked the Jedi's bearded cheek. His cool blue eyes snapped open to meet her gaze.

"You saved my life. It would not be right if you didn't allow me to fulfill my end of the bargain, at least in part." She grinned. "And, Luke, we have so much to talk about."

With a soft groan in response, Luke closed his eyes once more. Leia kept her distance and tried to keep the urge to strangle this woman under control.

* * *

After twelve seemingly random hyperspace jumps to shake any improbable pursuit, Chewbacca took the tiny A-wing toward the hidden planet of Anoth. For centuries, Anoth had been a haven for Jedi children, protected by its perfect obscurity. The twins lived there now under the protection of Leia's devoted servant Winter, far from Imperial spies or influences of the Dark Side that could corrupt their Force-sensitive minds.

As space snapped into focus, Chewbacca angled toward the clustered multiple planet Anoth. The world was composed of three fragments orbiting a common center of mass. Two of the largest fragments hovered nearly in contact, sharing a poisonous atmosphere. The third, more distant fragment housed the hidden stronghold and ionized fury masked it from prying eyes. The entire system was on the verge of collapse and would destroy itself in a cosmic blink. For the past century though, humanoid life had managed to catch a foothold.

With experienced skill, the Wookiee glided the A-wing through lightning storms and into the largest of the caverns that dotted the third fragment.

Willow-like, tall with white hair that cascaded to the center of her back, Leia's servant stood patiently with Jacen in her arms, Jaina playing peekaboo at her feet. She was indeed motherly, caring for these human cubs as her own. Chewbacca hefted his mass out of the cockpit and felt bones he didn't know he had crackle. He stretched mightily as Winter approached with Jaina in tow.

The Alderaanian woman smiled. "Chewbacca, I'm glad to see you. I hear Leia has gone on some sort of vacation?"

The Wookiee grumbled, understanding Basic perfectly, but unable to produce the strange utterances.

Winter frowned. "Has she found trouble?"

Chewie nodded. Jaina hugged his leg and he scooped her up and onto his shoulders. She giggled.

"Han must have sent you to protect us."

Again, the Wookiee nodded.

"Well," she said, "What I wouldn't give for a protocol droid, but we'll just have to make do. There are repairs to be done, Chewbacca. Will you do them?"

Another nod.

Winter smiled softly. "I was about to cook a mynock stew for dinner. Are you hungry? It would be nice to have some adult company."

The Wookiee gazed lovingly into her silver-gray eyes and grinned a wide, toothy grin. Dinner.

* * *

The gaseous planet Bespin was a sun that failed to completely take form. She loomed like a gigantic lantern ornament before the New Republic fleet as they were pulled into her powerful gravitational orbit. Several fighter squadrons of various classes sped to and fro and back again, sweeping the system for any sign of Skywalker and Organa Solo. The flagship Benefactor soared ahead of its Star Cruiser companions while on board, a junior officer by the name of Zack scurried toward the back of Admiral Haa ke's chair.

"Admiral, sir."

"Hold, please," Haake said to the transmission before him. The chair swiveled to face the young officer. "I trust there is good reason for this interruption, Lieutenant."

"We have reached standard orbit, sir." Zack frowned when he caught a flash of Imperial uniform on the holopad half-concealed by Haake's body. "No indication of the fugitives' whereabouts as of yet."

"Very well. Upscale the search. I want two more squadrons combing the system."

"Yes, sir."

Haake scowled as the boy declined to salute and half jogged from his office. He turned back to face the image of Ambassador Furgan. "They're on to me."

"That is your own fault. But the ball is rolling. They will destroy the peripheral fleets and the remaining will come running to me. Your mission is done, Haake, however clumsily. One last thing. I want Bepin. And I want that New Republic fleet."

Rufus Haake nodded silently and watched the hologram disappear. It revived a moment later with the image of Han Solo.

"Mister Solo," he rumbled, "I believe it's time I met your acquaintance. Won't you please come aboard?"

A number of restless fighter pilots and maintenance workers gathered around Zack and listened to him speak of Haake's contact with the Imperial Ambassador. As the conversations between them became more heated, Wedge Antilles broke away from the group and began to pace on his own, his mind whirling in a maelstrom of thought. There was something not right about this whole thing. This whole...New Republic. There was certainly something not right about Rufus Haake. He was sick and tired of the feelings that kept gnawing at his stomach every time he went on some so-called clean up mission. Maybe it was time to really clean up. He turned and called for the attention of the others.

"I know how fed up everyone is with how things are being run around here. Maybe it's time we quit being herded around like Banthas and really did something for a change."

"What are you talking about?" asked Zack, niece to the last.

The squadron leader smiled wanly. "I've got a few ideas."

Chapter Six

The fleet of Grand Admiral Maxus Thorn drifted silently just beyond the system of Bespin, just beyond the sweeps of New Republic fighter squadrons. Aboard the flagship Zephyr, a New Republic vessel had just landed. The Grand Admiral arrived with Captain Saysithi to warmly greet Commander Storm.

"Welcome, my friend." He grasped her hand and his pale lips smacked it gallantly. "I did not doubt for a second that you would return to us."

Kayla bristled with indignation. "Then you should not have abandoned me in the first place."

"You understand, of course, the dire position we found ourselves in. We would have been lost..."

"You are lost already."

Thorn raised an eyebrow as two more Imperial pilots disembarked, carrying a limp, wounded figure. Leia Organa Solo followed cautiously, having told her droids to remain on board the shuttle.

"Catch of the day, Commander?" he queried.

Leia retorted pointedly, "Don't act so surprised, Grand Admiral. I suspect you knew of our coming all along."

Thorn passed a questioning glance to Captain Saysithi. The alien gestured the equivalent of a human shrug. He turned his attention back to the New Republic diplomat. "On the contrary. I had no prior knowledge of this curious visit. To what do I owe the honor, dear councilor?"

"I've come to negotiate. First, however, my brother..."

"Of course. How rude. You'll forgive an old man, won't you?" He said to the men still holding Skywalker in their arms, "Sick bay. I want him to be given absolute care, understood?"

The pilots acquiesced and Leia watched nervously as they left with the fallen Jedi. She turned a resentful look on Kayla Storm and commented, "I had hoped this meeting could have taken place under better circumstances. And on neutral ground."

"Yes, of course, councilor. Consider yourselves my guests. There is nothing to fear. "

He gestured to the automatic blast door and escorted Organa Solo into a corridor. Saysithi and Storm fell in step behind them.

"We've been at war long enough and I am well aware of the animosity the remnant fleets are experiencing with the Imperial Academy of Carida," Leia stated. Actually, it was an educated guess. Spies that infiltrated the Inner Council could be from any number of sources, and with conflicting interests.

"I would agree tensions have been strained as of late, but I can hardly see how that is any of your concern."

"I am concerned with the new propositions that have been passed by the Inner Council. Are you aware that the New Republic intends to step up its clean up missions to destroy the fleets and finally move against the Academy?"

"Yes. We have received some...transmissions to that affect." Maxus Thorn sighed. "I'm going to divulge what I know to you, councilor, because the information no longer matters any to me or to the security of the Empire. Humph. Security. I am almost certain my spy has double-crossed us and joined alliances with Carida. They're using the New Republic military to carry out retribution against the remnant fleets for turning away from Ambassador Furgan. The man is an idiot. We have no leadership to guide us and merely seek to exist at this point. It is Furgan who seeks to resurrect the Empire, through the use of your own military. You obviously are not here on behalf of Mon Mothma. Therefore, you must come not to negotiate, as nothing can come of it, but to join a dying class of misfits."

It was more than a confirmation of her suspicions. The corridor ended in a t-intersection and Thorn paused to gaze through the giant, transparasteel window at the stars, and the slightly lopsided Kismet.

"We've had numerous problems with our new superweapon," he muttered. "The engineering's been flawed from the start."

"All the more reason for us to find a way to make peace between our two nations. Surely, Ambassador Furgan must realize that he's only going to seal his own fate by having you destroyed."

"It's a confusing situation at best. Out with the old, in with the new, eh?"

"Most in the New Republic share my same convictions, that the Empire should be negotiated with, that a treaty be signed, and boundaries be set to ensure our borders will remain sovereign. It's just the military..."

"And the military makes the galaxy swirl round. I am sorry I cannot help you, Councilor Organa Solo. What is happening between our two so-called governments is beyond my control. I will be damned if I am going to crawl to either one of them with my tail between my legs, however frequently the thought crosses my mind."

"It wouldn't be wise for you to continue this way," Leia said. "I may still be able to convince the Inner Council..."

"It's not likely you'll be able to convince the New Republic of anything, after that stunt Skywalker pulled for us on Coruscant," Kayla interjected.

"Quite right," agreed Thorn. He scratched his whitened beard. "Forgive me if I withdraw my previous invitation. The last thing my people need is a New Republic fleet chasing us from one end of the galaxy to the other to catch traitors."

"We came to negotiate," Leia responded through gritted teeth.

"I will give the Jedi three hours to stabilize his condition for travel, then you both must leave. Captain Saysithi, make sure the councilor is made comfortable. Commander Storm, I wish to speak with you privately."

Leia blinked hard. Of course she had failed. What could one say? "I am afraid, Grand Admiral, of what the New Republic has become."

"Yes," nodded Thorn. "And you have good reason."

Leia quietly accepted Saysithi's offered tentacle and left Kayla Storm to face her superior alone.

"The Force is with me," she told him. "Skywalker must remain here."

The old man slouched in his disability chair. "A military with the Force as its ally was once thought to be unstoppable. We know better now, but perhaps this is the edge we need against Furgan and his puppets." He looked into the woman's intense emerald eyes and loved them passionately. "I promise you something will be arranged."

* * *

Kayla Storm returned to her quarters to shower and change from the grubby prisoner's apparel that clung to her with dried sweat and filth. She stood now in an olive commander's uniform before a long, hexagonal mirror, her mind swimming in an avalanche of thought and emotion. For her, the Force was at once abhorrent and seductive, but it was the power she had always desired. With each passing hour, she felt it invade her soul and in all honesty, she feared herself. She feared this loss of control.

A powerful presence filled the room. Storm looked over her shoulder instinctively but saw nothing. When her gaze shifted back to the mirror, an ungodly apparition stood where her reflection had once been. She staggered and looked quickly for an escape. But this was the Force in its darkest moments, and there would be no hiding.

Commander Storm finally dropped to one knee in submission. "Master."

Emperor Palpatine's eyes danced hellishly in the dimly lit chamber. "So, you have been reunited with the Jedi Knight Luke Skywalker." He spat

the name like bile from the pit of his diseased soul. Kayla smiled inwardly. There was more than hate in the old man's voice, but fear as well. Skywalker had been his downfall. The Emperor licked his lips, appreciating her insight. "It is most fortunate, my dear, that you have chosen the correct path."

She wasn't convinced that she had chosen any path, but questioned, "Why is it I have not discovered my talents until now? The Empire could have been preserved."

Palpatine's apparition separated itself from the mirror and strode around her slowly. It touched the nape of her neck and she recoiled.

"Darth Vader sought to hide you from me because he saw you as a threat, just as Skywalker was."

"I would never have betrayed you!" Kayla insisted.

"Hm." Palpatine grinned slightly. "I believe he has, in fact, done us both a great service. Only you remain to carry out my legacy. You will succeed where the fool Vader has failed. In time, you will be my Empress."

Kayla stared at his yellow eyes as they gleamed with perverse delight. Her ambitious thirst filled, overflowed, yet was not satiated. "Tell me what I must do and it shall be done."

* * *

Time passed with infinite slowness. Leia paced the plush quarters with frayed nerves and feeling sick to her stomach. She wanted her brother to be close at hand and worried about his injuries. At the same time, she was angry with him. It was Luke's suggestion to leave Coruscant. Leaving Coruscant resulted in bloodshed and now his insane plan to negotiate with Grand Admiral Thorn resulted in a prompt slap in the face. There would be no returning to the New Republic with the way things were. How could Luke have been more wrong about this whole situation? It would have been better to stay and tolerate the Inner Council's corruption, perhaps rally support from within. Luke was not a politician yet even he should have given more consideration to such blatant action against the government. Yet in this instance, he acted more as Han would, swinging to the rescue without a moment's thought to the blasted ramifications. Leia thought becoming a Jedi Knight was supposed to alleviate all the difficulties of impulsive behavior. And the damsel in distress, Kayla Storm, now had them in her corner, on her terms, and yet they were not imprisoned. What was the angle? How had this woman influenced Luke to her own end? For once, she wished she had a Jedi's insight, at least when it was on the mark. At least she had figured out what the problems were, spies and all. Now it was time to start working on solutions.

Leia spoke into the small transmitter attached to the inside of her jacket. "Threepio, get Artoo linked to the ship computer and see if he can locate Luke. I want to be out of here in ten minutes."

"Understood, Mistress Leia," replied the protocol droid. "I will take a moment to find a suitable outlet. Please hold."

The entry chimed.

Leia straightened her jacket and faced the door. "Come."

Commander Kayla Storm entered somberly, and the emerald eyes hid something terrible.

"What is it?" Leia asked.

"Your brother is dead."

She stepped back mindfully. "No, he isn't."

Storm's voice was strangely compelling. "Luke Skywalker gave his life for what he thought was right. Too bad he was so mistaken. His wounds were mortal, after all."

But I would know! I would have sensed it! Leia closed her eyes and reached out with her mind, not really sure how but searching, feeling for her brother's presence with everything that she was. Luke...

There was nothing but a cold, black vacuity. She was no Jedi, but her brother was a link that brought her closer to the Force. Something kept him veiled from her sight. Something blocked the path. It could just not be.

Commander Storm's eyes narrowed into points. "It's no use, councilor. The Jedi Knight is dead."

Leia clutched the back of a chair for support and whispered harshly into her comlink, "See-Threepio, where is Luke!"

"One moment." There was a long hesitation before the droid began to stammer. "Oh dear, oh dear...I-I-I'm terribly sorry, your highness. Oh my..."

"Tell me!" The scream stuck in her throat and produced a hollow, raspy sound.

There was another pause as See-Threepio searched his memory banks for the correct word usage. There was none to be had. "It has been recorded that Master Luke passed away not ten minutes ago and the body was jettisoned into space, as per Imperial procedure."

"The records may have been tampered with." Leia glowered at Kayla Storm. "It's convenient there's no proof of his death other than the

memory of a computer and the word of its programmer. Where are you hiding him?"

"Skywalker was mistaken for one of our own," she said quietly. "His death and the mistakes following it are horrible, not convenient."

"Mistress Leia," Threepio went on, "the Imperial fleet appears to be on course for the Bespin system, where the New Republic awaits our arrival."

Alarm crawled up her spine and tightened her stomach into knots. "What have you done to us?"

Kayla gave a twisted smile. "Grand Admiral Thorn wishes to return you to Mon Mothma as a gesture of goodwill. So you see, your diplomatic mission will not be a complete failure." She paused and the expression shifted to mock pity. "I am truly sorry about your brother Luke."

Leia collapsed in a soft chair as if struck.

Kayla Storm left the bereaved silence.

* * *

The Millennium Falcon glided toward the New Republic fleet with her escort of X-wing fighters. There was no hurry in her flight. In fact, a rather impatient squadron leader urged Han Solo to increase the engine speed of his souped up cargo ship by ten percent. Reluctantly, the old smuggler complied and sat forward in the pilot's chair as he saw a small cluster of Imperial warships make a blip on radar.

"Uh-oh," he grumbled.

"No." Calrissian shook his head and pointed to the Star Destroyers in the distance. "They're not moving in attack formation. Imperials are real sticklers about that sort of thing."

"They sure are in a hurry to get over here. Think they struck a deal?" Han wondered.

"I know they struck a deal."

Solo looked over at the Baron Administrator and inhaled deeply. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Don't say that!" the other snapped. "Things only get worse when you say that!"

Han shrugged, nonchalant, and angled the Falcon toward the flagship Benefactor.

Several New Republic soldiers waited for the company to safely dock in the cavernous hangar. Solo and Calrissian disembarked with their escort and approached the soldiers warily. Almost at once, the pilots unholstered heavy blasters and opened fire on the unsuspecting guard. The two companions yelped in surprise and dove behind the Falcon's landing ramp for cover. Han groped at the empty holster at his hip and swore at their captors for leaving him so defenseless. Besides, he thought bleakly, who am I supposed to shoot? The small group of soldiers was quickly subdued as more pilots appeared with more guns, as if from nowhere. Wedge Antilles relieved the soldiers of their weapons and turned to give a command to the pilot behind him.

"Alert Beta and Delta teams we have control over the Benefactor's main docking bay. Have these guys taken down to the brig. Move!"

The pilot nodded and the captives were taken away. Sirens wailed mournfully as explosions reverberated from within the flagship. Not altogether convinced it was safe to come out of hiding, the perplexed civilians edged toward Antilles and Han formed a question slowly on his lips.

"So...uh...what's goin' on, Wedge? Anything new?"

The revolutionary smiled and rested his heavy rifle across his shoulders. "We're cleaning house."

Lando gave Han a huge grin. "Well, I'll be..."

Solo's face twisted impishly. "Somebody get me a mop."

* * *

The Imperial shuttle left the flagship Zephyr like a giant bat taking flight. Grand Admiral Maxus Thorn watched it glide toward the Benefactor as Haake's voice spoke frantically over an intercepted transmission to Ambassador Furgan.

"A mutiny is underway, Ambassador! I cannot keep control..."

"Has Mon Mothma been alerted?" Furgan barked.

"I can't get through! I can't..."

"Fool! You are lost!"

"Who are you?" Haake demanded, voice muffled as he must have turned away from the transmitter. "What are you...? NO! "

There was static and Thorn threw a gleeful look in Saysithi's direction. "You see how our problems seem to take care of themselves?"

"We still need fuel," purred the alien captain.

"Yes." Thorn stared hard at the New Republic fleet. "Yes, we do."

* * *

Han Solo stood on the bridge of the Benefactor and watched Antilles and another pilot drag Haake's lifeless body toward the blast door. They sure were in it now. He smiled as Leia was escorted through the entry by Lando. His wife stared as Rufus Haake was taken out, ignoring Han's advance.

"Hey, no hug?"

Her eyes flashed venomously. "You shouldn't have killed Haake. He was working with Carida and knew of another spy within the New Republic."

"Is that what this is all about?" he exclaimed as she brushed past.

"The Inner Council has become corrupt due to Imperial influence. Furgan's trying to use our military to clean up the dissension in the Empire and causing dissension among us in the process. It's practically another New Order, Han." She paused to look at him and her voice became bitter. "If you had been around more, you would have known that. You'd also have known that I'm carrying another child."

Solo felt his mouth drop open. So that was why Luke wanted him to stick around...where was Luke anyway? He rubbed at his temples and the headache that was starting to pound against his skull. His family needed their lives to be safe and dependable. And here they were in the middle of an uprising, alienated if not completely divorced from the place Leia would have liked to call home. To hell with it. He tried to wrap his arms around her from behind and received only a sharp jab to the ribs.

"Hey! Settle down, princess!" He whirled her about to face him and gripped her shoulders hard. He was fuming; at her, at Luke, at the kid, at himself. It was all he could muster to keep from shaking some kind of sense into her. "What is wrong with you!"

Leia hissed sharply, "Luke is dead!"

The kid...As shock settled in and he realized what an idiot he really was, Leia twisted out of his grasp and headed for the door.

"Leia..."

"We've got a transmission coming in," Lando said as he studied a communications' control panel.

Solo clenched his teeth and tried to swallow his fury. "Open a comlink."

Calrissian punched in a code and scowled as the image of Grand Admiral Thorn appeared on the forward viewscreen.

The old man was obviously pleased. "Ah. Congratulations are in order, I see. I take it Princess Leia arrived unharmed?"

"Thorn, you rancid piece of meat, what have you done with Luke?" Han growled dangerously.

The Grand Admiral shrugged. "The Jedi was practically dead on arrival. There was very little our Em-Dee units could do for him."

"I'll bet," Lando muttered under his breath.

"I offer my most heartfelt condolences to his friends and family. Now if you'll kindly surrender the Beshin system and be on your pathetic little way..."

Lando raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"There's no way in hell..." Han began.

"I'm certain there is," Thorn interrupted. "I'm certain Mon Mothma would not be particularly pleased with your little escapade. In fact, I'm quite certain she would insist on turning your hijacked fleet into floating carnage as soon as she gets a chance. It's really only a matter of time until she finds out, unless she already has. Time which could facilitate your escape."

"You're going to alert Coruscant if we don't bug out ASAP." Han laughed bitterly. "What a saint."

"Let it go, Han." Lando looked through a viewport at gaseous Beshin, jewel of the smuggling underworld. There would be some unhappy clientele to deal with if he ever decided to return. "There'll be other Sabacc games." With higher jackpots, and better odds.

Maxus Thorn, the grandfather, smiled. "A wise decision, Baron Calrissian. I'm glad there is one of you gifted with intelligence."

Han gave a silent oath and went looking for his wife.

* * *

Luke Skywalker was not dead, but fought an ever-strengthening tide that sought to pull him toward that end. The more he struggled, the deeper he seemed to sink. So death is quicksand, he thought grimly and gave up the fight. The tide, the infinity that was the Force, washed over him and he was assaulted by memories of youth--his guardians Owen and Beru Lars, his few friends, including the late Biggs Darklighter and Kayla Storm. Before that, chaos and a man who had forsaken him, his sister, his mother. Mother was a blank figure in his past; voiceless, faceless, yet she must have been. Flesh torn from flesh, Luke was taken at birth; Leia was sent with their mother to Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan where the infant girl would be raised as a princess. The infant boy was dropped somewhat unceremoniously into the arms of Owen and Beru Lars, moisture farmers on the desolate world of Tatooine, and raised to be the pauper. Fate separated them once again. Emotional anguish came from his twin as angry accusations, attacked his soul like shards of jagged glass. He wanted to succor the cries of this lost child; cradle her tightly in his arms so she wouldn't hit, cover her mouth so she wouldn't scream. But the pain was too much and she would just not shut up. The wounds of his heart scarred as he wished revenge on Kayla Storm for her deceit. The tide receded as Skywalker again stepped toward the darkness. My son. His father's voice spoke in the forefront of the Jedi's mind, masking the anguish he felt from Leia. Do not give in to your hate, as I did. The voice of Anakin Skywalker resonated deeply but did not instill terror as it once had. Darth Vader was no more. His father had returned to himself. But that didn't change the occurrences of the past. She betrayed me. Luke tried to wake up, get up, but his father's presence held him firm. Luke, it is time you took her as your pupil as Obi-wan took me. You must pass on what you have learned. Father. His head spun frantically. I'm not ready. The elder Skywalker allowed his tone to become sharp. If Kayla Storm is permitted to follow the Dark path, the Empire will resurrect in a form that will pale its previous infamy. You were strong enough to redeem Darth Vader. You must be strong enough to redeem her as well. Memories of the terrible encounter before Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader chilled Luke to his very being. To allow such evil to reemerge was horrific enough, but in a person he had known nearly his whole life, someone he cared for. Father... Anakin whispered softly in his mind. Forgive me, son. Luke wanted to tell him it was okay, that what was done was done, and that he loved him despite all the betrayal. But the thoughts would not organize themselves as the tide washed back in. He felt himself slip. Then, suddenly, but quietly, softly, gentle fingertips stroked the back of his mind and guided him toward consciousness. You are strong. The suggestion came to him. In a little while, you will be just fine. Tender lips touched his forehead for a brief instant and his eyes blinked open to see the attractive face of Kayla Storm. She sat close at his bedside with his prosthetic right hand clutched in hers. He no longer sensed the lust for death that had overflowed from her sense into his own during the flight from Coruscant, but cunning, and a delicate honing of her craft that was not altogether malign. She smiled coquettishly. "Hello again." The pain faded and Luke realized that Kayla was much more than a novice Jedi. She was powerful and had the capability of patience and control, and to heal, rather than destroy. "How is it you've learned so much?" he asked. His voice cracked like brittle clay. She ignored the question and quietly said, "I need your guidance." "That's why you told my sister I was dead and sent her

back to the New Republic?" A touch of anger flashed through Luke's mind but he kept it well in check. He looked through the bedside viewport and watched Haake's fleet orbiting Bespin. Something was happening there. Kayla followed his gaze. "They will be gone soon, and the Empire will be rebuilt."

"For one thing, you sound overconfident."

"And another?"

"You're wrong." Luke bit the inside of his cheek as the New Republic fleet made the jump into hyperspace. Nothing could be done for his friends now, and he sensed that, for the moment, they were safe. They would not be if Kayla Storm was enveloped completely by darkness and evolved into a nemesis like Darth Vader. He refused to open himself to Leia's grief.

Storm's tone became ice. "You should not doubt me, Luke Skywalker."

He turned his head and looked at the green eyes calmly. "In our past, I rarely have."

The eyes sharpened but she did not respond. Luke folded his hands and placed them at his lips, making a final decision. "I'll teach you, but not here."

"The Grand Admiral needs me. I can't just leave."

"If you wish to become a Jedi, you will follow my instructions." He shifted his gaze to watch her reaction. "The training will commence on Tatooine."

His novice frowned sullenly.

"Commander Storm to the bridge," an intercom announced.

Kayla rose to her feet. "I'll consider it. But I don't think you're in a position to make demands of any sort, Jedi Skywalker."

Luke only grinned in reply. Incensed, she turned on her heel and left.

* * *

Within hours, the fleet of Admiral Ackbar came swiftly to Bespin and to succeed where Haake failed. Maxus Thorn watched the fighter squadrons come in droves, like maddened insects attacking a large, unsuspecting intruder. The damage was becoming severe.

"The Kismet has lost her main deflectors," announced a shaken, young ensign.

"Steer clear," commanded Thorn.

The Super Star Destroyer Zephyr angled ponderously from the volatile superweapon. The Star Destroyer Maelstrom was slower to follow suit and as the Kismet erupted, disappeared in a ball of fire.

"The Kismet and the Maelstrom have been destroyed, sir," someone commented on the obvious.

Grand Admiral Thorn turned his chair slowly to face Captain Saysithi and Commander Storm. "Then we are alone. Captain, regretfully inform Ambassador Furgan that we will be rendezvousing with him in two days."

"Aye, sir."

"Ensign, lay in a course for the Carida system and jump to lightspeed when feasible."

"Aye, sir." The young officer paused. "They're blocking our escape, Grand Admiral."

"Commander Storm..."

Kayla stepped forward to receive orders.

"Take out as many squadrons as you can to draw their fire away from the Zephyr. You will be called back when we are ready to make the Jump."

Commander Storm crouched before the disability chair and quietly surmised, "You're going to abandon me again, aren't you?"

The old man patted her hand and gave a sad smile. They had spoken at length about Palpatine's visitation. He was in awe of this girl, this chosen one. Kayla Storm had more than his blessings. "And again, you will survive. The remaining TIE fighters aboard this ship have been upgraded with lightspeed capabilities. You need only follow our path and take your throne at Carida. Go now, my friend, Empress. You are our last hope."

"I will not fail you." she replied. The Imperial commander straightened, saluted, and left the bridge.

When she returned to Luke Skywalker, he was dressed and waiting.

"We're under attack," Kayla stated and tossed him a lifesuit and breathmask which she herself now wore.

Skywalker blandly gazed out a viewport at the ensuing firefight. "You don't say."

"Get dressed. This will be our only chance to slip out of here."

* * *

"Admiral."

The Mon Calamari swiveled his captain's chair to face the bridge officer.

"The Zephyr is sending out every TIE squadron it has to join the battle."

"It won't be enough," Ackbar wheezed. "Send out Blue and Red squadrons and issue a call for their surrender."

"We've tried hailing them, sir, and they won't respond."

"Very well," he sighed deeply. "Let's get this finished."

* * *

Several squadrons of TIE fighters, Interceptors, and the double-podded TIE bombers swept out of the flagship Zephyr and lunged forward to engage the New Republic Star Cruisers at point-blank range. Swarms of X and A-wing class fighters emerged from the opposing Benefactor in response. For the moment, forces concentrated on annihilating the TIE fighters rather than their mothership. Immediately, the Super Star Destroyer grasped the opportunity and disappeared in a flash of light.

"I can't believe they left them," breathed Ackbar's lieutenant. "Those short range fighters don't have a prayer."

The Mon Calamari Admiral hesitated only for a moment. "Imperial Commander, you are urged to surrender!" he barked into a comlink.

Kayla Storm turned her head slightly to glance at the former New Republic pilot seated next to her. He did well with the controls, despite his lack of experience with TIE bombers. Kayla set aside the cannon and bomber controls and leaned toward the communications panel.

"I hate to disappoint you, Admiral, but surrender is out of the question." Quickly she toggled frequencies. "Attention TIE squads, lay in coordinates and Jump on my mark. Now!"

She fingered the controls and waited expectantly for the stars to elongate. They did not. Her fists pounded against the control panel in impotent rage. "He lied to me! Damn it! Maxus Thorn lied to me!"

Her comrades, too, began to come to the same conclusion. The formations began to break up, TIE fighters racing at full sublight power to escape the attackers. The squadrons of New Republic fighters eagerly gave chase.

"All TIE squadrons..." Kayla began.

"No," Luke said quietly. "Let them scatter. If we can find someplace to hide, we can escape notice."

"But their sensors..."

"I'll worry about their sensors. Look there." Skywalker nodded toward a field of tumbling astroids and angled the TIE bomber toward them.

"You're not actually going into an astroid field!" Storm gasped.

Luke smiled broadly behind the pilot's mask. "My smuggler friend pulled it off once, why shouldn't I?"

"Your smuggler friend has a notorious reputation of being a little bit stupid. You're not stupid, you're...INSAAAAAAAAAANE! "

The TIE bomber dived headfirst into the churning debris. A number of the quicker A-wing class fighters paused in their hunt.

"Uh...Blue Leader, we've got a TIE bomber in the astroid field. Coordinates five-zero-epsilon."

"Don't risk it, Blue Three. Regroup at coordinates five-nine-beta; we've got a last stand goin' on out here."

"But what about this TIE?"

"Don't worry about it. They'll run out of gas soon enough, if they don't get pulverized."

"Roger, Blue Leader."

Admiral Ackbar watched the fighter squadrons return to their respective ships and asked his Lieutenant, "Have we hunted them all down?"

The younger Mon Calamari bobbed his head. "It appears so, Admiral. Blue Three and Blue Six reported chasing a TIE bomber into the far astroid field but our sensors don't pick up anything due to interference."

"Well," he sighed heavily, "Then I suppose that is that. Contact Madam President of our success, and of our failure."

* * *

They reached the edge of the astroid field without mishap and Luke Skywalker removed the suffocating breathmask, leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes. Kayla glanced at him, still somewhat anxious from the harrowing flight; Skywalker seemed to be suffering some pain from his injuries, or maybe he was just overwhelmed by the fact that he had just flown for the other side.

"Both," he grunted, listening to her thoughts.

"Hasn't anyone told you it's not nice to eavesdrop?"

"All the time."

Storm removed her own breathmask and watched the horizon of normal space. "It's going to take about seven months to get to Tatooine at sublight speed. We'll have to stop frequently for supplies since there isn't any room for cargo on this thing. Next stop should be Anorak in fifteen hours. I don't see why you couldn't have picked a system that was a little closer..." She noticed Luke shaking his head. "What do you mean, No?"

"We won't have to stop."

"What do you mean We won't have to stop? You just wait until you feel a few natural urges and then we'll see..."

Luke grinned. "I'm going to teach your first lesson regarding one of the skills of a Jedi, namely control of the Force that dwells inside you and your perception of that Force."

"I don't know what you're talking about. We'll die if we don't stop to get food and water..."

"Listen, Kayla. Close your eyes and feel the energy around you. Sense it deliberately, not out of reaction to stimulus. The Force surrounds us always, it is with us always."

Storm complied to his instructions and felt her muscles relax almost immediately. There was a pleasant feeling that drifted into all of her senses. The touch of soft velvet, the smell of wildflowers, gentle strains of musical flutes, even the taste of sweet delicacies. The Light Side whispered to her soul like the overtures of a fervent lover. Please come, it invited with mild persuasion.

"We can alter our perception of time, not only in our minds, but in our bodies as well. A Jedi can lull himself into a hibernetic trance," Luke was saying. "If you can't, we will stop as you need. But I'm convinced that with your sensitivity to the Force, it won't be a difficult task. It begins with trust, and a leap of faith."

"I can trust," she muttered quietly, already slipping into a blanket of warm slumber.

Skywalker smiled to himself. Perhaps the art of Jedi Masterhood would not be so difficult after all.

The TIE bomber landed on the edge of a deep canyon and tilted awkwardly over its precipice.

"Good morning."

Kayla screamed. She moved her hands frantically over the controls to get the repulsorlifts to respond. They did not and as surely as she'd convinced herself that they would die squashed at the bottom of the canyon, the bomber began to move with the lightness of a feather. It rose carefully into the air, turned away from the cliff, and came to rest a few yards from their previous position. She stared at Luke Skywalker.

"How...?"

"Grab your things."

They emerged from the twin pods with a stretch and a yawn, and Kayla was amazed to find that not even her muscles felt stiff. It was like waking up from a refreshing catnap. She ran her hands through her hair. It had grown by inches, still short, but no longer spiky. She was relieved to finally break the Imperial mold although it would have to be remedied later. Storm gave Skywalker a good, long look and began to chuckle in spite of herself.

"What?" he asked.

"Ever heard the story of Rip Van Winkle? The man who slept for a hundred years?"

Luke tugged gently at his shaggy facial growth. He had wanted a beard, but this was ridiculous. He shrugged off her laughter and gestured to the canyon. "That's Beggar's Canyon. Mos Eisley must be fifty kilometers Northwest."

Kayla hefted her survival pack over her shoulder. "That's a long walk through rough terrain. I don't see why I don't just shoot us both in the head to get this over with before we die of dehydration. And I'm starving..."

"Shh. Listen."

The Imperial folded her arms. "What? I don't hear anything."

"No. Listen," Luke emphasized. Kayla scowled. A bit disappointed in her unwillingness to try, Luke grabbed her elbow and pointed to each horizon. "Mos Eisely--Northwest, fifty kilometers. Tusken Raiders--South, fifteen kilometers and closing. Jawas --East, ten kilometers and closing in at a faster clip. Don't you hear them?"

Kayla looked at him blankly. "You've got to be kidding."

"The sandpeople are probably angry that we crashed in their territory. The Jawas on the other hand..." Luke ducked back into the TIE bomber and began ripping out bits of mechanized junk.

"What are you doing?" Kayla exclaimed. "You're breaking it! We'll never get out of here if you break it!"

"We won't be leaving for awhile anyway. Jawas are scavengers. They'll get here at least ten minutes ahead of the sandpeople and bargain for this scrap. I figure we can get a decent price and maybe a ride into town." He began to ramble, tossing part after part into the sand. "We need to find water, eat, get supplies...I bet the price of water has skyrocketed. Then we'll set up camp and commence the training. Oh, I need to stop by Obi-wan Kenobi's to get something for you. Don't worry, I'm not up for a hundred mile jog. We'll rent a landspeeder when we get to Mos Eisely. Where should we set up camp? It can't be anything too easy." He paused only for a moment. "Yes. That'll do just fine. I can't wait to get started."

Kayla let him ramble, amazed at the luck of this fledgling Jedi Master. But of course, it wasn't luck at all. Destiny. And hers was yet to be fulfilled.

* * *

The shack was still in relatively good condition, despite the years of neglect. Luke Skywalker rustled through the mess, as if looking for lost treasure. It had been years since he had been here. Where was it?

Kayla Storm emerged from the washroom, toweling off her black hair. They had received unsavory glares as the citizens of Mos Eisely scrutinized her Imperial uniform. She was certainly out of place. At Luke's insistence, she was now clad in the loose beige tunic and slacks so common among the colonists.

"Why don't we stay here?" she questioned. "The plumbing still works, it's comfortable..."

"It's too comfortable. That's the problem," Luke objected. Finally, he uncovered a small, tattered box and smiled. Wonderful.

"I don't understand you, Skywalker," Kayla mumbled and sat at a table to devour the meal set before her.

"That wouldn't be a first," he commented and sat, placing the box before her. "A gift."

"What is it?" Her voice was muffled by a mouthful of bread.

"Something of my father's."

Suddenly curious, Kayla grabbed at the box and withdrew a lightsaber, much like the one her Jedi wielded.

"It was the blade of Anakin Skywalker during his days as a Jedi Knight. When he turned to the Dark Side and became Darth Vader, Obi-wan kept it for me as an heirloom. It's yours until you construct your own."

"General Kenobi must have been a fool. How could he allow his star pupil to become so evil?"

"General Kenobi was a great man. The circumstances of my father's corruption were beyond his control."

"Mm-hmm." She studied the weapon carefully.

Luke continued, "When I was young, this was the lightsaber I used to confront Vader on Bespin."

Kayla lifted her gaze. "Luke, you are still young. It's just that horrible beard..."

"I was rash. In stampeding into a situation I knew nothing about, I nearly lost my friends, and he severed my right hand as a lesson."

"I can't imagine Vader sparing such a little whelp. Why didn't he destroy you when he had the chance?"

"Because there was good in him. He knew the Dark Side would be his undoing and saw me as his only hope for redemption. Kayla, you will come to understand that the boundaries between good and evil are often blurred. There is Light, there is Dark, and mostly there is gray."

"The escape from Coruscant..."

The Jedi Master nodded. "We must be careful. Even where there are good intentions, even in righteous indignation, anger can lead us astray. A Jedi must learn patience."

"A Jedi must not stand still when atrocities are being committed," Kayla argued. She pressed the activation stud on the hilt of the lasersword. The blue beam of energy materialized and Luke quickly shifted, barely saving his shoulder from getting speared.

"Oh!" She stared at him, surprising even herself. "Sorry about that."

"You don't know how to use that yet," he chastised. "Power it down."

The novice complied immediately. "When will you teach me?"

Luke reached over and broke off a piece of her bread. "When I think you're ready."

"And when is that?" she pressed. "I don't see what good I'll be unless I can defend myself against the Lords of the Sith."

"As far as I know, the Sith no longer exist. My father was the last one." He spooned some bean stew onto his plate and blew at the steam. "There's more to Jedi Knighthood than being good in a fight. The Force is the root of all knowledge. It's so infinite. There's so much more than manipulating the physical universe. Even after years of practice, I'm still amazed."

Kayla sat back and studied him. "It's a form of worship, isn't it? Even for the Sith."

"I believe so. But..." he strove to find some definition. "It's more. Some consider it a tool and that's where they're mistaken. It's deeply spiritual. Still..."

"I don't believe in gods."

"It's beyond that," Luke replied. "What did you feel, Kayla, when you went into that trance? Were you enraged? Were you afraid?"

Silently, she shook her head.

The Jedi Master leaned forward. "It's that serenity which feeds the soul. The Light Side of the Force gives us life; the Dark Side, death." He watched her silence deepen as her gaze lowered to rest upon the lightsaber. "I need a commitment from you, that you will strive for the Light."

"What if I fail?" she said barely above a whisper.

"I know you won't," he answered.

Kayla looked at him. "How's that?"

"Because I know you." Luke hesitated, then gripped her hand. "I believe in you."

Storm's free hand rested on the lightsaber of Anakin Skywalker. "Teach me more about this. There will always be time to learn the rest."

Luke grinned in spite of himself. "I hate to tell you, but this relationship will not be on equal footing. I am the teacher and you are the learner. I will make the decisions on what lessons are to be presented and when."

"Fine." Kayla pulled her hand away. "All I've learned my whole life is how to attack. I must learn defense or I'll be no good. I promise, Luke, you will be my benevolent dictator from here on out. Please."

The Jedi Master paused. She had a point. It might be a good test. His eyes shifted to the canister of water. "We'll see. Pass the water?"

Kayla reached for the canister but Luke caught her wrist. "Hey."

"Not with your hands, Kayla. This is lesson number three."

"What was two?"

Skywalker rolled his eyes. "Perception of the universe around you. The Jawas...any of this ring a bell?"

She flashed an impish grin. "I'm kidding. Can't an Imperial have a sense of humor?"

"Fine." Luke lifted his glass. "Water, please?"

"Come on. This is silly. It's right in front of you."

"As your benevolent dictator..."

"All right, all right. I'll give it a try."

"Do," he corrected.

Kayla released a heavy, exasperated sigh and closed her eyes. The canister shook, splashing expensive water over its sides, hovered in the air with uncertainty.

"Easy," Luke muttered. "I know I need to shower yet but now's not the time."

Kayla smiled at this and almost lost her concentration. The canister bobbed.

"Sorry," he whispered and sat back to watch with dispassionate objectivity. "Pour it into the glass."

Her hand lifted, as if reaching for something in her mind's eye. The canister became steady and tilted. The water flowed into the glass and stopped at its rim. She opened her eyes as the canister came to rest and smiled broadly.

"This one, I passed."

Luke returned the smile and nodded. There would be a few more simple exercises before implementing the test. It was a good first day.

Chapter Seven

Leia Organa Solo stared absently as the broad expanse of stars beyond her hijacked fleet lengthened into starlines, then transformed into the mottled vista of hyperspace. After months of running, she finally came to the conclusion that the only marginally safe place for them to hide would be the stronghold of Anoth. Fuel supplies were dwindling and they could not afford a continually aimless flight. The new baby would be due in a matter of days. She needed sleep, and a place where she could finally gain some peace of mind. The twins' birthday had been forgotten entirely in all the chaos. They were, of course, too young to care a great deal but Leia nagged herself with guilt. One day soon, she and Han would make it up to them, and for all the other, no less important, lost days.

The politician had finally made contact with Coruscant months ago to see if a diplomatic solution could be reached. Firstly, she was guilty of desertion with high security inmates marked for execution. Mon Mothma apparently didn't buy Bel Iblis' report that Kayla Storm took her hostage. Secondly, the mutiny and acquisition of Haake's fleet worsened matters irrevocably. The damage could not be changed. Mon Mothma's official response had been something less than even-tempered, melodramatically proclaiming that Leia and all traitors would perish in a sea of fire. It sounded like General Turchin's coaching. Ackbar was sent on the search and would bring them back for a trial that would surely result in their execution. So much for diplomacy.

Admiral Ackbar was her friend and long time ally. Leia prayed fervently that he would not betray them to the Inner Council. She prayed he would conveniently forget Anoth and keep the location confidential. Yet he was a loyal patriot and would not have understood the goings on of late. Operatives had gone ahead, listening, watching. Only Chewbacca had come to visit Winter and the children. It was safe. And as Thorn had mentioned, the New Republic could not destroy what the New Republic could not find. Anoth was the closest thing to invisibility as they could come. In the end, all that mattered was being reunited with the twins and the fact that their uncle was thought to be dead. Anoth then. There would be little to do but wait and simply exist in the cold, darkness of space. It would be a welcome change.

She jumped as her husband embraced her from behind but this time, Leia did not lash out. Han kissed her neck and she blushed, bowing her head.

"Can I ask you something?"

Leia nodded but her gaze remained downcast. This was a conversation they had tried to avoid over the past months. Things had been so strained.

"Why couldn't you have left a little more quietly? I mean, why all this? It's just a huge mess now, Leia."

"Luke was so angry," she said almost inaudibly. "It wasn't an anger where you want to hit someone although a lot of people were killed...It was something deeper. I didn't know what he was planning. He touched my mind and told me only that we had to leave. I did it because I trusted my brother's instincts. He said there wasn't a choice."

"So what did Luke know?" Han snapped.

Leia stiffened in his arms and he watched the reflection of her face in the transparasteel turn pale. Han backed off and sighed heavily to let loose a bit of inner steam. He had come to finally get a few answers and his wife was giving him the run around. Over and over, he tried to sort the events in his head and kept coming to the same conclusion. Spies or no spies, this was all Luke's fault. His overreaction to such a delicate situation was stupidity, pure and simple. And talk about overreacting to delicate situations, here they were with a stolen fleet, for cryin' out loud. Maybe he was just getting too old for this running with one's head cut off garbage. Ten years ago, he'd be having the time of his life. He had a few words for Luke Skywalker, but the kid was dead and all he could do was be ticked off about the whole thing.

"It's not fair of you to blame him," Leia muttered quietly.

"Blast it, Leia! Would you stop with that?" Han fumed.

"What?"

"Would you kindly remove the comscan you have on my brain and let me keep a few things to myself? Please?" He threw his hands up in exasperation. "I can't keep going on like this, your worship. What the do you want from me?" He clamped his mouth shut and felt badly for his temper. It was getting harder and harder for them to get along even on the most basic level. Something had to give or they just might lose each other completely. The silence weighed heavily on his ears.

She wasn't crying yet, but in a tremulous voice, she said, "I want you to bring him back."

Han folded his arms. "I can't, sweetheart. Nobody can."

"I don't believe Luke is dead. The records could have been falsified. Kayla Storm could have lied..."

Han's reflection shook its head. "Too much time has passed. If Luke were alive, he'd have found a way to contact us by now."

Leia faced him directly. "Unless someone's preventing him from doing that. Who knows what could be happening to him right now?"

"Leia." Han approached and rubbed her aching shoulders. "I know how you feel..."

"You have no idea!" she shouted and pulled away to glare at him furiously.

"Oh! So I'm the jerk, right?" Han shouted back. He stopped and lowered his voice. "Luke was my friend and sometimes it still hurts, okay? But I'm getting over it. Princess, you're running around here like he died yesterday and I think it's time you stopped torturing yourself."

"How dare you..."

"I don't know," he continued, scratching his head. "Maybe...maybe it's this pregnancy. Maybe things will be better all around once we reach Anoth and the baby's born."

The tears welled up in his wife's eyes. He tentatively offered to embrace her and she miraculously accepted, burying her face in his shirt and struggling to stifle deep, heart-wrenched sobs.

"You think I've lost my mind, don't you?"

The space pirate breathed yet another deep sigh and counted slowly to ten before he could answer without irritation in his voice. "I think you need rest."

She cried harder. It was just becoming too much. He kissed her forehead and left her to be alone. But not quite.

The tiny life within her stirred, sensing but not comprehending her emotion. Leia touched her weighty abdomen with a trembling hand and the unborn child became calm. That calmness drifted into her own sense and she resolved not to weep again until her brother could be found. Not a solitary tear.

* * *

The two merciless suns hung high like demonic lanterns and pounded their furnace heat onto the planet Tatooine. Central to the endless Dune Sea towered a plateau as a stoic sentinel, keeping watch over an unforgiving land. Hence the name Sentinel Rock. Upon it, two fierce combatants edged precariously close to a precipice. The ancient weapons of Jedi Knighthood wove through the air in a majestic dance; thrusting, whirling, parrying, thrusting again. The green laserblade locked with the one of icy blue and sparks cascaded between Luke Skywalker and Kayla Storm in a frightening hiss. Damp with sweat and heaving for breath, the

apprentice seemed to enjoy the respite. The Jedi Master, however, seemed barely winded and at ease, even cool. She hated him for that.

"Be passive," he lectured. "Be at peace. That's when the Light Side of the Force will come to you."

"The Dark Side comes more easily with anger. Rage!"

Kayla broke the lock and swung at Skywalker's head. He ducked the blow and after a brief clash, created another lock.

"Yes. But to follow such a path can only result in self-destruction. A true Jedi uses the Force as a source of knowledge and defense."

With a quick thrust, he sent Kayla reeling but caught her arm as she nearly toppled over the cliff.

"Concentrate!"

She jerked away from his grasp and brought the lightsaber between them sharply, desperately trying to calm the turmoil that screamed through her senses. Control. Luke responded in kind but remained still, allowing her a moment to collect herself. Kayla stared at the blue blade and attempted to draw strength from it. This, Luke had told her, was the blade of Anakin Skywalker in his days as a Jedi Knight. The man who became Lord Darth Vader had wielded this weapon. She felt a residual presence around it, like a scent on clothing. Luke's recklessness, his father's corruption, whispered into her thoughts. Their errands having been accomplished the day before, they set up camp here and Luke instructed her in the performance of more useless parlor tricks; the levitation of stones, gymnastic feats, more lectures on the spirituality of the Force. It bored her beyond patience. Only once did his instruction curb that boredom with visions of the possible future. She saw herself standing with Imperial majesty over Skywalker's prone form. Kayla again insisted he instruct her in the use of a lightsaber. He had been slow to comply, uncertain of what she had envisioned and why she was suddenly so eager, and now he knew full well the test was a mistake. It would be an error Kayla would not allow him to make twice. She would use Vader's lightsaber to her full ability, to her destiny's full completion. She would be Empress.

Skywalker attacked with a suddenness that threw Kayla off guard but for a moment. This time she defended well and lost no ground. The air felt hot in her lungs.

"Good!" Luke praised. "The key is defense. Anticipate my movement."

He sidestepped as she lunged and tripped her with an outstretched foot. The novice tumbled to the uneven ground and tasted salty blood in her mouth, and fury.

"You're being too aggressive," Luke chastised as his green lightsaber powered down. He crouched to help her sit slowly, examining

her scrapes with an experienced eye. "It's almost midday. We'd better get out of the suns and drink some fluids. I need to clarify a few things with you before..."

He trailed off as Kayla Storm brought her lightsaber close to his face. It hummed quietly and smelled of ozone. Her eyes were venomous, but the venom spread feverishly when he did not flinch in fear, nor anger. There was no surprise in this. The lesson had gone too far. The confrontation was bound to happen someday and was destined to happen again so long as she allowed her own seduction to the Dark Side of the Force. But Kayla was not to blame for this. The blade hummed closer still but emitted no heat, only light. The screaming torment of her mind fell silent as Luke touched her wrist with the gentle hands of a priest. She strove to hang on to the hatred that fed her power but felt barriers crumble under his cool gaze. Luke removed the lightsaber and set it aside, deactivated, and placed her empty hand in his.

"Let it go."

Her eyes became haunted, as if horrified by her own actions, and she gasped, "I'm sorry."

Luke bent his forehead against her own. "It's my fault. I should have known you weren't ready."

He swallowed hard as she impulsively wrapped her arms about him. It would be easy to follow human instincts and fall in love. She filled a certain emptiness in his spirit. But too many mistakes had already been made. It couldn't happen, not now while he was trying to guide her in ways that required calm equanimity. The Jedi Master pulled out of her embrace and gently stated, "I think that's all for today."

"But it's early..."

"We need to take our time." The remark held a double meaning which did not escape her. Luke rose to his feet and straightened his shirt. "Training will resume in the morning."

The apprentice softly grinned as she watched the Jedi Master retreat to the shelter.

* * *

The Imperial Academy on Carida was all spit and polish. Revolting, as far as Maxus Thorn was concerned. Pure facade that hid the Empire's own ineptitude. He glanced from Captain Saysithi to the four gleaming stormtroopers whose duty it fell upon to escort them. The proud captain of his flagship was devastated and Thorn couldn't bear to see the twisted expression. The spotless marble hallways echoed with the clamor of metallic footfalls, a clamor the old man always despised. He couldn't

turn his thoughts from Leia Organa Solo and the trouble she'd found with the New Republic. She came with a message of peace and now was the object of a death hunt because of it. Sad, really. She seemed like such a nice girl. Thorn would have enjoyed dealing with her if he had been in a position to do so. Perhaps someday. Haggard from lack of sleep, Maxus slumped in his disability chair as it turned into a turbolift and they began to shoot skyward. The time for talk was over. It was now time for the Grand Admiral to tuck his tail between his legs and beg for leniency from this blasted idiot Furgan. Perhaps it would have been better to join Organa Solo after all. The old warlord scowled. Groveling was not an act to which he was accustomed and he loathed this meeting. The civil war between the remnant fleets and Carida was indeed lost. Ambassador Furgan would take everything; his territory, his ship, maybe even his life, not that it mattered. What mattered was that now he had the capability to engage the New Republic head on and, given the shakiness of its government, have a chance of winning. Thorn would bet good credit the others were squirming under his thumb as well, even more that Furgan was gloating.

The turbolift stopped and released its passengers into the office of Ambassador Furgan. It was overdone, of course. Everything with this man was overdone. He sat at an enormous desk/control station and a floor to ceiling window framed by the most expensive dressings made an impressive backdrop. Beyond, the mountainous region of Carida provided adequate distraction from the daily duties of ruling an Empire and above, a hideous chandelier cast eerie shadows across the room. Thorn looked down at the plush carpeting, at least an inch thick. Excessive, but the stormtrooper feet were silenced, in any case.

"It's about time you arrived, old man," commented Furgan.

"It amazes me even now that you managed to obtain such a diplomatic position, Ambassador," Thorn grumbled. He lifted his gaze and noticed the holographic image of the turncoat Turchin standing on the corner of the immense desk. "My, isn't this a surprise. It's been some time since we've heard from you, Turchin. Now I understand why."

"My apologies, Grand Admiral. I was threatened..."

Bullshit, Maxus thought, but only gave the spy a cool glare. "I hope I haven't interrupted anything."

"Not at all," said Furgan. "General, if you'll excuse us."

The image nodded and vanished.

"I see you're no longer bothering with encrypted messages."

"Oh no." The ambassador smiled. "The New Republic is quite putty in my hands, thank you."

"Oh no," Thorn mimicked sarcastically. "Thank you." Thank you for alienating us, thank you for having us chased to the farthest reaches of

the galaxy, thank you for destroying my fleet. I'm putty in your hands now. Quite. "Now what are your terms, Furgan?"

"Your ship, your territory..."

"My life?"

Furgan laughed. "No, old man. You'll die soon enough on your own. Until then, you're much too valuable a strategist for me to dispense with."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I am done with toying with the Inner Council. I want to strike against Coruscant and take their fleet, then I want the fleet that was taken by the New Republic traitors, then our victory will be absolute."

Maxus chuckled softly to himself. The man was just too easy to read, even for one who lacked sensitivity to the Force. Which reminded him..."Very well, Ambassador, I'll see what I can do. Now, there is the matter of Commander Kayla Storm."

"A female commander?" Furgan growled with disdain.

"She's a Force-sensitive and has gone to Tatooine to be trained as a Jedi Knight by Luke Skywalker. Someday soon she will become our most powerful ally."

"If she is with Skywalker, she is no ally of ours."

Thorn smiled wanly. "You're mistaken. I believe she will come to claim the Emperor's throne, with the Jedi's head served upon a platter."

Then, impetuous Furgan would be gone and Carida would return to its true glory. Somewhere in the infinity of space, his last trump card was preparing to be played.

* * *

The ruins of Owen and Beru Lars' homestead had long been swept away by innumerable sandstorms. During their lives, Luke Skywalker had been an ungrateful and angry boy. Angry at being abandoned by his true parents and ungrateful to the love and guidance his guardians attempted to give him. After their deaths, it became too late to apologize. In an effort to make amends, he had erected a small memorial in an outcropping of sandstone years before, and made it a point to come by regularly to pay his respects. He approached it now as Kayla Storm watched from the comfort of their rented landspeeder not far off. She had been virtually silent since yesterday's botched training session and Luke suspected she was desperately trying to gain control over her inner turmoil on her own.

Without his instruction, she would hopelessly fail. He was a Master now. He had to teach. He had to persuade and remove the shadowed intentions that callused her thoughts. She had tried to ruin him and such an act would seal her fate as a Dark Jedi, if she so desired. Her desires were jumbled, clouded, and Luke wished he could see them with a more crystalline clarity.

Solemnly, Skywalker placed a single thistle-rose at the base of the memorial and recalled his grief upon finding it burned out by stormtroopers. It was then that he was convinced his destiny would lie in the hands of Obi-wan Kenobi, and he would become a Jedi Knight like his father. Now, he reminded himself again, he was a Jedi Master. But he was plagued by his own uncertainty.

"Now you listen here, son." The argument took place twelve years ago, but Luke heard Owen's angry voice as if he were speaking to him presently. "I don't want you hanging around with those friends of yours anymore, especially that Kayla Storm. Her father's a drunk and she's nothing but trouble. I need you to work longer hours in the fields. You're wasting too much time."

"You already have me working from dawn till dusk. Why can't I spend some time on my own?" he had demanded.

"Because you're all glands and hormones. I know what kind of trouble you're capable of getting into."

"Kayla and the others are my friends," Luke had replied sharply. "And I'm not your son. My father was a great warrior, not some moisture farmer."

"Your father is dead and left you in my care!" Owen shouted. "Now do as you're told!"

"You can't tell me what to do!"

"As long as you live under this roof, I certainly can!"

Luke's voice had turned quiet and sullen. "Then maybe I won't live under this roof anymore." He shook his head and traced the edges of the memorial with a black-gloved finger. "Uncle Owen, Aunt Beru, I'm very sorry."

He sensed Kayla Storm draw near and turned with a quick jerk to face her.

"I'm sorry, Master Luke. I didn't mean to invade your privacy."

Luke's pallor darkened and he looked away. Kayla was taken back.

"Have I said something to offend?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't call me Master," he replied quietly.

"But am I not your student?"

"The term denotes a position of power and as you and I both know," he paused briefly to gauge her expression, "such power can corrupt."

Kayla bit her tongue and smiled inwardly. A weakness he'd been foolish enough to let slip.

"It's not a slip, Kayla," he told her. "You simply needed to know."

A tense moment of silence elapsed before she finally spoke. "We came here to remember your guardians?"

The hood of the Jedi's robe lowered and his face was again placid. "Yes. And I think it's about time you remembered some things yourself. It's time you shed the Emperor's propaganda and tasted some reality."

Storm tried to hide the irritation in her voice but failed miserably. "I don't see how that could further my training."

"You don't see because you've been blinded," Luke replied.

"There's really no need..."

His voice developed a hard edge. "There most definitely is a need. From now on you will spend the majority of your time in meditation. After yesterday's fiasco, I will not continue your training until you are straightened out."

Kayla Storm's mind whirled with rage but her action was to cast him a hateful glare.

The Jedi Master spoke quietly. "You are mistaken about a great many things, Kayla." Inwardly, he winced. This was a line Palpatine had tormented him with. Why had he voiced it? What was wrong with her today? The morning had been fine, with the usual exercises. After another attempt to see the future, she had become sullen. She must have come across something terrible, but would not confide. He just could not see through her anger.

She bowed her head and said barely above a whisper, "It will be as you wish, Master."

Chapter Eight

The cold space was torn by chaotic Anoth, home of the offspring that would one day be called Jedi. Just beyond that planetary chaos, the hijacked Benefactor hung suspended in silence. Somewhere within, Anakin Solo made himself known to the universe after a long, difficult labor.

Mother and child rested now from the exhausting effort and young Anakin nuzzled comfortably against Leia's breast. His father the pirate watched from the entry and longed to be a part of that intimate union because, for the moment at least, his wife was happy. For Han Solo, it was at once the end and the beginning of a new leg of his lifelong journey. Gone were the days of gambling money he didn't have and smuggling spice for swindlers who didn't pay him. No more life debts. Han was resolved to quit running after lost treasures and settle for the one he had found with Leia and their three precious children. This life was definitely better. He bid his wife and newborn son goodnight, then met Chewbacca, Lando Calrissian, and the droids outside the apartment. As they waited expectantly, he leaned back against the wall with his arms folded across his chest and smiled broadly.

"Well?" Lando coaxed. "Are you just going to stand there with that stupid grin on your face?"

"It's a boy. Anakin Solo."

"Thank the Maker!" See-Threepio exclaimed. "Congratulations, sir!"

Artoo squealed his excitement as well, barely able to contain himself.

Calrissian laughed and patted his old friend on the back. "Come on, family man. This deserves a good liter or two of elba beer."

"I believe the officer's lounge is fresh out of stock, sirs," quipped the talkdroid.

Lando bristled, "Threepio, couldn't you just let us enjoy the idea for a little while?"

Han chuckled. "Lay off, ol' buddy. Not even Goldenrod could spoil my mood today."

Threepio straightened in surprise. "Oh, well....thank you, sir."

Solo tossed him a wicked look. "Don't push it though."

"Captain Solo!"

Han blinked hard and half-turned, not used to being called a captain. He saw the approach of Wedge Antilles, Winter, and the twins Jacen and Jaina whom they escorted.

"We have visitors from the planet, sir."

The father laughed and crouched on the ground with his arms outstretched. "Come here, kids!"

"NO!" shouted Jaina. Jacen hid behind his nursemaid's legs and sucked his thumb.

"Now, children," Winter chastised gently, "this is your father. Go to him."

"NO!" Jaina screamed a second time, obviously the more headstrong of the two. Jacen sunk lower.

"What?" Han frowned. The day was already taking a downturn. "What'd I do wrong?"

"Jacen and Jaina haven't seen you since they were infants, Captain," said Winter somewhat protectively. "You can hardly expect them to remember. I'm sorry."

"Well, I guess I haven't been much of a dad, have I?" The toddlers began to whimper. "Hey, look. I don't know how to do this, ya know? And now you've got a new baby brother. How 'bout you cut me some slack and I'll do the best I can for you. Deal?"

It was Jacen who finally wandered over to let his father embrace him. Jaina remained with Winter and cast him a wary look.

Chewie rumbled something incoherent.

"Translate, See-Threepio," said Winter. "Chewbacca's been trying to say the same thing for the past two hours and I can't make anything of it."

The prissy protocol droid straightened up, hystatic that someone would finally have need of his services. "Oh yes. The Wookiee expresses hunger and wonders if you might prepare Mynock stew for dinner tonight."

"Mynock?" Lando winced, squeamish.

"Yuk!" blurted Jaina. "No more stew!"

Winter shrugged apologetically. "It's all he's wanted to eat for the past seven months."

The Wookiee nodded his head vigorously and howled.

"Excuse me, Captain Solo..."

"Can't you see I'm busy, Goldenrod?" Han removed a handkerchief from his vest pocket and gently wiped a tear from Jacen's eyes. His eldest son remained silent.

"I nearly forgot to tell you something that may be of some importance."

"A droid forgetting? Chewie, take this hunk of metal upstairs and give him a tune up."

"I didn't say that I actually had forgotten, sir, merely that it was being reserved in my long term storage files. It may be important."

I..." the droid stumbled as Chewbacca reached for his arm. "Unhand me, you carpet! I've just been waxed!"

"All right! Out with it!" Jacen shrunk away from the sound of his father's irritation. Han whispered in his ear. "I'm sorry."

"An Imperial TIE fighter, actually...bomber-class, has crash-landed recently on the planet of Tatooine."

"Now why should that be of any importance to me?"

"Uh...." Threepio emitted a sound equivalent to a human clearing his throat. "It is a bit confusing. No sign of Imperial class warships have passed through that sector in years."

"That's impossible," muttered Calrissian. "TIE fighters don't have hyperdrive capabilities and the nearest civilized star system is half a year away at sublight speed. There had to be a Star Destroyer nearby. How long ago did it crash?"

"Perhaps a standard week."

"Maybe you should've checked the charters before you go jumping to conclusions," said Han, not happy with the audience standing around him and his son. Finally, Jaina toddled over and touched Solo's arm.

"Daddy," she announced.

"Yes," approved Winter.

"I have, sir," replied Threepio. "I have thoroughly studied area system charters one hundred and eighty-six thousand times."

"Gotta admit, he's thorough," said Lando.

"Bah," growled Han. "Let the New Republic deal with it. It's not any of our business anymore."

"So where do you think it came from?" asked Calrissian, his curiosity at a peak.

"One could speculate that the TIE bomber originated near the Bepin system, as exactly two hundred and ten standard days were spent in normal space, according to the ship's compulog. Within that radius, the only Imperial vessel was that of Grand Admiral Maxus Thorn."

Han paused. "That would be seven months, about the time we opened that can of worms..."

"Still, there's no way anybody could spend that kind of time in space, starfighters don't have enough cargo area for supplies! There had to be a glitch in the compulog. There's no way..."

Slowly, the space pirate rose to his feet and gripped Chewbacca's arm for support. "There's only one person I know who could pull off a stunt like that."

"But Skywalker was killed!" exclaimed Wedge.

"No." A strange feeling of relief passed through Solo's expression. "C'mon, Chewie. Luke has some explaining to do. You're in charge, Lando."

"Why me?"

Han clapped his friend's shoulder and winked. "'Cause the girls love a man in uniform." They turned to leave at a slow jog.

"Han, your children!" Winter called.

Solo waved it off. "I'll make it up to them! I promise!"

Leia's servant gathered the twins close to her chest and in silence they watched him abandon them yet again. She felt their ache and thought it horrible.

* * *

The chamber was black as pitch. All light was extinguished, and the climate controls made the room much too cold. But this was how the Grand Admiral had wanted it. The darkness didn't bother Saysithi, as his vision adjusted to it rather quickly and he could see shadows of body heat, softly humming motors, even a ghostly shadow of the lights. His tentacled arms lifted the frail old man into his bed, leaving the nearly always occupied disability chair curiously empty. He cocked his snarly head to one side, listening to the shallowness of the human's breath. Maxus Thorn was about to die.

"Ninety is a ripe old age for a human male, don't you think, my friend?" he whispered.

Saysithi nodded, then remembered the Grand Admiral's eyesight was not so keen. "Ninety? Yes. For a human male."

"How old are you?"

"I've forgotten. Rest, Maxus."

"When I die, I will rest. Now I want to talk. Do you think I've served the Empire well?"

"Of course you have."

"Do you think I was wrong to turn Organa Solo away?" he questioned.

Saysithi collapsed in the disability chair and sighed doubtfully. "I'm not sure. You were fond of the woman, weren't you?"

"I appreciate her predicament," Maxus breathed. "Captain, there is something I want you to do for me."

"Anything, Grand Admiral."

"Under the left arm of that disability chair, you will find a compartment and inside that compartment a collection of data cards. They are my personal logs, my private thoughts. On one of them, I have devised a strategy for Ambassador Furgan to launch an attack against Coruscant and destroy the New Republic fleet. I want you to incinerate it. I want you to tell Furgan that I went against his orders and that I think he is a pompous ass. He will have to construct his new tyranny without my assistance. "

Saysithi smiled in the dark. "As you wish. Is there anything else I can do?"

"Leave me to die in peace," he replied softly.

"Aye, sir." Saysithi opened the compartment and removed all of the data cards. He rose to his feet. "Good-bye, Maxus."

The alien left and Maxus Thorn squinted as the entry slid aside and back again. He shifted his position, painfully.

"Yes," he whispered. "Peace."

* * *

The fabric of the makeshift shelter rippled as wind howled suddenly without. Luke steadied one of the metal poles that comprised the skeleton and put a vibroblade back in its medkit. He extracted a small mirror and rubbed his cheek. Even the Jedi Master was tired of the tangled rat's nest that hung from his chin. Now the beard was clipped short and neat. He was fond of it and couldn't muster enough gall to do away with it completely. Kayla would be impressed. Appearances aren't supposed to matter, he reminded himself and tossed the glass into the kit a bit disgustedly. But the few moments she'd found to tease him were good-

natured enough and good nature in Kayla Storm was progress in itself. Meditation indeed had a calming effect on his apprentice. He no longer sensed the callused hatred that had been driven into her by Imperial training, but recognized aspects of her personality that reminded him of a girl he loved a long time ago. Love. He smirked. Can a sixteen year old boy truly know love? Owen was right about glands and hormones. Even two years later, it was Leia's beauty that drove him to rescue her while the older, more experienced Han Solo was in it purely for the money. Strange how things turned out.

Luke mentally kicked himself for not instructing his pupil to meditate from the start. Combat training. Lightsaber duels. It was a terrible error in judgment and he was determined to control the damage created. After years of war, Kayla Storm needed a respite. Self-doubt crept into his mind constantly now. Was he saying, doing, showing the right things? Were some things right for one and not for another? Was the timing right or should a lesson come later? Was he dragging his heels or was Kayla's impatience only a symptom of her continuing struggle against the Dark Side? Yoda would have known the answers to all of these questions as he never seemed to make mistakes. Of course, Yoda had the advantage of having eight hundred years of experience when he instructed Luke. A Jedi Master was expected to dispense infallible training methods and yet infallibility was impossible. Obi-wan learned that. Luke knew it as well and was paralyzed by his fear of failure. Beware. Anger, fear, aggression, of the Dark Side are they. This kind of fear? Or was his initial over-confidence to blame?

He compelled himself to put the thoughts aside. Kayla Storm was making progress because, or maybe in spite, of him. He looked down and carefully gathered the mound of facial hair into his hands. Luke wanted to make her laugh.

The Jedi shuddered as he stepped into the desert evening. A sixty degree temperature difference between night and day was not uncommon on their desolate homeworld. The first colonists must have been out of their minds to settle here, he decided and noticed Kayla had taken his robe. He strode toward the campfire and paused to kick a rebellious, smoldering log back into the flames. He listened to it pop and splinter from the heat. Luke watched her silhouetted figure tremble as tiny landquakes traveled up her spine. It was as if the Jedi robe could not keep out the cool of the wind, but perhaps the coldness came from inside.

"I'm sorry I was harsh with you the other day," he stated. The novice was lost in meditation, completely unaware of Luke's very presence. He sat beside her and offered up his gift. "Would you consider this a sacrificial peace offering?"

"Ugh!" She turned away abruptly in what Luke thought was disgust. He started to smile as she gained her feet and stalked toward the edge of the plateau. She trembled. Her shoulders shook. This was not the laughter he expected. How could she be angry over something so mundane?

"I know it's not a very good joke but it's just hair, Kayla."

She clutched the robe about her but it made arching billows as the wind caught hold. Luke rested back on one elbow and began feeding the remnant beard to the flames.

"Maxus Thorn has just passed away," she muttered.

"My sister's child has just been born," he replied. "That is the way of the Force."

The apprentice stiffened momentarily, then screamed into the darkness, "GET OUT OF MY HEAD!"

Luke sat bolt upright, startled by the outburst. Finally, a barrier fell and she began to sob, overwhelmed as both sides of the Force battled within her for higher ground. It was a feeling he remembered and did not envy. He watched the flames leap up to lick the wind. Her spirit, like the flames, was ever churning against a tumult that threatened to smother it into darkness. He wanted to cup his hands to protect what light remained.

He said quietly, "The Dark Side of the Force can be seductive."

"This isn't seduction, but rape!" Kayla snapped. "Palpatine comes to me in visions to remind me of the reason I'm here. Not to become a Jedi Knight as you've been led to believe, but to take his place as Empress!"

Luke folded his hands against his lips in thought. Finally, he responded, "I've had my suspicions. But the very fact that you could tell me this at all is a step in the right direction. Now we know that the Dark Side influences you through the image of Emperor Palpatine, just as the Light Side coached me through Obi-wan. These are influences only, although they are difficult to ignore."

"This Force is a curse," she spat. "How do you know what your destiny is? Does one of these spirits come along to tell you, and that's just how it's going to be? If I'm to take Palpatine's throne, there's nothing either one of us can do to stop it."

"No. It's not like that," Luke told her.

"Then what is it like?" she argued, turning to face him. "If something bad happens, it's a mistake. If it's good, we call it destiny. Terrible things happen, Luke. Aren't they also predetermined?"

"You have to realize it is no man's destiny to succumb to the Dark Side."

"And why not? It sounds to me like the great Jedi Master doesn't know what he's talking about."

Luke averted his gaze, embarrassed by his own sense of ineptitude. "I won't pretend to know everything, Kayla. I do know that in the greater scheme of things, not much is left to chance. However, within that

scheme, there are certain things we can control. We are not automaton...."

"And yet there is such a thing as fate. I have a hard time swallowing all that."

"Then maybe we're just wasting our time," he said solemnly. "Maybe I can't get through to you."

She crouched beside him and stoked the fire. "No. I'm grateful for what I've learned from you. The meditations have kept me sane when I thought..." She closed her eyes, intent on fighting a wave of emotion.

Luke gripped her hand. "The calming technique I showed you. Clear your mind. Breathe." He watched her expression turn placid and sensed her tension ease into something tolerable. "Good."

Her eyes remained closed and she did not let go of his hand. "I have a bone to pick with you."

Luke sighed. "Vader killed the Emperor to save me and died as a result. I thought I explained all that."

"That's not it." She watched the flames. "I remember things now that happened before my enlistment. The night my father was killed by stormtroopers, you left me for dead."

Luke also concentrated on the fire. This was a difficult subject to get into, especially since Kayla's relation to the Force was so volatile. And he did not want to consider his own sentiment. "I was afraid."

"How long did it take for you to get over it?"

Her gaze bore into him and he shrugged uncomfortably, looking at her hand held in his own. "I was young and irresponsible. I couldn't tell Owen and Beru. I..."

"Got over it in a matter of weeks," Kayla grumbled. "It's strange you weren't such a coward for the Princess of Alderaan. But that must have been destiny, right? Leia must have been a beautiful young woman. You fell in love when you first laid eyes on her." Their gaze met and Luke frowned, anticipating her inquiry. "Does it bother you that she's your twin sister and married your best friend?"

"We don't need to talk about this." Luke released her hand and shifted his position.

"I think you should face up to your true feelings, Master Luke," Kayla mimicked smugly. "Get in touch with your true self."

"Now you're just trying to anger me. What is wrong with you, Kayla? Ever since we've started this, you've tried to confront me on every level. Don't you want to become a Jedi?"

"That's not the point!" Kayla nearly shouted. "The point is that when I look at you, I see nothing but a cold, blank screen. That's not the Luke Skywalker I remember."

"The Force leaves an indelible mark."

"Luke, you and I both know that if there is distrust between us, the training will be a failure. Even your apprentice can sense the barriers you're trying to keep up." She rested her hand on his knee and he visibly flinched. "I remember we used to come to this place and share our dreams. We would lay side by side and watch the ships in orbit, and talk about escaping to someplace better. You once told me, no matter where we ended up, that you would always be there. It seems you finally made good on that pledge."

"I brought you here because I thought it would evoke memories of your past. The meditation has obviously paid off and you can be very proud of your accomplishments. You are well on your way to becoming a Jedi Knight, but there are many things you have yet to learn."

"There you go again. Lecturing."

"All right. End of lecture." Luke stood, intent of returning to the shelter, but Kayla rose to block his path, giving him a soft, backward push.

"I'm not going to let you walk away from this."

"What is it you want? Because there are better things we can be doing with our time."

"No. What is it you want?" She poked a finger at the center of his chest. "I can sense your loneliness. There are strong emotions at work that you won't admit to. What is it you're longing for?"

This was the girl Luke remembered. Strong, certainly opinionated, a shadow of his sister. So many things, the thought slipped and he winced.

"Aha!" she beamed. "So there is a personality behind the Jedi facade! You still have feelings for me!"

Luke spoke softly through her reaction. "For us, there is a Jedi Code. 'There is no emotion; there is peace.'"

"But there is emotion." She stepped closer and gentle fingers combed through his pale brown hair.

Luke shook his head and retreated to sit near the fire. Kayla persued and sat close by. "'There is no ignorance; there is knowledge.'"

She smiled. "But you said yourself you don't know everything."

"'There is no...passion,'" he said with some awkwardness, "'there is serenity.'"

"But there is passion." She touched his chin and compelled him to meet her gaze. The emerald eyes smoldered their seduction.

Luke cleared his throat and finished the spiel that suddenly held very little meaning to him. "'There is no death; there is the Force.'"

"There is death. It is the emotion and the passion that give what time we have here meaning."

Luke shook his head again. "We live on through the Force."

"The truth is, Jedi Master, you are only half alive."

"Kayla..."

All of Skywalker's well-constructed arguments and lectures scattered like so many grains of sand as she kissed his wrinkled brow, his cheek, and finally his mouth. Her breath was intoxicating. He accepted her advance as a man dying of thirst but offered only a drop of water. Luke touched her shoulders but did not move far off. He spoke with his eyes shut, trying not to sound as shaken as he felt.

"The past is done, regardless of what you and I might feel. You are my Jedi apprentice and this will destroy everything you've accomplished."

"Quiet, Luke," she breathed and silenced any further, half-hearted protest with a kiss that spanned a trillion light years and on to infinity. It would be their undoing, Luke realized. But it seemed more important that his loneliness abated, and the longing was satisfied. He wrapped her in a warm embrace, not just in body, but in mind.

We will be one, and you will know me.

"You'll find some frightening things if you walk around in this head of mine," she whispered, trembling.

Luke nuzzled her ear. "Everyone has their demons. Don't be afraid."

Kayla pulled him to the uneven ground and her sense intertwined with his own. There could never be a more intimate embrace. The Jedi Master lost himself to his student.

The moons of Tatooine moved along an inevitable path across the night sky as the seduction was made complete. Luke pulled the Jedi robe to cover them both, though the flames warmed their flesh. Kayla stared at the flickering light, quiet. He touched the black silk of her hair and remembered how long it had once been, years ago. His fingers traced the gentle curve of her spine. They had experienced the other's memories, relived the joys, the pains, even the terrors. But in the end, it was Kayla who pulled away with something yet hidden. Certainly it was understandable. Everyone desires their own space, their own private thoughts. But Luke had laid his soul before her to examine in depth, because that was what she desired above all else. She must have known he

was disappointed...no, deeply saddened that she wouldn't reciprocate. In spite of that, he kissed the back of her neck. There was hardly a need for words when two minds were so close.

This was difficult for me.

What could be more simple? Her eyes didn't shift from the flames.

I know that you've influenced me from the start. The escape from Coruscant...

I needed you.

Luke turned her to face him and kissed her mouth. I don't know where this will take us. But I love you with everything that I am.

He was answered by silence. Luke pulled back to stroke her cheek but her eyes focused on something beyond the stars. His heart plummeted. If she returned his love, she surely would have responded. He began to search her mind but barriers like telepathic steel sprang up around every facet, no matter how insignificant. Please don't do this. Don't shut me out.

He muttered aloud, "And you thought I was closed off." and dressed.

A moment passed before she whispered his name, sounding frightened.

The Jedi sat at her side and began the task of pulling on his boots. "What's wrong?"

Tentatively, she reached to grab hold of his wrist, and placed his hand beneath the Jedi robe, onto the flatness of her stomach.

"Can you feel what's happening?"

Luke shook as a reality made itself known. The conception had just taken place. The Force, the bond of all life, was at delicate work. When that work was completed, she would bear a daughter. The Jedi Master bowed his head as waves of disbelief, then guilt washed over him, and then hope. He would have a child of his own.

"Even if I fail, you will not be the last Jedi," Kayla whispered his exact thoughts.

Luke embraced her and muttered into her soft hair, "You said I was only half alive but now, with you, Kayla, my life is full. I give you my word I will never forsake you or this child."

"Then we begin a new dynasty," she said in hushed tones. "It is a dawning of a new era for the Jedi."

"Yes." He kissed her softly, then hesitated. The words she spoke sounded false, strangely uncharacteristic.

Her countenance twisted into dark ambition. "Hand in hand, you and I will rule the stars. This is the heir to our throne."

Luke sat slowly as the proposition rang through his consciousness and bisected his soul like a scintillating ax. A dynasty. Behind every facade is a personality, she had noted. This facade, so perfect in its complexity, collapsed and the bareness of his sense was attacked by cunning manipulation. He squeezed his eyes shut but could not silence his realizations. Kayla Storm's goal to achieve the status of Empress was not on any borderline, but firmly decided and embraced. It would not come to pass through the taking of his life as he once supposed and so foolishly accepted her change in behavior as a positive step. Her ambitions would be grasped through her possession of him. With the conception of their unborn, she was well on her way to that end.

His voice was hollow with disbelief, ripped of substance by her betrayal. "How can you do this?"

"How can you refuse?" She draped her arms about his neck and kissed him softly. "Remember, beloved, a Jedi is only as good as the promises he keeps."

Luke did not feel warmth. The arms that wrapped about him were the suffocating coils of a snake; the kisses were sweet poison. A dynasty. Shock deepened into anger and he removed the coils, pinned her wrists to the ground.

"It hurts, Luke," she gasped, trying to don the mask of vulnerability, but the scales had fallen from her Master's eyes.

"How can you do this!" he shouted, then lowered his tone to a low hiss. "I loved you and how many times have you betrayed me? I left behind my entire existence for your benefit and look how you've twisted this to your own end. I never should have listened to you. I never should have listened to my father. Why did I trust you?"

She grinned. "You will be glorified."

Luke resisted the urge to strike her as her gaze became calculating, seeking an entrance to again touch his soul, assess his own ambitions. He barred her path and anger lapsed into something kin to fear. He rested back on his heels and could not stop the tremor in his hands. The apprentice watched him carefully.

The words Luke finally spoke sounded weak to his own ears. "I won't...Kayla, I will not play this game."

She replied, "Master, I promise you it is no game."

Kayla reached to again embrace him, but the Jedi Master rose to his feet. There could be only one way out of this. It was almost done.

The novice propped herself on one elbow and scolded, "I have your word, Luke. Surely you won't abandon your offspring as Anakin Skywalker abandoned you."

The younger Skywalker swallowed hard and tasted his shame. "I forsake you."

And so she destroyed him. His word broken, the Jedi left to weep; not so much for the loss of his love of her, but for the loss of himself. As he took a steep path to escape the plateau, he could almost feel her laughter.

Chapter Nine

Ambassador Furgan paced the office like a caged animal, barely containing his fury with the news of Thorn's death.

"Was it suicide?" he demanded of Saysithi.

"No, Ambassador," the alien purred. "The Grand Admiral died of natural causes. In the end, he expressed his unwillingness to carry out your orders."

"Oh, that I could have killed him myself," Furgan growled. "That old, doddering fool! How dare he do this to the Empire!"

Saysithi cleared his throat. "I doubt very much he had a choice in the matter, sir."

"Nonsense. The old man would have lived another twenty years if he had a mind to." He glanced heavenward and shook his fist. "Oh, I hope you are quite satisfied with yourself, Maxus Thorn! Damn you! I want his personal logs."

"There was only one, sir." Grinning smugly to himself, Thorn's captain and friend handed over a single data card.

Furgan snatched the slim, information receptacle and poured over his contents. "What is this gibberish?"

"Crossword puzzles, Ambassador."

The ambassador of Carida swore viciously and slammed the data card against his desk where it shattered. He stalked over to the alien Saysithi and two stormtroopers stepped forward, anticipating an order to kill from their leader.

Instead, Furgan leaned close to the alien's gnarled face. "You were Grand Admiral Thorn's second in command and therefore you will lead the strike against the New Republic. I want Ackbar's fleet destroyed and

Coruscant laid to waste. I don't care how you accomplish it, but if you fail I will kill you. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir," he replied coolly. "But if I fail, I will not be returning alive."

"Get out of my sight. I want the remnant fleets consolidated and ready to leave in two standard days."

Saysithi nodded once and left without a salute.

* * *

Anakin Solo screamed furiously and so did his mother.

"Where is he?" she shouted to no one in particular and stormed through the cluttered nursery. Diapers, bottles, midnight feedings, colic--the trials of motherhood were not at all the dreams Leia Organa Solo had come to expect. Not having undergone this baptism of fire with the twins, Leia felt discouraged by her own clumsiness. Even the most deft political rhetoric did not phase this little one. How could someone so small be so opinionated?

The infant burped something sloppy onto her shoulder. She shouted louder this time, "Where is he!"

She tripped on a squeaking, stuffed Ewok and nearly dropped Anakin. The baby was silenced, momentarily stunned, then resumed the wailing at a higher, infuriated pitch. Leia thought it time to collapse and succumb to a good, long crying jag herself. The noise was more than she could take.

"HAN!" she cried out helplessly.

Then in traipsed Winter. Ironically, the softness of her voice could be heard over Anakin's screaming. "The twins are being entertained by your droids. May I be of some assistance?"

"No," Leia lied through clenched teeth. "We're doing just fine. Thank you."

The willow-like figure shrugged. "Okay."

As she turned to exit, Leia called out to her. "Wait! Winter, I'm sorry. I don't know what to do. He's been crying for three hours straight and won't keep anything down. Please help me."

Winter received Anakin into her arms and looked him over with an experienced eye.

"Is...is he dying?" Leia asked timidly.

The servant gave a soft smile. "No, Leia. He's probably just readjusting to life outside the womb. Perhaps the formula rations aren't agreeing with his digestive system. I'll see what else we have." She cradled him and he quieted almost immediately, to Leia's surprise and dismay. "Hold him like this and rock him gently. There, there now, baby Anakin. You are a precious one. Yes, you are. Babies just adore all sorts of compliments; just like men, their egos need to be stroked and coddled. Isn't that so, Anakin, my handsome one? Yes."

Leia began to feel physically ill. "Winter, I've been raised in politics all my life. I'm a perfectionist and not very good at being a mother."

"A perfectionist mother is something you will learn very quickly not to be. Motherhood is an art as well as a skill. Perhaps you just need a break..."

"I've been gone for most of my children's lives!" Leia blurted in exasperation. "I will not spend another moment away from them!"

"Shh. Infants are sensitive to loud noises."

Leia collapsed on the sofa and closed her eyes, welcoming the blessed silence. Winter diapered the infant and found a suitable bottle for him to suckle on.

"Where did Han go?"

"Hmmm?"

"I saw the Millennium Falcon leave the fleet. Where is he going?"

Winter didn't move her gaze from the hungry newborn. "He wanted to keep it confidential. It may just be a wild goose chase anyway..."

"What goose chase? Winter, you have to tell me."

The nursemaid sighed. "Tatooine. They have reason to believe your brother might be alive there."

"Why would he keep this from me?" Leia asked in a husky whisper. After all the grief...

"As I said, nothing is certain. Captain Solo is going to be angry with me now because he wanted to surprise you; and if you didn't know, you wouldn't be disappointed if they came up empty."

"Winter, you are my assistant, not Captain Solo's. You were right to confide in me." Leia rose to her feet and began to pack a bag. "I'll be taking Chewbacca's A-wing. Will you...?"

"Of course," the nursemaid nodded.

Organa Solo bit her bottom lip. There would be plenty of time for the children later. This was more...important? She wondered why she allowed the thought to be finished and left without looking back.

"Come, Anakin," Winter cooed and strolled toward the entry. "Your brother and sister are anxious to meet you."

* * *

It was very late now, but Mos Eisely never slept. The cantina catered to the same riffraff it always had, a haven of neutrality for alien bounty hunters and the criminals they chased, refuge for a few settlers hell-bent on forgetting the tribulations of moisture farming, but the band was remarkably distinct from the one that performed nearly a decade before. The discordant grind of their instruments pounded deafeningly. Found by the sensible to be mere auditory torture, this particular brand of music had found a niche in the smuggling counter-culture with its overtones of rascality. There was a unique revelry in the atmosphere and the screaming conversations focused on the upcoming Tusken rain dance of Chala--a mystical ceremony that sometimes produced a smattering of rain showers across the Dune Sea. The sandpeople loved their traditions and religiously hoarded any moisture they acquired through the phenomena, however insignificant. The rest were all stone drunk, or getting there, as liquor was cheaper than water and easier to process. The rate of alcoholism on Tatooine soared conversely to the yields of moisture harvests. It was unfair that the barbaric nomads could legally get away with such an advantage while they slowly died of thirst and poisoned livers. There was talk of striking against the Tusken Raiders, maybe even putting their shaman into slavery. But it was all drunken talk. Like so many other planets near the Outer Rim, civilization was on the decline.

Luke Skywalker took a moment to survey the riotous anarchy before actually stepping into it, careful not to jostle the more intimidating patrons. He had taken time to meditate, clear his head, pull away from the darkness. Kayla Storm represented to him the last surviving link between his Jedi Knighthood and his angry, reckless, old self. From the point of view of a Jedi Master, it would be prudent to sever that link so the Dark Side of the Force would not be so alluring; and in order for her training to continue professionally, unimpeded by emotional complications. But perhaps his first attempt at teaching had failed so utterly that there could be no continuance. To even break this link was nearly impossible with the conception of his unfortunate daughter. To stay would endanger his own soul. To leave would ensure the child's slavery to a callously manipulative, hideous mother. It was hard to let go of his anger. He hoped the unborn would abort and cease existing altogether for its own sake. That, in itself, was a hideous desire. As for galactic rule, it was a proposition he'd struggled against since his first encounter with Darth Vader. He had nearly lost his friends, had lost his right hand, and came to know his father as his father. That

ambition he packed away in a tight, little box marked "DANGEROUS", put it in the darkest corner of his soul, and vowed someday to be rid of it forever. Just as he would someday be rid of Kayla Storm. In the end, love turned sour, leaving only afterimages of suffering and regret.

After much deliberation, much grief over the fate of his unborn daughter, he came with uncertainty to see if a ship might be found. His movements must not have been cautious enough. Probably, he had stepped on something's toes, or tail, or tentacle. A roar pierced through the earsplitting music as Luke was pinned to an immense, hairy mass before his lightsaber could be brought to bear. The crowd took only brief notice, then resumed its clamor. The burly arms tightened around his torso and Luke felt his lungs were about to collapse. He closed his eyes and willed the pain to be acknowledged, but not felt. Death would come, light would fall. In a sense, he was relieved.

"Chewie, ease up, will ya?" hollered a familiar voice. His relief shifted.

The Wookiee gave an exhilarated howl and released his embrace.

Luke gazed in bewilderment as black spots danced across his vision. "Chewbacca?"

"Here, take it!" Han paid off the Jawa that had offered them some relatively useless information as to Skywalker's whereabouts. He waved it off, shouting, "Now go on! E chu ta!"

The Jawa chattered something in gratitude and disappeared into the throng. Luke swooned and Chewie assisted him to sit down at their table. The room kept spinning, the music throbbed in his chest.

"Never get in the way of an hystatic Wookiee!" Han smirked. "You okay, kid?"

Luke waited for the spinning to slow, and finally stop before giving a cautious, breathless nod. Solo and Chewbacca got a good laugh out of this at his expense.

"I told you the kid could barely take care of himself!" Han joked to his furry companion. Then the smuggler's face turned more serious. He leaned across the table, but still had to shout to make himself heard. "Now since you look too healthy to be a corpse, what the hell are you doing here!"

In the past two hours, Luke had asked himself the same question a thousand times. He could only gasp, "Training!"

"Training?" Solo exclaimed, "I thought you were done with all of that!"

The band, the Travesty Blues, finished its set and wandered into the throng in search of refreshment, applauded with shouts, claps, and whistles. The cantina quieted to a dull rumble, its patrons half-deaf and

accustomed to the scream of nightclub conversation. Han sat back and continued, suddenly able to lower his tone, even if that tone was still a near yell. "Granted, I've been out of the political swing of things lately but you got a whole lot of people pretty upset over that stunt you pulled on Coruscant. Now far be it from me to pass judgment on a Jedi Knight but it wasn't exactly a smooth move on your part. We're completely cut off from them now."

Luke finally caught his breath. "Good."

"How can that be good? So you ran into a few bad apples. Big deal. Aren't there ways to get around those things kind of, you know, diplomatic-like? Now things are so messed up, poor Leia doesn't know whether she's coming or going. And do you realize how sick she's been with grief?" He leaned across the table and let his temper wind up to vent nearly a year's worth of frustration. "For Crys-sake, Luke, she thinks you're dead! You didn't even have the courtesy to contact Winter. I don't know what you're thinkin'!"

"I was thinking that if my transmission were to be intercepted, it would put us all in a lot of danger," Luke responded flatly.

"Oh, so now you're worried about putting our lives in danger! Thanks a heap, kid!" Han scowled as Luke rubbed his temples as motioned for him to quiet down. "No, I will not. You've got a lot of nerve pulling what you pulled and not even having the guts to set things straight! I thought all that Jedi stuff was supposed to teach you a thing or two but I guess you're just as goddamned nieve as when I first met you! Or maybe that's not it. Maybe you've got something crammed up that Jedi sleeve of yours. Well, I hope to hell it's worth it because Leia is going out of her mind. Our children don't even know us because of you!"

Having heard enough, Luke rose to his feet. "Finished?"

Solo folded his arms sourly. "Not even close. Park your butt back down in that chair and give us an explanation."

"Didn't Leia tell you? She knew firsthand how corrupt the Inner Council had become."

"She just said you were ticked off and there wasn't a choice in the matter. Now don't you give me some line about your destiny 'cause I don't buy that crap. I want hard, cold reasons. And I wanna know why you had to break those Imperials out of detainment."

Chewbacca stood and gruffly offered Luke a seat. The Jedi acquiesced and folded his hands before him on the table. It would not be easy to speak of failure. A scantily dressed humanoid waitress glided by to serve Han a strong Ilrukan Ale.

"Thanks, this'll cure what ails me. Huh?" He winked at the girl flirtatiously and paid her a healthy tip. "Why don't you get one for my human friend here?"

Luke declined the offer and she passed along. The pirate drank and waited.

The Jedi's gaze remained focused on the center of the table as he began to speak. "There is a woman called Kayla Storm..."

Han nearly spat his ale and struggled to swallow. "A dame? You did all this for some Imperial dame?" He rolled his eyes and slouched backward. "Gee whiz, as if blowing up the Death Star wasn't good enough, or offing a couple of Dark Lords. Nah, you had to divide a whole nation. You. This is your fault, Luke. Now let me tell you something..."

Luke's eyes sharpened into sapphire points but his tone was coldly even. "No, Han. You will let me finish."

The line had been drawn. Han Solo stopped just shy of crossing it and clamped his mouth shut.

"She was a...friend from my past. I saw...I thought I saw her killed by Imperial stormtroopers. It happened long before I met any of you."

"Funny you never mentioned her. What other skeletons do you have for us to trip over?"

"Han, I was barely sixteen. Children rebound, and forget, easily. I felt sorry for myself but it never seemed all that important especially after..."

"Leia," Han finished. "You saw Leia and fell like a ton of bricks. I know, I remember what a fool you were back then. Now look..."

Luke flashed him another warning glance and continued slowly. "When we crossed paths again, I was stunned. I found her being questioned...No, not even that...tortured by an interrogation unit much like the one Leia encountered on the Death Star."

A soft groan passed through Chewbacca's lips but Han folded his arms, unmoved. "Okay, so Turchin's men got a little bit out of hand. That doesn't mean..."

"That's when I realized she was sensitive to the Force. And she was condemned to die. I believed the Empire might have been more open to negotiation than the New Republic at that point, and helped her escape in exchange for an audience with her Grand Admiral."

"You were wrong, Luke," Han interjected quietly. "Oh man, were you wrong."

He nodded. "I believe Kayla Storm has had an influence on me from the very beginning." He paused long enough to fully sense Solo's exasperation. "I was later compelled to take her as my Jedi apprentice which has ended disastrously. She has always had a lean toward the Dark Side but it seems the spirit of Emperor Palpatine has been coaching her

to believe that she will be the heir to his throne. Kayla has become very powerful, and manipulative."

Han wiped his hand across his mouth and stated, "You need to get away from this woman."

"I came looking for a ship."

"You've found it." Han slammed the rest of his ale. "C'mon. Let's get the Falcon gassed up and hit the hyperdrive. Leia's probably gonna rip all our heads off when we get back. She doesn't even know we came out here. Maybe I'll let you handle that one, kid. Luke?"

Han and Chewie had started to leave but halted when Luke did not move to follow. He sat with one hand covering his mouth, elbow propped on the table. Always worrying about something, Han decided and clapped his shoulder. "I said c'mon, Luke."

"I have a responsibility to Kayla Storm," he stated, voice distant.

"Forget the training. It's no good."

Mildly surprised, Luke glanced at his friend and saw that Han had taken an alternative meaning. Perhaps that was for the best. The secret he held could be quietly hidden, for now. He stood and faced the two smugglers. "I thought I'd made up my mind to leave but I can't allow another Dark Lord to rise to power. I have to confront her as I did my father and end this now while she's still a novice. There is a bond between us which I cannot forsake."

Han shook his head, unable to comprehend what the Jedi was talking about. "But you can forsake your family and friends?" The slow realization came to him that Luke was actually serious about this. He was, in essence, turning his back on them.

"Listen here, Skywalker, I want you to forget about this Imperial dame and get back where you belong, with your sister, the twins, and your newborn nephew!"

The cool blue eyes flickered. "You had a son."

"Luke, you've got to come back with us."

He was tempted but had to think of his own. He could not desert his daughter like his father had him. He didn't know how he would deal with this new Dark Lord, or witch, or whatever Kayla Storm was but was determined to take in what was his. And if Storm would not change her ways...

"Send Leia and the children my love."

Han leaned close to his face and growled, "You are some piece of work, Skywalker. Do you know that? How dare you..."

Skywalker sidled past them and left in a hurry. The Wookiee started to follow but Han held him in check.

"Let's give him some distance first." He chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully. "I wanna see what this Kayla Storm is up to."

Chapter Ten

It seemed the night would just not pass. Kayla Storm slept fitfully near dying embers, haunted by memories of her past, and promises of the future. Her nude form shivered in the cool air and, subconsciously, she pulled Skywalker's robe about her as a blanket. She almost did not hear the approaching footfalls then, with a jolt, she sat upright and stared at the hooded figure that stopped to survey the desolate landscape. Its back was mercifully turned against her.

"Master?" she spoke sharply and clutched the Jedi robe. It could not be Luke. The figure was smaller, twisted in on itself. She pulled the cloak on to cover her nakedness. Its fabric helped to take away the chill of her spirit.

There was a low, diseased chortle. "Yes, it is your Master."

Kayla took in a sharp breath as Emperor Palpatine turned slowly to face her in the coming half-light. His voice belched from the pit of hell.

"You forget your purpose, Kayla Storm. In order for you to fulfill your destiny, in order for you to become Empress, you must kill Luke Skywalker. Upon this, all depends."

She managed to gain her feet and cast the phantom a rebellious glare. Kayla no longer feared this ghost, this image the Force created. The Force was a tool and therefore, so was Palpatine. She would do things according to her will, not his, not anyone else's.

"Your hate has blinded you, Palpatine. Skywalker will be a powerful ally. Just as you possessed Darth Vader, so will I need a similar henchman."

The phantom Emperor hissed, "It will be your undoing and this bastard child will not survive."

"It will restore the Empire and this child will be my heiress."

Storm did not flinch as the tangible work of death moved close. It whispered with utter coldness, "I will not allow my legacy to fall into ruin."

Palpatine raised his hands like sharpened claws and reached for her throat. Kayla strove to remain calm, for her respiration, her circulation, the upheaval of her thoughts and emotions, to slow--just as Luke had taught her. She closed her eyes and the demon passed through her in a ghastly mist. Within, the tiny cluster of living cells divided again and again with inevitable growth. The waking nightmare was over.

A gust of wind whipped at the robe she clung to, seeking to seize her with hot fingers and cast her over the edge of the plateau. She watched the first of Tatooine's suns break the horizon. Another day. The air was already choking but in an entirely different respect. Thunderclouds rolled ominously across the vista, barely containing their electric energy and precious moisture. Tiny tornadoes darted toward the surface where farmers and their automated harvesters waited to suck the atmosphere dry again. A strange sight. Kayla Storm tilted her head ever-so-slightly, attuned to the Force and the living creatures that created it. There was jubilation across the globe with the coming of monsoons, and a touch of fear at their sudden intensity. The sandpeople thought it an act of Chala, goddess of rain. She must have been pleased with the perfection of their ceremonial dance. They sacrificed a fattened Bantha in her honor, and delivered it up in fire. Chala must have been well pleased, indeed. Kayla smirked at the simplicity of their beliefs, such worms. She looked skyward. Somewhere above, great ships ended one leg of a celestial witch hunt. Luke was on his way back to her and others followed. His sister was coming. The smirk broadened into a smile. Not just any day.

* * *

The A-wing class starfighter arched gently toward the desert planet. Within, Leia Organa Solo read the instructions and explanations from the ship's tutorial program and made the necessary adjustments to start a landing cycle. The fighter responded by drifting into a synchronous orbit.

"Attention, Mos Eisley spaceport, request permission to land."

There was a smattering of static. "Please hold your flight pattern...experiencing severe weather disturbances...can neither send nor receive..."

"Disregard request. I'll try Anchorhead," Leia responded. It was doubtful the controller heard her. As she attempted to contact the Anchorhead spaceport, she received worse interference. Leia relaxed in the cockpit and waited with eyes closed. Whatever turbulence that was down there would clear up soon enough. Then she would find her husband, his Wookiee accomplice, and maybe even her lost brother. After all this time, her hopes would be confirmed. It could be the only sane reason Han would abandon his family without warning.

Luke, her mind whispered, you must still be alive.

Maybe there was a response. It was hard to tell. Her thoughts jumbled into stark fear as explosions rocked the tiny fighter. She looked through the canopy for her attackers; there were none to be seen. She looked down at the radar and stifled a scream. A swarm of tiny blips, shields raised, cannons at full power. Leia keyed in frantic information to raise shields, power up cannons, increase engine speed by fifty percent. An alarm began to chime as more explosions destroyed any possibility of raising shields. Her head lifted and her eyes widened like saucers as she saw ten New Republic Star Cruisers rise over the planet's ecliptic. Ackbar's fleet. She would be dead in a matter of seconds. The swarm of X-wing fighters swooped down and around her in a sadistic game of cat-and-mouse.

"Renegade A-wing," the squadron leader ordered, "you are urged to surrender your vessel by order of the New Republic. Failure to respond with information regarding the location of your fleet will result in..."

Leia switched off the comlink and, ignoring the computer's demands for a landing sequence, gripped the manual controls and bolted for the planet's surface. The X-wings tightened into formation and gave chase, ion cannons firing in an effort to further disable her smaller fighter. The port engine burst into flames, sending a shower of sparks through the control panel. Leia shrieked as the A-wing tumbled into the stormy atmosphere. The squadron of X-wings turned tail immediately to avoid the dangerous flashes of lightning. The clouds broke to reveal miles of endless sand rushing closer. She pulled at the throttle with every ounce of her strength and the fighter sluggishly began to respond. There was bone-crushing jolt as it skipped across a tall dune, an explosion, darkness as she slumped forward against the controls, tasting blood in her mouth. And finally, sweet silence.

* * *

"Blue Squad, return to mother."

The Mon Calamari grimly watched the X-wing group coast into the hangar of the flagship Vigilance.

"A scout, do you think?" wondered General Turchin.

"Perhaps," Ackbar nodded his bulbous squid head. "We'd better run a sensor sweep, just in case."

"I have a landing party ready to salvage the remains as we look for Skywalker," the spy continued.

"We'll have to wait for a break in the storm first, General." The fish eyes swiveled to cast him a distrustful look. "Then you will have you chance to mop up your carnage."

"I'm not sure what you're implying, Admiral," he replied, shocked.

"No, General Turchin," Ackbar sighed deeply, "I'm sure you don't. I'm just wondering how you came across the location of Skywalker's whereabouts."

Turchin smiled slyly. "One might say a little bird told me." A bird named Furgan.

* * *

The sky blackened as if day had never arrived. The Jedi Master (though he barely felt himself worthy to be called one) deeply inhaled the electrifying air as he climbed the steep path. He felt more alive than he had ever been. Luke Skywalker wanted to reach the summit quickly and laugh in Kayla Storm's face, tell her, "You see? You couldn't destroy me and now I'm here to give you a lifetime of misery!" But that wasn't right, it wasn't the point of his return, to provoke. The smell of ozone that was released with every stroke of lightning was invigorating. Peals of thunder pounded in his chest and left his ears ringing. Never had he experienced a thunderstorm on any planet--never a storm that held such ominous power. He was instilled with awe and yet, the rain held back in its atmospheric imprisonment. The Tusken goddess Chala was not yet prepared to offer her reward, or punishment.

Halfway up Sentinel Rock, Luke halted and raised his hands to his temples. There was a sharp pain as the Force made an intense fluctuation. There was this bizarre storm, his sister called out to him, and then...

He looked up in horror as the disabled A-wing streaked helplessly through the clouds, cascaded in a shower of lightning, and crashed not ten kilometers from where he stood. Violent smoke billowed from the wreckage.

He reached out in pained desperation. "Leia!"

No response. Not even a blink. Luke swung about to see if Han and Chewie still followed him. They raced for the crash site in a landspeeder stolen from outside the Mos Eisely cantina.

Come, Luke.

The thought whispered through his mind softly, warm and without malice. There was something strange about the call. It beckoned hauntingly.

Come.

Luke chose not to resist and continued the climb.

* * *

Acrid smoke stung at Han's eyes and attacked his lungs rawly. His hands worked frantically to uncover the canopy of the A-wing fighter half-buried in sand. His wife lay within crumpled, bleeding, maybe dying. The release mechanism was jammed. The pirate pounded his fist against the transparasteel which only managed to send bullets of pain up his arm.

"I can't get it open!" he bellowed. "Chewie!"

Chewbacca shoved him aside a bit roughly and ripped the canopy off its hinges with a mighty grunt. Han tore away the harness holding Leia in place, and dragged her out without a moment's thought to what it might do to her injuries. He collapsed beside her and held her head close to his chest, bitter tears clouding his vision.

"Leia, I'm sorry!" he rasped, "We shouldn't have come here. Come on, sweetheart, hang on..."

Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. Her gorgeous brown eyes fluttered open but did not see him.

Han's grip tightened. "Leia!"

She whispered dazedly, "Luke, please don't..."

Her eyes glazed and she drifted back into unconsciousness, mumbling frightened, incoherent thoughts.

Chewbacca roared. The second engine had caught fire and the air was too thick to breathe.

"Then let's get out of here," Han growled and lifted Leia in his arms.

The Wookiee asked a gruff question, this time gesturing to the plateau.

Solo glared at it. His answer was short and clipped with resentment. "He's made his decision. Let Skywalker fend for himself."

Carefully, this time, he laid his wife across the back seat of the landspeeder and Han Solo let the scars of his enmity deepen.

* * *

The Jedi Master faced the fledgling witch in silence, acutely aware that she was a product of his own failure. Similarly had Ben Kenobi failed with Anakin Skywalker. Both had been good men at the start; Luke felt he was mostly a good man, but the Force left such marks on the soul that were impossible to erase. There could be no good without evil, and the reverse was also true. Both aspects could not stand alone. Luke felt he had nothing to cling to, that the sand was constantly shifting beneath his feet and he could not gain a steady foothold. And Leia was in pain. He remembered his resolution and solidified. The daughter of Luke Skywalker would not be deserted as the son of Anakin Skywalker was. He refused to put his child through that anguish. It was not the fault of the unborn that created all of this, but his own, as Han Solo had so crudely pointed out.

While Luke felt haggard from the long night and no sleep, Kayla Storm was radiantly refreshed. Her appearance seemed immaculate; her fingernails were painted like blood, her hair neatly combed back and still wet from being washed, her clothes were clean while Luke stunk with filth. Ploy or illusion, it was obvious Storm had taken great preparation for his return and that very fact made Luke feel ill at ease. That, he sensed, was the desired response. He made a mental note that he must keep closer guard over future responses.

She spoke first. Her voice lilted like tones from a harp. "I was afraid you would not return."

A token remark, Luke thought. He replied, "No good could come of my leaving. Your training is not yet complete."

"I see." Kayla approached and whispered seductively in his ear, "What more would you have me learn, Master?"

At once allured and repulsed, the Jedi turned his back. He watched the wreckage not far off. Smoke poured forth in thick clouds, blending with thicker ones that coalesced above Sentinel Rock. He shut out the beckoning of his sister's anguish and his gaze drifted to the violence of lightning, remaining fixed as thunderous booms echoed across the landscape. The clouds rolled like the waves of a turbulent ocean. In all the millennia the Tusken Raiders had performed their religious dance, Tatooine hadn't seen more than brief rainshowers in more than fifty years. Now the coming of torrential rains threatened to change the desert landscape, and its people, forever. Whatever the reason, the rain dance of Chala had tapped into the Force and the impossible was being made possible. It was backwards and chaotic, like his own thoughts.

"Strange," Luke whispered to the phenomena.

"It doesn't matter," Kayla said with an air of disdain. "The place will be flooded out and every living thing that can't escape will die."

"Somehow I doubt that," he muttered. "The abos here can be very ingenious when faced with adversity, even when that adversity is not man made."

Storm placed her hands on her hips and laughed. Skywalker was familiar with the Imperial slang term for planetary natives. "Yes! This thunderstorm is woman made, isn't it?"

Luke wasn't sure if she meant Chala or herself and gave her a cautious, sideways look. "Things must be worse than I thought."

"Oh, things are so much better, my lord. We are powerful with the Force. Who's to say the more...technologically disadvantaged abos wouldn't deify the creators of such magic?"

The Jedi Master shook his head. "The path you are undertaking is extremely dangerous, Kayla. You're losing your mind to it. I have been there."

"Ah, sage words of experience! What is so dark and dangerous about a woman persuing her ambitions?"

She sought his gaze but Luke refused to look at her.

"The Dark Side of the Force is like an untamed beast that has developed a taste for blood, except that it feeds on hate and fear, blind ambition. One must do more than lock it away from what it desires most. One must be rid of it constantly and forever ."

Kayla smiled. "A final lecture from the failed Jedi Master!"

He caught a glimpse of her smugness and clenched his fists at his sides to restrain his own anger. He shouldn't have left her in the first place, thus preventing the vision of Emperor Palpatine that must have come to twist her mind to the point of snapping. There was no time to regret past mistakes as Luke felt an unexpected invasion of the Force creep into his sense. You'll find some frightening things if you walk around in this head of mine, he remembered her saying. Luke closed his eyes and let his mind go blank. Do not think. Do not feel. Just be. But it was too late. Kayla Storm reached into the recesses of his soul which she now understood so well, uncovered that tight little box marked "DANGEROUS", and rattled at its locks.

She continued impishly, "Quit your moralizing, Lord Skywalker. I see in your heart you hold the same desires."

A new pet name. Luke inhaled and released an abysmal sigh. "My only desire is to see to the welfare of that child you hold hostage in your womb. I won't permit you to twist her to your own end. Once she is born, I will take her and leave." Luke felt some satisfaction as her pretentious smile faded. "You've become incorrigible, Kayla Storm. I see that now. The only reason I stay here rather than give aid to my sister is for the sake of my child."

"You are your father's son, after all," she quipped sarcastically.

Luke's jaw became rigid at this. Anakin Skywalker was his true father, not the monster Darth Vader to whom she alluded. Yet, deep within, there was a twisted affinity to Vader that haunted his dreams, merely a shadow of what he could become. He had only to make the choice. The box in the corner of his soul strained at its bindings.

His teeth gritted until his head ached. "No, I am not."

Kayla ignored this and turned her attention to the crash site. Agony was the true beauty of war. She commented, "Your sister dies down there."

"No," Luke repeated tersely. Leia had been taken from the hulk of twisted metal. She called to him in desperation, then was consumed by her injuries. Han Solo bellowed out hatred and Chewbacca, animal fury. Even the storm produced a negative aura. He tried to deter the cries but still they attacked him. It was overwhelming.

At his side, the witch laughed softly. "Maybe not yet, but very soon."

Suddenly, he desired to kill her despite the child she carried. That would be the end of it and Luke could return those who truly loved him, to those whom he had abandoned. Perhaps never again use this Force, this curse, this ulcer that gutted his spirit into something black and hideous.

"You are a liar," he breathed, and tasted the acridic smoke and the electricity of the coming storm.

Kayla smiled sweetly. "Now."

His eyes snapped open as the A-wing class wreckage burst with explosions. With it came eruptions of thunder and finally, rain. It was enough to cause the lid of the dangerous little box to fly wide, and a thousand demons screamed through his consciousness. With murderous intent, Luke whirled toward his apprentice, lightsaber ignited and ready to strike.

Her smile faded to a grin no less confident. "Come, beloved. I don't think violence is necessary. You love me with everything that you are, weren't those the words?"

Kayla Storm brought up no defense as Luke approached, and simply folded her arms across her chest with bizarre calmness. Luke hesitated and plunged into despair. More failures.

Oh, Ben. Please help me.

"No one can help you," was her response to his silent plea, "Lord Skywalker."

Rivulets of water ran down his face and matted his clothes against his skin. The pounding rain stung at his eyes as he blinked hard to seek Kayla's expression, so full of self-importance. Luke pressed the activation stud on the hilt of his weapon and the green blade powered down.

He shook his head and breathed, "I will not kill you."

Kayla pointed through the downpour at the still smoldering starfighter. "The New Republic is to blame for this, not I. If you would only accept the inevitable and join me, you could reap your revenge. Luke," she spoke softly and stepped close, "I am Empress, but I need you with me."

She kissed him warmly and he replied, "Then I am with you, for now."

"You must realize that you are mine," she told him with finality. "You will never be your own again."

"I am here for the child. Nothing more."

Kayla smiled as her Jedi led her through the tumult in search of a ship. The battle was not lost. Only the most gentle nudge would seduce Luke Skywalker to be her ally. The rules of engagement were hers to make.

* * *

The landspeeder careened through the flooded streets of Mos Eisley, very nearly running over several revelrous pedestrians that stumbled their way to the cantina. This landspeeder, however, was recklessly determined to reach the spaceport where the Millennium Falcon lay in wait. Han Solo was only mildly surprised to find a squad of heavily armed New Republic soldiers also waiting. Strangely, it was the icing on the cake. He felt the Wookiee tense beside him, ready to lunge into a suicidal battle at the slightest cue. Had it been ten years ago, or maybe even the day before yesterday, they might have blasted their way through come hell of high water. Well, he surmised, here was the high water, in any case. But today was different. His wife was in a bad way. He'd lost a good, no, probably the best friend he'd ever had save Chewbacca. His children were in the depths of space with no parents. It was a very bad afternoon. He felt old and tired of it all.

The landspeeder's engine wound down to a halt before the squad. The soldiers stared in disbelief as the legendary swashbuckler Han Solo handed his blaster and the Wookiee's bowcaster wordlessly to their sergeant. Chewie whined softly at his friend. The smuggler shook his head. Today, the fight was just not in him.

The officer in charge stammered through his order to arrest them and all was done.

Chapter Eleven

"Madam President!"

Mon Mothma turned toward the insistent Councilor Xin. "If you and General Bel Iblis wish to meet with me, you may do so in my office." With an irritated wave, she strode on. "I am a very busy person, Councilor Xin. Work needs to be done."

The Bothan hurried after her. "I understand that, Madam President, but..."

"I see no reason to use the amphitheater when there are only three of us present! Admiral Ackbar and General Turchin are on a mission to find Solo and Skywalker. Councilor Borsch and General Rieekan are indisposed as well."

"Yes, but General Bel Iblis said..."

"Confound Garm Bel Iblis!" she retorted. "Perhaps the good general would be wise to consider his resignation from the Council. I've just about had it with his liberality!"

The voice of Councilor Xin became stone cold. "Mon Mothma, it is urgent."

The President paused in mid-stride and looked at the Bothan warily. "Yes," she said slowly. "Yes, I see that it is. Very well, councilor."

Five hundred and sixty-two representatives from the major systems in the galaxy crowded every seat of the spacious amphitheater. Prismed light cascaded across the bald head of Garm Bel Iblis as he paced the floor. It was an impressive assembly. The work to organize this passive coup had gone on secretly for many months. After Skywalker's turn against the New Republic and the hostage taking of Leia Organa Solo by one of the escaped inmates, Bel Iblis went to Mon Mothma with his report. Her response was a brutal reprimand which took even her old, political advesary off guard. With quiet suspicion, he hired objective surveillance teams to watch her and the other councilmembers. All checked out okay except Haake and Turchin, but now Haake was dead. Mon Mothma fell to the seduction of political power, promises made by the Imperial operatives to ensure her election as the next President, in fact, an expansion of her Presidential powers to totalitarian authority, if only she would follow their instructions to the letter. It was unclear exactly how this all tied in with the Imperial Academy on Carida or why the Empire would want to ensure the destruction of its own fleet. For certain there was corruption even at the highest echelons of the New Republic and General

Bel Iblis was determined to have it weeded out. With so many of the Inner Council chasing ghosts, this was the most opportune moment to spring his trap, for better or worse. He confided only in Xin who had been terrified of going along with it, as a Bothan is typically only concerned with the safety of his own political hide. But Councilor Xin was no typical Bothan. Their emissaries had been sent out all over the galaxy to press planetary leaderships to send their elected representatives to the Senate on this date. Now the Bothan would deliver Madam President to an angry lion's den. He would pull through regardless of his fear because he knew, as everyone in the amphitheater knew, things had gone terribly wrong. Organa Solo's desertion and institution of a new Rebellion was not the way to go about things. Government had to change from within, and from the people it presumed to lord over. Those people were here now. Change was about to happen most rapidly.

The President of the New Republic entered with Councilor Xin half a pace behind and gaped at the crowd in dumb horror. She shook violently and leaned heavily against a marble pillar, knowing full well the events that were about to take place.

Garm Bel Iblis spoke slowly to her, as if addressing a child. "My dear Madam President, I would like to introduce you to the Senate of the New Republic, representative of all the civilized star systems of the galaxy. Our first order of business is to kindly ask for your resignation."

The woman gripped her chest as if her heart were failing her and gasped for breath. Mon Mothma's isolated, little universe fell to pieces.

* * *

The princess of the obliterated planet of Alderaan was emersed in the bacta tank, a method of treatment implemented for only the severest of injuries. The red bacta seemed to speed the body's natural healing process, at least in mammals such as humans. The long feelers at the end of the Mon Calamari snout twitched from the pungent odor.

"How much longer?" Ackbar demanded.

Two-One-Bee, the Em-Dee unit for his fleet, replied, "A few moments, Admiral, and then she must be isolated to rest."

The Admiral folded his arms. He had always admired Leia Organa Solo, even attempted to protect her from the witch hunt Mon Mothma had commanded him to embark on. But General Turchin had been ordered to assist in the mission which left no room for stumbling around. He wished he could think of the human female as his friend but politics cut strange boundaries. Ackbar felt torn between loyalties, but wished her no harm. He watched as a mechanism lifted her broken body from the tank and

settled her into a cot. The Em-Dee unit covered her immediately with a thermal blanket and injected some form of antibiotic.

The princess groaned, "Anoth..."

The Mon Calamari snapped his head up in acute surprise. He knelt at her bedside and listened closely.

"The children...Luke...No..."

"Hush, Leia." His webbed fingers brushed the red bacta slime from her hair. "Your children will not be found."

His personal comlink announced, "Admiral Ackbar, we are receiving a HoloNet transmission from Coruscant. Priority one-five-delta."

Ackbar stood and left immediately for the bridge. Once there, he received stunning news, and blessings.

* * *

The interrogation unit hummed lowly as it hovered close to the face of Han Solo. He was experiencing now what Leia must have gone through aboard the first Death Star. The chick had guts.

Chewbacca looked on helplessly, restrained by electrified cuffs that sent a high voltage current through his shaggy mass whenever he moved more than an inch. A clever little gadget. After an hour of continual struggle and therefore continual electrocution, the Wookiee gave up a useless effort and stood perfectly still. He whined occasionally with Han's cries, but that was all.

"What is the location of your renegade fleet!" Turchin demanded.

It sounded so Imperial. Han had him pegged as one of Furgan's cronies, and was probably the last person in the galaxy to do so. The truth serum Myridium was in full affect now. The pirate's tongue felt loose and he wanted to talk, a lot. He tried to clamp down on it but the words came anyway. "With my newborn son. He's got my eyes, ya know."

The good general leaned close and sneered, "And where is your newborn son?" His breath and body odor reeked.

"Take a bath," Han mumbled.

Turchin struck him hard but this was nothing new; they'd been at it for a while. How did such a greasy character get in the military anyhow? This guy was so greasy, his head looked like an oil slick. Han tried to smile at his private joke but the numbed muscles in his face wouldn't cooperate. He enunciated the best he could. "Not here."

"Interrogation droid." Turchin was getting restless. "Increase the dosage by triple. I don't care if it kills him."

"Oh, come on now..." Han groaned. This was starting to get more than a little annoying.

The Wookiee howled and strained against his confinements. The resulting shock made him cringe back and whimper. He fell silent and watched the human he had given a life debt to receive another injection. The drug burned through Solo's blood like hot lava. His eyes became puffy and blurred. Han screamed. Then he could no longer see. He hoped he had fainted but such was not the case.

Han could imagine veins popping out of his thick neck as Turchin shouted, "Tell me the location of your fleet!"

"It's uncharted," the smuggler moaned.

"You will show me where it is!"

"Your stupid hunk of metal has shot me up with so much Myridium, it made me go blind! See?" Solo yelled back and poked at his eyes. There was strength in not having to look at his awful surroundings. "It's not my fault!"

"Then Chewbacca will show me." Turchin said with such a coldness that it should have struck fear into them both.

Instead, Solo chortled. "Ya know, that's the thing about Wookiees. Awful sense of direction. I remember one time..."

"Fagh!" Something was thrown against a wall and probably broke.

"Hey, it's true! Chewie, would ya tell him it's true? I'm not lyin' here!"

The Wookiee roared pitifully. Now they were going to die. Han said a short Corellian prayer for his beloved Leia. This was it.

He cocked his head and listened as the automatic door slid open and shut, listened to the deep, gurgling wheeze of a Mon Calamari. The latter sound was disgusting.

"Stop this at once," Ackbar gurgled.

Maybe he wasn't such a bad guy after all, Han thought, just a little overenthusiastic.

"Why?" was the obvious question.

We were all having so much fun.

"I've received word from General...President Bel Iblis. The Senate has convened and Mon Mothma had been removed from power. We are under orders to bring the prisoners back unharmed. To go against this will be considered high treason." The Admiral wheezed laboriously throughout the whole relay. "Apparently, there has been an increase in activity in the Carida system. The Imperial Academy may be preparing to move against Coruscant and we must return immediately."

General Turchin remained silent for a long time. Han grinned, imagining his jaws and eyeballs had dropped straight to the floor. Bet your fancy spy network didn't know that was gonna happen, he thought. Somebody's in trouble.

"How can this be?" Turchin gasped.

The Mon Calamari sounded almost relieved. "The people, it seems, have spoken."

* * *

Luke Skywalker watched through the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon as the flagship Vigilance and her fleet made the jump to lightspeed. With that fleet, his sister and his friends would be shuttled to Coruscant where they would suffer capital punishment for their crimes. The time for grief had passed and now he glared sullenly through the forward viewport. He was helpless to save them, helpless to assist in any way, even if only to make their deaths less painful. Instead he was here with Kayla Storm and the creation of his own blinded lust. The anger was turned keenly upon himself for his lack of discernment in her regard, even from the very beginning. The tables had indeed turned against him; he was no longer the Master but the pawn of this woman who would call herself Empress. This woman he despised carried his child. It was a good trap.

"Why did you insist on hijacking this piece of trash?" she demanded and picked at the torn leather seat.

Luke was tired of her demands. "I've traveled in this ship before. It will get us where we want to go."

"Which is?"

"Anoth."

Kayla gave him a sour look. "I don't think so, Lord Skywalker. I suggest you set course for Carida, and I will take my throne."

"Not yet," Luke replied. "I am the last surviving kin to my sister's children. It is my responsibility to collect them."

"Oh, your responsibility!" She leaned over and stole a somewhat lingering kiss. "You are such a perfect little Jedi Knight. Or is it still Master?"

Luke refused to respond. She touched his tight-lipped frown with one finger. The nail was claw-like and painted red.

"I know something," she stated off-handedly.

"Hm." For some reason, this amused Luke, as if this so-called Empress might know anything at all. He had confronted Palpatine, witnessed his death, studied under his clone on Byss. Certainly, Kayla Storm hardly possessed the power or the malevolence to fill the tyrant's shoes. The Jedi kept the insult to himself.

"I know how to destroy the New Republic."

The Jedi's heart palpitated. This was an end to which he could just not see. Aside from his bitterness toward Kayla Storm, he desired to avenge the harm the New Republic had brought upon his sister; yet he could not fathom a solution. The Force was with them but that was hardly reason to create delusions of grandeur. They were only two and the New Republic was comprised of thousands of star systems. With his own brand of manipulation, he kissed the finger and brought Kayla's hand to his cheek. The closer he traipsed along the Dark path with Kayla Storm, the more snugly fit her emotional noose about his neck. It was a strange hatred.

"Do tell."

"There is a weapon." Her voice was barely audible as she breathed her conspiracy. "One more insidious than any espionage, more devastating than any Death Star."

Skywalker froze with the onset of comprehension. "The Force."

She gave him a twisted grin. "Of course. Matter matters not. We need only destroy Coruscant and the New Republic will die with it."

"You and your lies," Luke grumbled and brushed her hand away. Entire star systems. Surely such mass destruction was impossible even on a planetary scale. Even if it were possible, it was unthinkable.

"Lord Vader has foreseen it, nearly a decade before the fact. Don't you think that is the reason your father beckoned you to instruct me?"

"No." Luke folded his arms. "Vader was always prone to over-dramatics. I wouldn't give his premonitions much weight."

Kayla gripped his chin to make him face her and spoke in a low hiss. "I can see the future, Master Luke, move objects without a touch, crush bones without exertion. Why not crush planets?"

"You're insane." Luke shrugged away, sickened, and set the controls for autopilot. Her hands clamped on his wrist.

"I can reach into your mind and uncover your most private thoughts. Now that you have invited me in, I will never leave. I will never release you."

He moved to wrench free but, amazingly, her grip held fast. The strength was more than her own. Again she invaded his soul. He ripped away and left the pilot's chair, feeling transgressed.

"Your Master Yoda taught that we are luminous beings, not crude flesh." Kayla stretched out in the copilot's chair and quoted, "'Nothing is impossible save that which you believe to be impossible. You must unlearn what you have learned.'"

"I doubt he was contemplating planetary annihilation," Luke growled.

"We'll go to Anoth and collect your kin, and then test my hypothesis. You will see that I am right."

Skywalker's visage darkened.

Kayla smiled almost gently. "Your father always wanted you to rule, Luke. Don't disappoint him a second time."

Luke Skywalker nodded silently and concentrated his thoughts on the children, all of them. Somehow, even in his own apparent self-destruction, they must be spared.

Chapter Twelve

A New Republic shuttle angled through ionic turbulence toward the strong hold of Anoth. Beyond, the pirated fleet drifted against the cold backdrop of space in silence. The shuttle weaved closer to the multiple planet, its sensors blinded by blasts of incessant energy. The graceful pilot looped his ship into a cavernous landing area, dodged protruding stalactites, and ended the journey with perfect alighting.

"I assure you, Commander Antilles, we are quite capable of looking after ourselves," said Winter as she, the children, and Wedge disembarked.

A number of guards wandered out to stretch their legs while others remained in the shuttle.

"I'm sure you are," Antilles acknowledged. Anyone who could care for two toddlers and an infant without blinking had to be stronger than a Bantha--or a whole herd of Banthas. He shrugged.

"Calrissian thought security arrangements should be made since Han, Leia, and Chewbacca have been missing for so long. We'll know soon enough if we have to bug out fast." The lithe figure seemed to collapse in on itself, consumed with intolerable guilt. The children cried as Wedge moved to steady her.

"Winter?" "It's my fault," came her small, weakened voice. "I told Leia and she went. I love her children. I was afraid that with her return, I would no longer be able to care for them and she can't..." She covered her mouth and sobbed. "I wanted her to leave." Antilles stood speechless as the nursemaid wept on his shoulder. Jacen and Jaina clung to her legs, Anakin nuzzled her chest. The children loved her, as well.

Winter straightened, suddenly embarrassed and, as she combed her fingers through stark, white hair, said, "Forgive me, commander, that was uncalled for. I hope you won't let this conversation go any further."

Wedge shook his head quietly. She sighed. "It's time for them to go to bed. I think I'll turn in as well. I'm just...exhausted." The pilot stated evenly, "We will be here."

* * *

Lando Calrissian found himself in the awkward position of admiring a renegade fleet. He hated the military. Having been dubbed "General" before the climactic battle of Endor and the hand he played in destroying the Emperor's second Death Star, Calrissian was looked upon as something of a hero and therefore, an authority. Celebrity was the title he preferred, not hero. One offered the perks of glamour and wealth while the other demanded great feats of nobility, even martyrdom for a cause. To be a hero required him to become respectable and give something of himself. To be considered an authority...Well, he hated every minute of it. The respectable Baron Administrator of Bespin stepped through the automatic entry to the bridge.

"Officer on deck," an ensign announced. All stood at attention.

"Cut that out," Lando growled and approached a junior officer. "Any word from Solo or Skywalker?"

"No, sir. Not yet." "Baron, we're being hailed. HoloNet frequency...Coruscant," said the communication's officer.

Lando slumped in the captain's chair. "If they can hail us, then they've found the fleet. I should've known Ackbar would double-cross us."

"We're being hailed again."

Calrissian smoothed his mustache and straightened his short cape. He stood and gave his best shot at looking respectable. "Put it through." He watched the image of Garm Bel Iblis materialize on the forward screen. On either side of the General's hawked nose were icy blue eyes that pierced the hearts of most men. They sparkled now with anticipation and their corners wrinkled as Bel Iblis grinned smugly.

"Good day, Baron Calrissian."

"Depends on your point of view," Lando retorted. "What do you want?"

"To inform you that Han, Leia, and Chewbacca have been taken into New Republic custody and have safely arrived at Imperial City. Luke Skywalker is still at large."

Lando's knees gave in and he lowered himself into the captain's chair. His friends were going to be killed and it would be a matter of hours before they would be collected as well. His mouth went dry but he produced an experienced look of cool indifference.

"They...we won't give up without a fight."

Bel Iblis looked confused for a moment, then smiled broadly. "I keep forgetting how out of touch you must be. You obviously haven't heard the good news." Now it was Lando's turn to be confused.

"What news?"

"The New Republic has gone through quite a few changes in recent days. Mon Mothma has stepped down and a Senate fully representing the major systems of the galaxy has elected me as acting President until a formal vote can be taken." The smile faded and he became very serious. "We've detected a great deal of movement coming out of Carida and fear the Imperial Academy is preparing to strike Coruscant. Baron Calrissian, you must bring the fleet back to us so we can better defend ourselves. We can settle our differences diplomatically."

Lando folded his arms. "What if it's a trap? Even if it's not, why should we help you?"

The new President was blunt. "If it's a trap, then you are hopelessly lost. But from the amount of time you've spent drifting around out there, I 'll wager your supplies are getting pretty low. We will be happy to remedy that situation, and postpone the inquiry until the battle is finished. Who knows? If we lose, you'll be free to roam wherever you like. The New Republic will be finished and we'll be back to square one."

"So you're asking me for help." Lando fussed with his mustache scrupulously.

"What about Leia's kids? Can we keep them here?"

Bel Iblis sighed. "I'd like to. However, confidentiality is something of the past around here and I'm afraid some of the undesirables in our ranks might pass on the information to Carida. Admiral Ackbar, Han Solo, and I are in agreement that the safest place for the children is with their mother. Coruscant's field generator will keep the planet protected." "Skywalker was afraid of some kind of Dark Lord reemerging. That's why he sent them away in the first place." "Leia and her children have been forced to be apart long enough. I think the Jedi's fears are unfounded."

"We don't know that."

"No, but tell me what in life is certain." The President's gaze sharpened. "What is certain, is that Leia Organa Solo needs her friends and family now more than ever. If you consider yourself her friend, Calrissian, you will come."

Lando made himself quit twirling the end of his mustache. It was a rotten habit. "You're asking us to risk our lives for a government gone corrupt. I'll have to give it some thought."

"I appreciate your suspicion but I can assure you our political troubles are being taken care of. If you refuse to help, the Empire will again rise to power. Baron, I am not beyond groveling. I beg you to choose the lesser of two evils."

"I appreciate your candor, Mister President. Give me a little time." He did appreciate it. He really did. They would be there in five minutes if he could help it.

"Time is not something we have a great deal of, Baron Calrissian." The transmission ended. All the cards were laid on the table and Lando decided all bets were off; he had one hell of a lousy hand.

* * *

President Garm Bel Iblis rocked back in his leather chair and looked across the mahogany desk at two senior officers, an ex-smuggler, and a Wookiee .

"These are traitors!" the General growled. "It is a matter of principle..."

Turchin was beside himself with contempt but the old Corellian would have none of it. Bel Iblis let his voice cool to an even tone.

"I see only one possible turncoat in this collection, Turchin. As a matter of principle , you will be placed in detainment for the time period before your trial. And interrogated."

Color drained from Turchin's expression. With a brief nod, the President ordered two guards to take the Imperial operative away. Now they were clean, finally. He turned his attention to the Mon Calamari Admiral.

"It was imperative that anyone with ties to Mon Mothma remain ignorant to our operation," he began, almost apologetic, but not quite.

"I know it must have been difficult for you to be left in the dark."

"With all due respect, Mister President, I'm sure you haven't the slightest inkling," gurgled Ackbar, nostrils flared. "I am greatly offended you wouldn't confide in me." He paused to receive an apology that didn't materialize. Ackbar finished grudgingly, "I hope this new administration will be more upfront with its military from now on."

Garm nodded. "Of course. Admiral, I must ask you to refrain from consulting with Mon Mothma until after the trial."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Ackbar rolled his eyes. "She's not a wicked person, Mister President, just fallible like the rest of us."

"Thank you, Admiral. Good day."

The Mon Calamari glanced quietly at Han and Chewbacca before taking his leave. They certainly had a lot of explaining to do. The Wookiee paced, looking haggard from Turchin's interrogation. Solo was in even worse shape, his gaze painfully swollen from the Myridium. His eyes fluttered as he spoke, now able to see at least a few, blurred shadows.

"If I know Lando, he'll be here with the kids in about forty-eight hours ." "I'm sure that will give us enough time. The Imperial fleet won't arrive for another sixty."

The President waved it off as inconsequential. "I've been at this for many years, Captain Solo. Coming to the negotiating table is always difficult for big egos. But now we are willing."

Han frowned only slightly; the insult was pointed at them both.

"I wish you had come to me sooner, Han."

"I was going to," he muttered. "But you thought I'd be too entangled in politics to listen." Han shrugged. The thought had crossed his mind, but maybe it just didn't matter anymore.

"The charges against you and your friends are still very serious, even under these new circumstances. We'll just have to see if we can get through the next few days," Garm surmised.

"I know."

"I wish you could have told Luke and Leia to hold off."

"I know."

Bel Iblis leaned forward in his seat. "A mutiny, Han? What were you and Antilles thinking?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" "No." "Blast it!"

Garm pounded the desk with a clenched fist and rose to his feet to glare at the pirate.

"Far too many people have been killed for you to stand there and act like some sort of idiot. I know you are not an idiot, Han Solo, smuggler extraordinaire. You are going to tell me why, now." Han faced the glare for as long as he could before shifting his gaze downward to study his boots. He blinked hard because his eyes still hurt, and he felt like the fool the other Corellian claimed he was not. Chewie stopped pacing, very quiet.

"We got rid of Haake, anyway. Just seemed like the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do," Garm echoed, as if not comprehending. "You, your wife, Luke Skywalker, and all were in the wrong. Change came about in spite of all the chaos you created."

"In spite or because of?" Han snapped. "I doubt you would've raised a finger if we hadn't rocked a few boats. I'm not on trial yet, Garm. I don't appreciate all the questions." The President straightened.

"The Senate will need a number of things from you before the inquiry can begin."

"Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself? We still have Furgan's gang to worry about."

"Admiral Ackbar and I have Furgan's gang to worry about. Besides, I've contacted the Smuggler's Guild and promised copious payment if they agreed to come to our assistance. I don't want you to even think about leaving the planet."

"Never crossed my mind," muttered Solo. Bel Iblis continued,

"We will need written testimonies, the memory banks of Artoo-Detoo and See-Threepio, ship's logs, etcetera..."

"The Falcon was abandoned on Tatooine."

"We'll have somebody fetch it later. Oh, and I need to speak with Leia right away." Solo's head snapped up and he squinted at the acting President.

"She's in bad shape, Garm." Garm let his demeanor soften as he walked around the desk to rest a hand on the pirate's shoulder.

"When she is awake, I will need to talk with her." Han swallowed a lump and nodded wordlessly.

* * *

They slept. Winter, the children, Wedge Antilles, even the guards that accompanied him--all slept. Young Jaina Solo turned onto her side while her brother Jacen snored and her brother Anakin suckled his thumb. A dark man invaded her childish dreams. Jaina. Her eyes opened, still dreaming.

"Uncle."

Your mother and father will not be coming back to you.

She blinked, not sure what it mattered. Mother and father were nice, but they had Winter.

Collect your brothers and come to me. Almost two years of age, the response came clear as a bell.

"No! Stay with Winter."

Come or you will be punished. Disregarding her favorite doll with a violent "Humph!", Jaina crawled close to her sleeping twin and whispered in his ear. Jacen awoke, whimpering, and followed his sister to Anakin's crib. Jaina crossed her arms and pouted.

"Too high."

Then just come, Uncle Luke insisted. Bring everything Winter would take for a long trip.

"We go on trip?" squealed the girl. Anakin stirred but did not wake. Jacen found a bag and gathered toys to fill it with. He was always so quiet.

Yes.

"Uncle play more games?" Jaina persisted.

Come to the landing area and I will show you something amazing. Jaina giggled and pranced about, teasing her sad, mute brother.

Hurry now, Uncle Luke prodded. Suddenly intent on completing their chore, the twins dragged their bag of belongings through the entry and down the corridor. Through all the rucous, the infant slept soundly.

* * *

"Han, is that you?" Calrissian's perplexed query buzzed through a rotten comlink connection to the Millennium Falcon, filtering the ionic turbulence of Anoth.

"Ignore it," ordered Skywalker. "Head for that third fragment, mark bearing three-beta-zero." Kayla angled the cargo ship toward the stronghold and watched the opposing response of the flagship Benefactor.

"They're trying to head us off."

"Evasive maneuvers." The Falcon turned tail, then attempted to loop around the Star Cruiser. It was then that the renegade fleet emerged to block them in.

"Millennium Falcon you are ordered to respond," Lando barked.

"Who is flying that ship!"

"We're surrounded." Kayla sounded a trifle worried.

"Maintain radio silence," Luke stated flatly. He hadn't counted on the rebel fleet. Perhaps a suicide run would be the end to all of his problems. A dozen X-wing fighters poured forth from the Benefactor's maw. The Jedi stood and was about to head for the gun well when one of the starfighters exploded without cause. The squadron swarmed in confusion.

"That one," whispered Storm and she pointed to each X-wing in turn.

"Then you. And you." Each fighter exploded in turn, blinding flashes of chaos. Slowly, Luke Skywalker lowered himself back into the copilot's seat and gaped at the resplendent fireshow. It was an abomination of the Force. It was appalling to watch and yet, he could not shift his gaze. The Jedi Master was transfixed by the dark power of his student.

* * *

"They're not even firing!" An officer cried out.

Baron Calrissian stared in horror until the explosions ceased. The Millennium Falcon hung suspended, unscathed and unmoving.

"It can't be," he muttered. "It's just not possible." In the moment it took him to utter the words, the Star Cruiser Intrepid began to rip at its seams.

"Intrepid, begin evacuation..." The communication's officer trailed off as the Star Cruiser vaporized in a burst of light.

"What the..." The navigator interrupted Calrissian,

"Beginning calculations for lights peed jump! Any quadrant, any sector!" Star Cruiser Valiant was next to explode. Lando paced the bridge, unable to keep the panic from his voice.

"Wait. Wait! Send an emergency trans mission to Antilles! Now!"

"Aye, sir!" The Benefactor rocked as two more Star Cruisers met a fiery end.

"Calculations completed!"

"Transmission completed!" The officers shouted at once.

"Get us out of here!" Lando bellowed. The remaining fleet found safety as stars turned into starlines, and they were gone.

* * *

Luke could not mask his revulsion as he looked upon Kayla Storm. Such power over life and death...He was hypnotized by the complications. They were unstoppable. No amount of defense would be sufficient without the Force. Coruscant would fall. But it would be an eternal nine months, and only if he could keep a hold on his uncertain sanity. His father had known. Yes. Being one with the Force, his father had known from the start. And Ben. Resentment imbedded itself deep into his conscious thought.

"As I said, Commander Storm," he said softly, "mark bearing three-beta-zero."

"Yes, I see it," she told him. The Millennium Falcon arched through metallic waste and found the cavernous opening of the refuge for Jedi children. The hiss and clang of hydraulic landing gear were the only sounds as the stolen ship landed next to a New Republic shuttle. Wedge Antilles and his men slept unawares; heavy, unnatural sleep. The children waited. There was another hiss as a sealed airlock was broken and the landing ramp screeched its reluctance to lower to the deck. The man dressed in black who stood above them was a frightening sight. His hands came out from beneath the black robe and threw what appeared to be sparkling stardust over the twins. Jaina giggled, "Ooooooh!" and danced through the golden particles of light. Jacen screamed, "NO!" It was the

first word any had heard from him. The boy ran in terror as Kayla Storm approached to stand beside his uncle.

"There. Now you've frightened him," she grumbled, folding her arms. Luke shot the blast doors a cursory glance and they crashed downward to cut off any hope for the toddler's escape. Jacen threw himself to the ground and wailed.

"Oh, that's much better." Kayla rolled her eyes. Jaina gave her brother a stinging rebuke.

"No, Jacen! You stop it! You come here and listen to Uncle Luke!" Sadly, the boy picked himself up and returned. Kayla prodded the whimpering Jacen into their ship and stated,

"You'll have to keep him quiet somehow, if you want to keep him alive."

Luke nodded imperceptibly and crouched to gather Jaina into his arms. She was strong and independent like her mother and father. He held a special place in his heart for this child and could only hope his own daughter would be something like her. There was an affinity between the man and the girl. The neice clung tightly to Luke Skywalker, favorite uncle. He paused, suddenly feeling a shiver of cold scramble up his spine. Something was not right here. Something he had never sensed before lay deep within the fragmented planet.

"Time to go," Storm nudged, apparently oblivious to his perception. The Jedi straightened and Jaina leaned heavily against his leg, exhausted.

"There's somethng I have to see."

"What?" Kayla demanded, impatient. "We need to move on, Master."

"Stay with the children," he muttered distantly. "I won't be long."

In actuality, it did take quite some time to delve beyond the fortress of the Jedi.. The smooth steel corridors became layers of jagged rock. In the pitch darkness, he did not grope, but followed his sense ever downward. Never did he slip, nor lose foo ting on the steep slope of stone. Down, ever downward, as if into the pit of hell. He grinned softly to himself at the irony. Here was the chosen refuge for Jedi children; its purpose to protect the innocents from the corr uption of the Dark Side of the Force. And yet evil resided here with an intensity he had never experienc ed. Why had he not sensed it before in his explorations of this system? Why now, did Kayla Storm, supposed heiress to Palpatine's throne, miss this so completely? Because he had been nieve. Storm was a fool as well, a mere novice hopelessly misled by Palpatine's spirit. The slope leveled out and Luke half-jogged through the impenetrable dark. He slowed to wind his way through a tunnel lit with eternal fire. He grasped one of the torches along the wall and hurried on to the tunnel's end. Skywalker stared at the relief carved on the surface of an ancient vault. The face of his father; rather, his helmet. He traced the geometrical

lines with a gloved finger. A crude impression, of course, but the relief had to be at least tens of thousands of years old. The creatures who made this must have envisioned his father's coming to power. For a moment he stood in awe. As he looked closer, scribbled hieroglyphs told of worshippers sacrificing some tentacled creature to the night. The pictures conveyed an image of consuming the being's spirit and then, his actual form. Luke shuddered. Cannibals. He stepped back, sickened and intent on leaving, when the vault groaned. The Jedi froze, waiting until the echo died somewhere far above, and again touched the image of his father. The vault groaned again, louder this time, and the entrance opened wide for his inspection. Luke hesitated only briefly before entering, using his torch to illuminate his way. His footfalls caused a millennium's worth of dust to plume and swirl about his legs. The air was choking, stale. A small desk was positioned in the center of the modest chamber while the walls were lined with shelves of... Luke blinked hard.

"Books?"

He had only seen a handful in this computerized age. These also were tens of thousands of years old. Tentatively, he reached to extract one, but it crumbled into dust at his touch. He brushed his hands off and leaned close to study the titles written in script on the bindings. It was an unreadable, foreign writ. His vision blurred momentarily and he rubbed his stinging eyes. When he opened them once more, the titles were written in perfect Basic. The Jedi swallowed hard and read the titles silently. The Dark Side Compendium, Volume One--The Book of Anger, Volume Two--The Weakness of Inferiors, Volume Three--The Creation of Monsters. These were the teachings he had learned on Byss from the clone of Emperor Palpatine. There he had tasted Dark power in an effort to beat the tyrant at his own game. He played the game well, using the knowledge he discovered to sabotage Palpatine's attacks with the World Devastators, but ultimately he was nearly consumed and saved only by his sister's love. His sister who was about to be executed. Now was the possibility of continuing his study, for he was, after all, the Master.

Skywalker smiled sickly. He moved on to the other readings, much the same in character. Finally he came across an immense tome entitled The Teachings of the Sith. This was what he was compelled to discover. The art of becoming Lord Vader. The self-help book to utter damnation. He started to chuckle softly in spite of himself, reaching for this strangely more enduring text, but the laughter died away as his torchlight extinguished. Luke stiffened. Pitch had a strange way of multiplying terror by degrees of ten. He set the Sith teachings on the small desk and felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Jaw set, the Jedi called out,

"Whoever you are, I do not fear you!" He waited and listened to the silence, and the pounding of his heart in his ears. The evil was tangible; he could almost taste its rot. His hand found the hilt of his lightsaber which ignited in a snap-hiss and he whirled toward a wall vacant save a long mirrored glass. He stared confounded at the reflection. The evil came not from any outside source, perse, but from within. That is why he could not sense it before. Dagobah! His mind

screamed. Luke grasped the ancient tome to his chest and bolted from the terror he could not escape.

Perhaps an hour later, he carefully masked the deep shock and boarded the Millennium Falcon. He stopped for a moment, sensing the slumbering New Republic soldiers, Winter, and the infant boy. Luke snapped his fingers in the general direction of the shuttle and left to complete a hideous task. Wedge Antilles awoke to the roar of engines.

* * *

The fractured planet of Anoth hung suspended around its glowing, central core. It looked deceptively small as the Millennium Falcon escaped to a safe distance. Within, Jaina rested in her uncle's lap while Kayla Storm manned the controls.

"Uncle, where's Winter? Where's baby Anakin?" the child asked with a yawn. Luke gave Kayla a hardened look.

"I won't do this until they've escaped ." His apprentice scoffed.

"You are weak, Master. How do you expect to annihilate Coruscant with some twenty billion souls screaming in your ears?"

"We go see mom and dad?"

"They're probably being executed as we speak, darling," commented Storm with a dry smile. The toddler didn't understand.

"Quiet!" Luke snapped. He rubbed his niece's shoulder.

"You're sleepy , aren't you, Jaina?" The little girl shook her head, hardly able to keep her eyes open. Suddenly, they became wide as saucers and she pointed with excitement at what seemed to be a shooting star.

"Winter! Winter!" Luke reached over her to touch the copilot's controls.

"It's a New Republic shuttle. They're escaping the system."

"Do it now then," said Kayla. He squeezed Jaina.

"Go to your brother and get some sleep." Obediently, the child climbed down and toddled groggily into the hold. Anoth seemed to wait with impatience, almost relieved to meet an only slightly premature end. At least, this is what Luke Skywalker surmised. A refuge for the Force-sensitive, secluded from life and therefore weak in the universal power, the planet's utility was null. He was anxious to be rid of the evil tomes locked beneath the planet's surface. A millennia of knowledge would be

wiped from the face of existence. Only the Order of the Sith would survive. His gloved hands traced the intricate black cover and rested there momentarily, this is the knowledge he had begun to learn on Byss. This was the knowledge he would pass on to his students after he had mastered it himself. It was simply inevitable. He could not change what he was. After this mammoth step toward a darker realm, there would be no turning back for the Jedi Master, and no relief. None at all. Luke resolved that after the destruction of Coruscant and therefore the New Republic, he would decide what must be done with Kayla Storm--to be content as her companion or to kill her after their daughter's birth and take the seat of Emperor for himself. He would follow whatever destiny the Force prepared. In the vault, he had discovered himself as he truly was meant to be. A new knowledge of evil would be accumulated according to his own experience, and his own will. The teaching would be pure, but his student must never again obtain power greater than that of her teacher.

"Quit your ruminating and let's get on with it," Kayla grumbled. She could hear his thoughts, but perhaps as only a distant, incoherent mumble. Perhaps her power was on the wane, or perhaps his simply increased.

"You haven't mastered control, Kayla. This is foolish."

"I see. Can you explain why those warships burst mysteriously into flames?" Luke ground his teeth.

"Would you give me some peace?" The novice grinned and leaned over to kiss him.

"Never." Skywalker closed his eyes and shut out all thought, all feeling, every signature given by the life that surrounded him, all but Anoth. There would be no magic words or theatrical gesturing; only so much smokescreen when a Master dealt with the Force.

He merely envisioned the multiple planet to be three pieces of brittle clay. No, he amended. Believe it to be so. He manipulated the clay in his hands, feeling the crumbling edges, testing its weight. It was nothing really. He closed his fist and ground the fragments to dust. It had the same feeling as the crumbling texts. Yet the evil presence remained, and grew.

"My Lord Skywalker," Kayla whispered in awe. "Look at what you have done." The Millennium Falcon bucked as the shockwave reached them, followed by the smattering of fine, planetary debris. Luke's eyes remained shut against what had been so easily accomplished. He could not stand it.

The drugs were doing their work. She could no longer feel her bruised ribs or shattered legs, her head no longer screamed with incessant pounding, and Luke was far away now. She could not reach out to her twin and was relieved. There was something wicked about Luke Skywalker and Leia was struck with the same dread she experienced when fleeing Coruscant with Kayla Storm. That woman had him. After telling her what had happened, where she was, and very nearly who she was, Bel Iblis sat at her bedside and patted her hand sadly.

"Leia, Leia, I am sorry."

"I should be the one apologizing." Leia's voice was weak. "Things were so desperate. Luke was convinced we had to do something but I never thought..."

"As your friend, I understand completely. The Inner Council was, for the most part, out of control. We should have seen it coming. But as acting President, I cannot condone the events that took place after you were taken hostage. The theft of Haake's fleet..."

"Rufus Haake was an agent of Ambassador Furgan." Garm nodded. "As was Turchin. But that doesn't justify what you've done."

"I agree Wedge Antilles and my husband acted a bit rashly. Afterwards, Mon Mothma just wouldn't listen. We had to run." Leia covered her eyes as the pounding in her head resumed. "I'm tired, Garm." The President responded quietly.

"I know, dear. I know. Now listen. Despite everything, with cooperation from the Senate, I can pardon you and your friends if you realign yourselves with the New Republic. The Imperial Academy is launching an attack against Coruscant as we speak."

"Of course we're with you." Leia sounded haggard, tired of words. She ran her hands through her hair and felt a twinge of pain from her ribs. The drugs were wearing off. "I just didn't know what else to do."

"I had hoped your brother would have more sense." He paused as Leia trembled violently. "Are you in pain? Two-One-Bee!" As the humanoid Em-dee unit drifted close to her bedside, Leia winced as it produced a long hypodermic, and recalled an earlier, more agonizing experience. She had developed a deep hatred for needles.

"I don't think that 's necessary."

"It will help you rest," the droid assured her. Leia bit her bottom lip silently as the needle pierced her skin.

"Is Luke dead?" the President questioned. She responded in a strained whisper,

"He's with Kayla Storm."

"The Imperial Commander he helped escape." The sedative flowed through her veins and Leia closed her eyes in submission. Tears spilled down her cheeks. "I believe she has turned him to the Dark Side of the Force." Slowly, Garm Bel Iblis placed his left hand over his mouth, as if he could not believe her words.

"Oh, Leia."

"My brother may as well be dead." Her voice was strangely distant and she was too exhausted to keep this up. Bel Iblis took her limp hand and a moment slipped by. He said quietly,

"Leia, your children will be here soon." Perhaps she didn't hear. Her chest rose and fell in merciful sleep. He stood and turned with a jolt as Han Solo burst into the room. Two-One-Bee hovered protectively at Leia's bedside.

"Please, no further visitation."

"Right. Come here, Garm." Han reached for the President's sleeve and escorted him to the hallway where Chewbacca, Calrissian, and their two droids were gathered.

"Somebody stole my ship." The Baron Administrator seemed pallid. "I've lost most of the fleet." Bel Iblis blinked hard.

"You what?"

"The Millennium Falcon showed up at Anoth and wouldn't respond. She moved aggressively and the next thing I know, fighters and Star Cruisers are blowing up all over the place." The President folded his arms.

"I hardly think she has the capabilities to destroy an entire fleet, Baron."

"No. You see, they just blew up." Bel Iblis checked his chronometer and bit back an exasperated shout.

"Starfighters and Star Cruisers to not just blow up. The Imperial fleet will be coming out of hyperspace within the next few hours. We hardly have time to bicker about..."

"Sir, if I may," interjected See-Threeepio.

"I've never heard of a protocol droid interrupting someone, but go ahead," he grumbled.

Han replied, "It's a bad habit of his."

"Baron Calrissian is being quite objective in his report. This R2 unit and I were on board the Benefactor and witnessed the phenomena. The ships exploded spontaneously, sir."

"See?"

"I've also never heard of any kind of droid suffering from hallucinations." Solo shook his head.

"The droids' memories are perfect. Now look, my kids and Winter are still on that planet and I'd bet good credit Skywalker has my ship."

"With the witch Kayla Storm." Garm folded his hands and touched twin index fingers to his lips.

"You've gotta let us go back there with reinforcements," said Lando.

"You are both under inquiry. I cannot allow..."

"Then send Ackbar!" Han shouted.

"The Imperials are coming. And if Luke Skywalker can destroy ships with the blink of an eye, we have an even more dangerous enemy than Furgan. I will not put our defenses in that kind of jeopardy."

"Garm, you old bastard..." Solo curled his fists at his sides but clamped down on his tongue hard. The acting President was right. They certainly couldn't leave Coruscant unprotected with the Imperial fleet coming, and resources were spread thin enough without having to send more ships away on what could very well be a suicide mission. Han was helpless and didn't like the feeling one bit.

"Captain Solo!" It was a desperate, breathless shout. They all turned as Wedge Antilles and Mara Jade approached at a flat run. Solo gripped the man's shoulders, flickering with hope.

"Wedge! You got my kids, right?" Antilles turned two shades paler and Han felt the hope extinguish.

"Right?" Wedge panted,

"I fell asleep and woke when the Millennium Falcon took off. Winter came running with the baby saying the twins weren't in their beds. We searched everywhere with no luck. Then the planet started to shake! We had to get out! When we finally did and found the Smuggler's Guild..."

"Another was destroyed, obliterated," finished Jade. Han Solo shook his head and muttered under his breath,

"I'm going to kill him." Bel Iblis pointed a finger in the pirate's face.

"Captain Solo, you are under inquiry and will not be responsible for the killing of anyone! See-Threepio."

"Yes, Mister President?"

"You will relay the order to General Rieekan to engage the field generat or immediately. I don't care what kind of superweapon Skywalker has in store for us. That is the best planetary defense our technology has to offer. Alert Admiral Ackbar that the fleet will be defending against two enemies, not just the one as we thought ."

"Certainly, sir. Come along, Artoo." He waddled off with the astromech droid in tow.

"But, he's not using technology," Mara pointed out. "I may not be trained as a Jedi as yet, but I definitely felt something."

"Yeah," agreed Calrissian. "Seemed like, whatever it was, had no trouble getting through any of the Cruisers' defense shields." President Bel Iblis sighed deeply.

"I'm open to suggestions. Should we pack up and run like we had to thirty years ago? Should we allow ourselves to be hunted down and slaughtered like animals, as the old Jedi were? Or should we lower our defenses and let them kill us in our sleep? Gentlemen, for better or worse, it is time to make a stand. Otherwise, the concept of a New Republic really has been something of a bad joke. Please excuse me." He left them. Lando pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to make some sense of it.

"Vader had his chance over and over to kill his children, but he didn't. I can't believe Luke, even if he's changed somehow, would hurt yours, or Leia." Solo frowned and the ache in his chest was beginning to make him physically sick.

"Lando, he's got us trapped and he can do whatever he wants."

"It's just not like him," added Wedge. Mara scoffed quietly,

"Sure it is. Like father, like son. I'd be happy to help you bring down that pompous jerk in any way, Solo, after the way he lied to me. Do as I say, not as I do..." Han sounded defeated.

"I gotta bring Anakin to Leia before this happens. Mara, we'll discuss it later. If there is a later." He shook his head in shock, or maybe it was a realization of mortality, and walked off with less than the usual swagger.

"I don't know about you, Wedge, but I'd rather be on a ship that has half a chance of jumping into hyperspace," said Lando. Antilles nodded.

"I'm with you."

"Join us on the Scoundrel's Nest," offered Mara.

"We can sneak you out of here and get you into fighters before Admiral Ackbar can blink."

"Chewie?" The Wookiee groaned softly and trudged after his true friend.

* * *

It was decided to persuade Carida into their grasp before moving against the corrupted New Republic. No matter how powerfully the Dark Side of the Force moved in him, Luke, though bordering on insanity, had become more cautious of its use. Again, he felt engulfed. He felt the pressure of metric tonnage weighing on his mind. Never would he and Kayla Storm be able to keep their concentration against both Ackbar's fleet and Coruscant's planetary defenses. Today, the Empire would be swallowed whole in their service. As they approached the planet, swarms of TIE fighters spilled out of the unified Imperial Navy. An alien voice purred through the comlink,

"Millennium Falcon, drop your shields and prepare to be boarded." Kayla smiled and leaned toward the transmitter.

"By all means, Captain Saysithi. By all means." Skywalker rose to his feet.

"The children need to be well hid. I'll be joining you shortly."

Furgan was enraged, which was not out of the ordinary, but also perplexed by this visitor. The Imperial Ambassador of Carida severely reprimanded the alien captain for inviting Kayla Storm to the planet as a guest and had her immediately arrested. Presently, she strained against the hold of two white-armored guards and spat,

"I told you, I have been chosen as Emperor Palpatine's heiress! Release me at once!" The ambassador paced the floor while Saysithi looked on in silence.

"How can I trust this, Commander Storm? You have been with the Jedi Skywalker for some time now. You have intervened in the launch of our attack on Coruscant at a most critical moment. How can I trust this is not some rouse to extinguish the Empire?"

"If we had wanted to destroy you, we would have done so long before now!" she shouted. "I am Empress! Release me!" Ambassador Furgan gaffawed.

"You are just a girl. An impetuous, temper mental, and...rather beautiful girl." He paused to stroke her cheek and Kayla bit the flesh of his palm until she drew blood. Furgan howled in agony and rage, then struck her hard across the face. Kayla swooned, but the stormtroopers kept her steady. She closed her eyes and called upon the Force...

"Skywalker!" the ambassador snarled.

"Guards, take him!"

"That would not be wise, ambassador," Luke intoned. The chandalier trembled, shook, and finally crushed Furgan under a wreck of metal and crystal. Kayla opened her eyes, smiling at the mess. She looked to her Jedi Master for approval but he ignored her, and the event, completely. The stormtroopers backed away cautiously, afraid to seize him, afraid to run. Saysithi folded his trentacled arms across his chest and stared complacently upon the Dark Jedi. She heard his thoughts like spoken words. The prophecy. One will come from the desolate place...

"We have come to claim what is rightfully ours," Skywalker spoke evenly and lifted an ancient tome for Saysithi's inspection.

"And yours." The nonhuman was struck with awe.

"The Teachings of the Sith. These are the writings of my people before the fragmenting of Anoth. How did you come across it? How could you know?" The Jedi ignored the questions as easily as he had ignored Furgan's demise.

"You may join us, Grand Admiral Saysithi, or you may perish." Thorn's replacement collapsed to one knee in submission. His people had worshipped the Lords of the Sith as gods, even before they had truly come to exist, the Lord Darth Vader in particular. Here was his son...It was just as the old priest had envisioned, five hundred years ago.

"The messiah has come." Skywalker finally took notice of Kayla Storm by mimicking her words from a faint, unfamiliar past.

"'You will be glorified.' You were right, Kayla. Yes. Thank you." Storm ground her teeth in useless fury.

* * *

Leia awoke from frightened, half-remembered dreams. It had been a long time since she'd had nightmares about the destruction of Alderaan and her imprisonment aboard the first Death Star. The sense of fear seemed to be all around her, almost tangible through her own raw sensitivity to the Force. She was surprised to see her husband sitting at her bedside as Winter rocked quietly with Anakin sleeping in her arms. As the old space pirate kissed her, she recalled once accusing him of being a scoundrel, that she preferred "nice men". Since then, Han had mellowed and was a little of both. His kiss was desperate. She caught a glimpse of his emotions--anger, sadness, a sense of being powerless. This anguish was a side of him she had never seen. The usual sarcasm was nonexistent.. He whispered close,

"Hello, beautiful. It's been awhile."

"What happened to your eyes?" Leia reached to touch the swollen gaze and Han flinched instinctively. He kissed her hands.

"Turchin got a little testy with his interrogation droid. He's kind of out of a job though, but I guess we all are." He attempted a weak smile. "Sweetheart, I haven't told you enough. I love you. I mean, I really love you. If I ever took you for granted, and I know I have, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for this whole mess."

"I know." Leia glanced at Winter and the baby, then back to her husband. "Where are the twins? Han, what is wrong?" Tears welled in the pirate's eyes.

"I can't..." He embraced her, obstinate, and Leia demanded,

"Han, I need to know." Her husband leaned closer still and breathed the series of events in her ear. Leia covered her mouth in horror and tried to pull away. Solo held her fast and whispered until the story of death and destruction was completely told. She clung to him and wept. Her assistant Winter looked on, but kept her silence.

* * *

Just beyond Carida, the flagship Zephyr and her consolidated Imperial fleet prepared for the jump to lightspeed. Within her cavernous docking bay, Lord Luke Skywalker studied the fragile pages of The Teachings of the Sith, and plunged deeper into an evil realm of hate and insanity. He was disturbed only when Kayla Storm entered the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon and sat in the copilot's chair beside him.

"The children are still asleep," she stated.

"And that is how they will remain," Luke responded distantly, thumbing to the next page. "There's no need for them to see what we have planned."

"When will I be taught those teachings?"

"When I've mastered them myself. It is not easy to understand."

"Give them to me," she demanded, reaching for the tome. Skywalker closed it and rested the Sith teachings on his lap.

"I am the teacher, you are the learner. I would not want to lead you astray, my dear."

"I am your Empress. You will give that to me." The Jedi Master could not withhold his punitive laughter.

"You think you are so strong, Kayla. But compared to the Sith, compared to my father, you are really nothing. The Emperor lied to you. You were but a vehicle towards my own enlightenment."

"You are the liar," she hissed. Luke lapsed into his usual disregard of her and looked through the forward viewport at the alien waving to them from the deck.

"Ah, my friend is here." Grand Admiral Saysithi bowed low as Lord Skywalker and Kayla Storm emerged from the Falcon. His gaze locked on the heavy tome tucked under Skywalker's arm and he could not shake it free. The cannibal race he belonged to foresaw the rise of the Sith, and its rebirth in the son of the last, the son of Vader. His family had fled sacrifice when they refused to adhere to the Sith teachings. When Anoth fragmented shortly thereafter, his people perished. It was a good thing that they had. He assimilated in to human culture and spent the last thirty years of his existence in the service of his good friend Maxus Thorn. Now Thorn was dead, and the malevolent redeemer had finally come. He was at once compelled to him, and repulsed. Luke permitted a slight grin.

"Grand Admiral, you seem distracted." Saysithi quickly shook his head.

"My apologies, Lord Skywalker. The fleet has been consolidated and is about to make the jump to lightspeed."

"Very good." Skywalker stepped forward and offered him the black tome.

"Saysithi, my friend, I want you to keep this for me. It may not be safe with Kayla Storm aboard the Millennium Falcon. These are not teachings meant for the weaker sex."

"Weaker sex!" Kayla scoffed. "Skywalker, you had better start showing me some respect or..." She broke off furiously as Luke again ignored her.

"She has no control," he conspiratorially told the Grand Admiral. "She must never see this."

"I'll make sure of that, my lord." Saysithi's tentacles wrapped about the black leather, trembling. Quite suddenly, Skywalker gripped the sides of the alien's head and he dropped the tome in fright.

"My Lord Skywalker!" Luke bent close to his ear and breathed,

"You are mine. Our minds are one. Soon they will be set in motion." The Grand Admiral collapsed to his knees and lowered his gnarled forehead to the Jedi's boots.

"Our minds are one," he gasped. "Soon they will be set in motion."

"Go now," ordered Skywalker. "The Millennium Falcon will lead the attack. You will hear me, and know what to do."

"Yes..." the alien hissed. He gathered the teachings in his tentacled arms and skulked away. Lord Skywalker turned to meet Storm's hateful glare, and lifted an eyebrow.

"You waste your energies on such petty things. Come, your throne awaits."

* * *

In the mottled light of hyperspace, Luke Skywalker returned from the hold and paced the cockpit. He was anxious to get on with it, but not filled with anxiety. His niece and nephew were lulled into heavy sleep by only slight instrumentation of the Force, their tiny minds determined to save them from the events that had taken place, and those that were about to. The Dark Side of the Force was no longer troubling to Luke. It was a tool like any other. No, he amended his thoughts. The Dark Side is a narcotic. Now he understood why it was so difficult for his father to turn away from evil, why he had only done so at the end of his tortured existence. The spirit suffered withdrawal and would miss its revel in seductive power. Already he longed to pour over the pages of dark instruction, but it was better left with his servant aboard the flagship Zephyr; there it was safe from the jealous, prying eyes of his ambitious student. He stopped behind the woman in the captain's chair and caressed her shoulders. Kayla Storm tensed rigidly. Barely a word had passed between them since the taking of Carida's fleet. The Dark Jedi sensed she held a mixture of anticipation and dread for the obliteration of Coruscant, and therefore the fall of the New Republic. She was afraid of his own intent, that he would move to steal her destined office. The fear was not unfounded. As Skywalker had noted more than once, Kayla Storm showed great promise but had not yet mastered complete control of her powers. He was certainly better prepared to take Palpatine's throne. Luke reached to the developing fetus deep within her womb. Weeks had passed since the sordid evening on Sentinel Rock that cleared the path down which he now traveled. There were fingers, toes, a heart beating, even the most simplistic of brain functions. And gender. Daughter.

"We're here," Kayla announced and shut down the hyperdrive. Starlines returned to pinpricks. The Millennium Falcon was dwarfed by the Imperial war ships that accompanied her. Coruscant and its three moons lay just within sight, blackened by pollution and war.

"Do this quickly and we'll return to hyperspace before the fleet knows what's happened."

"You shouldn't be worrying about the fleet," Luke chastised. To surpass the horrendous carnage they had left at Anoth would be a simple task. He was more willing to accomplish it than his pupil.

"Look there!" she gasped and pointed to the strange armada that suddenly appeared directly behind the Imperial fleet, like a mirage fading in from nothingness. It was a rag-tag bunch, comprised of old, reconstructed Rebel Alliance and Imperial warships, Correllian Corvettes and gunships, even a few of the Old Republic Dreadnaughts. The pride of that fleet was a pirated Super Star Destroyer, quaintly renamed the Scoundrel's Nest. Luke folded his arms, studying it closely.

"Well, hello, Mara."

"Mara?"

"Only the Smuggler's Guild uses such a cloaking device." He closed his eyes and tightened his mental hold on Saysithi. You will defend us as we attack. Almost immediately, three of the Imperial Star Destroyers veered off to engage the Smuggler's Guild. A hodgepodge of Alliance and Imperial starfighters poured out of the Scoundrel's Nest in response, all clearly marked with the twisted Dragon insignia of the Guild. Satisfied with the Grand Admiral's performance, Luke turned his attention to the capitol planet. Ackbar's fleet rounded one of the small moons to flank the intruders, prodding them toward Coruscant. Swarms of opposing fighter squadrons poured out of their respective warships and engaged in viscous territorial combat. One of the Imperial Star Destroyers drifted too close to the planet and burst in a brief flash of light.

"The captain hadn't counted on their planetary shield," Luke whispered.

"Fools."

"Why are we just sitting here? We should help," said Kayla, grimacing from the sense of pain, fear, and death that quickly surrounded them. Disgusted, Skywalker shook his head.

"Those who are weak will die today. We have a separate task." The Millennium Falcon hung back, unheeded by the opposing forces, and they watched the quickening flashes of light. Under Luke's command, the outnumbered Imperial fleet held its own with tenacity.

"I've never seen a battle from far off like this," muttered Kayla. "It's both deadly, and beautiful."

"Yes," Luke agreed. He shifted in his seat. "The time has come." He closed his eyes. Again, no hocus-pocus. His arms did not unfold as he reached beyond the battle with his mind, and attuned to the multitude of lifeforms that dwelt on the planet Coruscant--the humans, the aliens, the creatures, the insects, even the smallest microbe existed harmoniously through the Force. And by the Force, they could cease that existence. The planet would be destroyed and the fleets would take care of themselves. Then no one would be left to rule but he and Kayla Storm. What would they lord over, in the end? Debris. Destinies would be completed. Luke chastised the incessant buzzing of his thoughts and cleared his head. He reached beyond the life to the planet itself. Unlike Anoth, his

perception of Coruscant was hard, weighty, impenetrable. It was probably due to the field generator, and the Jedi reminded himself that the planet's relation to the Force was just that, a matter of perception. As he tried to shift the image, the world became palpable, flesh-like, living and constantly churning. It was almost sentient. This would not do at all. The image would not shift further. There was a mental snap and he realized Saysithi had broken free of his control. The Imperial fleet began to make mistakes, began to make itself vulnerable to the attacks of the New Republic and the Smuggler's Guild. It was a purposeful loss. Skywalker remembered the book and knew he would be unable to reclaim it. The Grand Admiral had lost his mind and was about to direct a mass suicide. Star Destroyers dove head long into the planetary shield and exploded in brief bursts of light. His closed eyes tightened as he sought to concentrate on regaining control of the fleet, as well as destroying the immense planet, as well as keeping the twins in their unnatural slumber. His cognitive capacity was spread too thin. The Force may be infinite, but the human mind, no matter how twisted, most definitely was not. Yet he refused to delegate such duties to the woman he despised. Kayla inhaled sharply.

"We've been spotted."

"Pilot of the Millennium Falcon, you are ordered to identify yourself and state your intentions." The voice of Admiral Ackbar wheezed through the transmitter.

"Luke," she said, suddenly uncertain of her own devises,

"They're coming ." Tentatively, Skywalker's hand lifted and stretched toward the seething organic matter in his mind's eye. Coruscant trembled with violent severity.

* * *

The command center on the planet's surface bustled with activity. President Bel Iblis consulted with General Rieekan near a giant radar as Organa Solo's droids manned the communication's post. The Smuggler's Guild, Admiral Ackbar, and the field generator were working miracles. The battle was almost won.

"Oh, Princess Leia!" See-Threepio exclaimed. Rieekan and Bel Iblis turned as the ex-councilor entered the command center, mobilized by a disability chair. Her husband was at her side, followed by Chewbacca. Rieekan scowled.

"They shouldn't be allowed here." The President replied,

"I don't have time for political squabbling, General. Keep to your duties." He approached Leia and took her hand.

"Leia, you should be in bed. I'll have that Em-dee unit scrapped for letting you out." She gave him a hardened look.

"I have to know what's happening. We have a right."

"As does the rest of the planet. There will be a broadcast in a matter of hours."

"Please, Garm. Maybe I can help." The acting President looked at her entourage dubiously.

"These are the best seats in the house. Maybe I should be charging admission." He squeezed her hand.

"Come look." He gestured to the radar of blue and red dots.

"General Rieekan?" The general grumbled impolitely.

"We're red, they're blue. The blue dots are disappearing rapidly. Not much of a show, people."

"Why is everybody so glum?" asked Solo. "We're winning!"

"In a manner of speaking," Bel Iblis sighed. "Several hails have been sent out urging the Imperial's to surrender and Admiral Ackbar has given the m every opportunity to retreat. They keep coming, and attacking, and it appears they will not stop until they are gone." Leia stared at the vanishing blips in silence for a while, then muttered,

"Why?" Han scratched the back of his neck, actually trying to formulate an answer, when he caught a glimpse of something. He pointed to the edge of the radar.

"What's this white dot that keeps fading in and out, a mistake?" Rieekan stated,

"It's a ship that's not quite within our sensor range so we can't ID it. She's been sitting there for half an hour, watching." Organa Solo whispered distantly.

"That's Luke."

"Are you sure?" asked Garm. She nodded wordlessly. The President turned to General Rieekan.

"Increase the field generator's output to full power. See-Threepio, alert Admiral Ackbar that Skywalker has arrived and he is to intercept immediately."

"Of course, sir." In that instant, Emperor Palpatine's fortress felt as if it would tear at its seams. Cries of pain and fear were deafened by an upheaval of rock. Glass and steel crashed effortlessly on those gathered below. Han Solo scrambled out from under a control center and staggered into Chewbacca, squinting hard through the dust that choked

the air. The droids emerged, then Bel Iblis and Rieekan, bewildered. They coughed as the putrid atmosphere of Coruscant flooded the chamber. Frightened tones reverberated against what were left of the walls.

"The field generator is holding," noted Rieekan.

"Everything's going to be all right!" The Wookiee roared plaintively, having found Leia crumpled nearby, her disability chair half-buried in rubble. Han ran to her aid, heart frozen as he brushed dust from her porcelain white face.

"Come on, Leia. Don't let him do this to you!" She responded with movement and wrapped her arms about her husband's neck. Chewbacca righted the disability chair and Han gingerly lifted her into it. Rather than frightened or in pain, Leia seemed dazed. He gripped her hands.

"Leia?"

Her voice was light years away. "My brother comes."

* * *

The Jedi twins screamed as Luke's concentration shattered completely and so too their Force-induced sleep. The Imperial Super Star Destroyer Zephyr plunged into a Smuggler's Guild Dreadnaught and the two exploded in a fiery union. Saysithi found his end. The Teachings of the Sith were no more. The blood in Skywalker's veins turned to ice.

"Leia," he whispered. The flagship Vigilance broke away from the culminating battle and moved to intercept. Ackbar's voice crackled a second time.

"Identify and state your intentions."

"Do it now, Luke!" Kayla pressed.

"Han, Leia, and the infant are on that planet. They live." He opened his eyes and stared at the marble-sized globe. Admiral Ackbar's ship hung suspended between the cargo ship and Coruscant, poised to strike.

"Then they will die with the rest," hissed Storm. Her hand raised slightly toward the Vigilance.

"You." Luke gripped her wrist until he heard the crackling of bone. She gave a sharp cry and the invisible onslaught dropped immediately.

"Millennium Falcon, you must respond or we will open fire." He leaned over to activate the comlink.

"Flagship Vigilance, this is Luke Skywalker. I intend to surrender."

"Acknowledged. Initiating tractor beam. Prepare to be boarded." As the transmission ended, Kayla pulled her wrist away and snarled,

"So now you are the betrayer. You will die for this, Lord Skywalker!" Luke physically dragged her from the pilot's chair and slammed her into the back wall. The emerald eyes of his one time apprentice and lover opened wide in fear as he rested his hand around her neck. It was fragile, supple. He could crush it in an instant and all would be done. The children cried for him. The unborn stirred restlessly. Lord Skywalker leaned close to her ear and said in a low whisper,

"You will do as I say."

* * *

Sergeant Paulus and his following waited on Landing Platform Five for the traitor's arrival. Enough debris had been cleared away for the Millennium Falcon and its escort of X-wing class fighters to land. The earthquake was creating more havoc than originally estimated and Skywalker's timely appearance had Paulus' nerves screaming. He was tired of encountering this trickster and couldn't wait to get him locked away to rot. The Imperial fleet had been defeated, in any case, and that was enough to stir up morale. The fighter pilots disembarked, among them Lando Calrissian and Wedge Antilles, of all people. Innocent until proven guilty, he supposed. They waited with weapons raised until a dark robed figure strode down the Falcon's landing ramp. Paulus approached quickly to meet him and spoke just as quick, frisking the Jedi for weapons.

"Luke Skywalker, I am obliged to place you under arrest by order of President Bel Iblis and the Senate of the New Republic." The sergeant's hands groped at the black robe but caught hold of nothing but fabric, layers and layers of fabric. Skywalker's face was completely shadowed beneath the hood. Strangely molded phrases came from those shadows. Hypnotic tones.

"You will find I am unarmed."

"You should find a lightsaber," announced Calrissian. Skywalker did not move, or even shift his gaze, as Paulus continued the search. Again, he flatly stated,

"You will find I am unarmed." Finally, the sergeant gave up.

"Place your hands behind your head." The Jedi complied and Paulus clamped on a set of metal bindings. He spoke in Calrissian's direction.

"We'll put him in detainment until trial." As they left, Lando muttered to Antilles,

"Tell Han and Leia we've got him. I have a few questions for Jedi Skywalker."

"I'll have somebody give the Falcon a once over. Be careful." Wedge clapped his shoulder and started him off.

Lando paused only briefly to speak with Paulus before entering Skywalker's cell. The Jedi Knight sat motionless on the metal slab that was his cot, enshrouded in black. The Baron Administrator approached with caution, but he had to have answers.

"You're going to be locked away down here for a very long time, Skywalker," he began. Luke interjected quietly.

"If the Force can destroy starships and even entire planets, the turning of locks is a very simple matter." He raised his bound wrists before him; the metal bindings released and fell into his lap.

"I came only to visit a few, dear, old friends." Lando swallowed hard, already having misgivings for this confrontation. Yet the Jedi had been his friend and ally, hadn't he? There were so many unresolved issues.

"Luke, what the hell is the matter with you?" He caught a glimpse of a small smile in the shadows.

"Luke," the Jedi echoed. "That name sounds so distant from me now. Luke Skywalker. It's as if that identity...perishes." The Dark Lord rose and the bindings clattered to the floor. Calrissian stared, paralyzed, as the Jedi drew close. His voice became almost whimsical.

"Perhaps Vader would be more appropriate, don't you think?" Lando backpedaled for the door but Skywalker caught hold of his throat.

"Luke," he choked, "you can't do this!"

"Observe, friend," growled Skywalker. He waited until Lando fainted from lack of breath before releasing his iron grip. The Dark Lord slipped out of detainment and moved fluidly through the Emperor's fortress, seen by no one.

Chapter Fourteen

The space pirate held his wife closely in his arms while she held their son in hers. The tremor had frightened Anakin badly and he was just now beginning to settle down. The tremor had frightened all of them, but it could have been so much worse. At least Leia and the boy were all

right, and Winter received only superficial wounds. At least the world hadn't come to an end. He squeezed Leia tight and held murderous thoughts for her brother the Dark Lord. An enemy. The familiar black-robed figure entered into the tiny apartment with a suddenness that startled all of them. Leia took in a sharp breath. Han rose from the bed and felt his blood begin a low simmer. It was too bad the authorities had confiscated his blaster.

"I can't believe it," he sneered. "Look who decided to drop in, honey." Unruffled, Skywalker lowered his cowl and his hands folded calmly before him.

"I had to come," he said.

"What, planetary annihilation wasn't good enough for you? Had to come and make things a little more personal? I'll show you personal." Han's eyes shot daggers as he approached menacingly.

"What have you done with Jacen and Jaina, you bastard?"

"Don't do it, Han," warned Leia. Luke closed his eyes and waited for the attack to come. Inevitably, a fist pummeled into the left side of his jaw and sent him reeling into a wall. Han clutched at the robe and slammed him viciously against it for good measure. It wasn't nearly enough.

"I oughta kill you right now," he snarled. Leia shouted,

"Han, stop it!" Luke grinned only slightly. This destructive energy might have been pleasing had it not been directed at him. If Solo didn't give up the fight now, his old friend might soon lay on the floor in a smoldering corpse. It seemed Han began to understand this. After a long moment, he obeyed his wife and smoothed out the Jedi's cloak.

"You're a lucky kid." Skywalker responded shortly,

"You know I don't believe in luck." Han scowled and wagged a finger in Luke's face. He was about to say something more when Leia interrupted,

"If he'd planned on killing us, he'd have done so by now. I want a few moments with my brother in private." The smuggler glared hard at Luke whose gaze remained unshifting and cold.

"I'll take Anakin."

"No. We'll be fine," Leia said, as if to convince herself more than her husband.

"You're being a fool, Leia," he snapped. "Give me my son!"

"Han," she replied coolly, "I need him with me. It might help." Discouraged, frustrated, enraged, Han Solo shook his head and slapped Luke on the cheek.

"I'll be right outside, buddy. And a dozen guards will be here in half a minute."

"Then I have half a minute," Luke commented wryly. After a final stifling look, Han left brother and sister alone with his son. Luke removed his robe and draped it across the foot of Leia's bed. He touched his jaw tenderly, then seemed to decide that it was not worth the attention. Leia stared as he sat close to her and Anakin Solo. Her legs were useless and she knew he could simply pluck her son away without a struggle. Yet he did not. Han was right outside and a dozen guards would be there in half a minute. She fought down her fear and held Anakin tightly. The infant nuzzled her chest.

"I see you're doing better," Luke commented on her injuries.

"I see you're doing worse," Leia commented on his frame of mind.

"This must be my nephew," he grinned at the boy.

"I named him after our father."

"Welcome, Anakin." Luke touched the child's hand which curled tightly about his index finger. There was strength in this little one, resiliency.

"May I hold you?"

"No," Leia replied tersely. His look bore into her and he rose to his feet. The apartment lay in a state of ruin. He strode to the broken window and gazed across the horizon. The sun was setting in a gigantic, red fireball. Kayla Storm and the twins waited and probably without an ounce of patience. It was important to learn patience in times like these. She would simply have to persevere. He spoke softly, trying not to frighten his already frightened sister.

"I've come back for you, Leia, and for Anakin."

"We won't go," she replied through clenched teeth. "I don't know what that woman has done to you, Luke, but we can change it. You can turn away." The Dark Jedi grinned at her naiveté and shook his head.

"Leia, Leia. You simply don't know the power of the Dark Side." He paused, struck by Darth Vader's cliché. The grin broadened to a sick smile. He was indeed his father's son.

* * *

The already strained tolerance of Kayla Storm was reaching its end. She and the children cramped together in one of the hidden cargo holds beneath the starboard corridor. The air was stifling. Jaina and Jacen

clung to one another quietly, knowing even as toddlers that there would be no room for dispute. Although she wasn't so cruel as to kill children, no matter how annoying, idle threats did have their place. The twins set aside screaming and wailing for terrified silence, for if they uttered but a peep, very bad things might happen to them. All her life, Kayla Storm had been told what to do, how to act, what to be, how to live, by the male establishment. And here was yet another man who deemed himself worthy of ruining her life. She was supposed to be an Empress, damn it. This was no way to treat royalty, trapped in the dark, playing nursemaid with twin Jedi children. She loathed her own pregnancy, but accepted it as an opportunity to facilitate Skywalker's alliance. Now he thought he possessed her as she possessed him. Not so. She was Empress. Kayla was about to venture out of hiding when voices and footsteps echoed through the Millennium Falcon. Jacen whimpered and Storm dug her fingernails into his shoulderblade in silent warning. She reached for the lightsaber at her hip and remained very still.

"Where is the pilot of this ship?" an officer barked.

"Luke Skywalker was taken into custody half an hour ago."

"Sergeant!" a comlink crackled.

"Go ahead," he replied.

"Sergeant Paulus is reporting that Luke Skywalker has escaped detainment. Baron Calrissian was attacked." The officer sounded irritated.

"I want the fortress searched, he could be anywhere. Also, comb the Falcon for thermal detonators. This could be a terrorist ploy." The first underling replied,

"Yes, sir." and Kayla imagined an accompanying jaunty salute. She waited for the footsteps to retreat. Only a handful were left to search the cargo ship--four to be exact. Storm brought her feet underneath her in a crouch and held the lightsaber of Anakin Skywalker in both hands. Her thumb rested lightly on the activation stud.

* * *

Leia studied her brother closely while Anakin began a half-conscious fuss. Luke seemed absent, unable to keep his attention focused for more than moments at a time. She heard muffled voices outside the apartment. The guards had arrived but Han kept them at bay until she called, or screamed.

"You don't know what it feels like to cause so much destruction," Luke finally said as he stared at the wasteland of Coruscant. "To be responsible for so much death." It was awful. And awesome. He rested his

left hand on the windowsill but cut it badly on jagged glass. He didn't take notice.

"Luke." Leia winced at the blood and passed him a white cloth. He accepted it and wrapped his hand, gaze distant and unaware. "Why do you seem so lost?"

"Kayla Storm claims to be Empress but there are so many possibilities," Luke muttered. Soon I will take that place, or you, or the children when they're older. But imagine, the Empire will truly be rebuilt and it will be fantastic."

"You're crazy," she whispered. Luke pretended to ignore that but thought, True enough.

"I want you and the children to be with us."

"Because you need us to restore the Jedi Knighthood, or the Order of the Sith. Why else would you risk your life in coming here?" The Dark Lord gave her a twisted grin.

"I can destroy planets, sister. I assure you my life is not in any danger."

"You think you're some kind of god, don't you?" Luke pursed his lips.

"An interesting suggestion. Kayla fancied posing as the rain goddess Chala before the Tusken Raiders on Tatooine. I'm learning more and more, dear sister, that few things are impossible through the Force. Join me."

"I don't have any power, Luke. I only catch glimpses."

"The Dark Side of the Force can give you power."

"I don't want it." She shifted Anakin into her other arm. He was gearing up for another tirade. She spoke in Luke's direction.

"You've been here for almost fifteen minutes now. It seems to me there must be more to your little visit than sweeping us off with you. Why the hesitation?" Luke looked at his wrapped hand. The once bleached cloth was soaked and crimson.

"Why did you have to be here?" he breathed. "It could have all worked out so perfectly if you had just not been here."

"We won't come."

"So you've said." The infant began to wail.

"Oh, Anakin..." groaned Leia. Skywalker left the shattered window to sit near them, and stroked the baby's cheek with his unharmed,

artificial right hand. Anakin quieted almost immediately, cooed, and gave his uncle a wide, toothless grin. Leia smiled through her own tears.

"He sees the good in you, just as you saw the good in Darth Vader." The Jedi blinked and stared at his boots. Droplets of blood fell beside the left one. He felt the hate he clung to dwindle in the company of his sister and her son. No longer did it feed his bloody ambitions, but was replaced with despair. They loved him when he deserved rancor. They were too good. He had become no better than their father, even became worse for not even Vader had thought to pervert the Force as he had. So many had died at his unremorseful hands. He had betrayed those he had once held so dear. This evil could not be allowed to fester.

"I know what needs to be done." He gazed at them, mother and child, his eyes glassy and dead.

"For your sake as well as you family's." Leia cried,

"Luke, I forgive you of everything! Just please come back to us!" The Jedi's eyes became wet and he closed them, whispering,

"Thank you for the forgiveness, but it's too late."

"No, it's not. Luke, tell me what you're going to do." His blue eyes opened but averted shamefully.

"I was a fool to call myself Jedi Master. I wasn't ready. I was pushed..." Yes, pushed. Coerced by his father who had abandoned them so callously. Who is to say the elder Skywalker wouldn't relish yet another betrayal, even in death? Luke shook his head imperceptibly and muttered,

"It was my own fault, my own shortcomings."

"Luke." She gripped his hand to bring him back to the present. "Answer my question." His brow furrowed. Question? What? His mind felt clouded and muddled. It was difficult not to lose concentration. Many voices across the planet's surface cried out despairingly, accusingly. The pain and terror of others deafened his own thoughts. It was his own fault. To become a Lord of the Sith had changed him not into a god but a demon. But there was another. The fog cleared and Luke gazed upon his sister and nephew with a new, sharpened purpose.

"I have to kill her. Then the lightsaber will turn on myself." Leia gripped Anakin close to her chest, for a moment afraid he might rip the infant from her grasp. Again, he did not, but rose slowly to his feet. She hissed,

"Luke, you've lost your mind. You can't..." He laughed sharply, but only once.

"I've lost my soul. There's nothing left." Leia shook her head wordlessly, struck with grief. Her brother kissed her forehead and, not forgetting the guards that waited to seize him, slipped out through the broken glass.

* * *

Landing Platform Five was a tucked away place and traffic was nonexistent. There were no witnesses to hear the screams of four guards as they were heinously slain. No one to watch as Kayla Storm mechanically dragged the bodies from the Millennium Falcon and laid them all in a row. Steam rose from the corpses only slightly and the woman grimaced at her own sanguinary work. Luke would not be pleased but it was time to go now. Time to finish what had begun. She saw no need to come to this place, only a need to destroy it and the government it housed. She would do it as they left, since the great Lord Skywalker seemed wholly unable. If more Force-sensitives could be joined to their ranks, so much the better. If not, it was time to leave. Search teams were organizing somewhere within the Emperor's grand palace. Another few minutes, perhaps. She crouched behind the hatchway ramp as an air lock hissed open. Luke emerged, half-jogging, his left hand wrapped in a blood-stained rag. He stopped cold when he saw the murdered guards. Something had changed in him, Kayla decided. There was still darkness, but in turmoil. There was a wish for his own death. Luke Skywalker had fallen from the pure faith. Cautiously, she stepped out of hiding. Her Jedi Master nodded in the direction of the soldiers.

"I take it you had visitors."

"Yes." She grinned as he approached. "They searched the ship and found me." Wanly, Luke caressed her shoulders.

"I don't blame them." He kissed her. His eyes lifted to catch a glimpse of the escaping twins. Very good. They would be found soon enough.

"I'm glad we could continue this," she told him, too wrapped up in her own lust to notice anything else. "Your sister..."

"There's something more important we need to discuss." He gripped her hand with his right, the hand Darth Vader had severed on Bespin. She could not move her gaze from this unscathed, artificial version.

"Come, let me show you something."

"They're searching for you, Luke." Her emerald eyes flitted warily. "My Lord Skywalker, don't you dare turn against me. After all we've shared? " Her hand raised to strike him but he caught her wrist.

"I said come, beloved." Kayla Storm did not trust him, but escape now seemed improbable. Her escort tucked her hand across his arm and led her into the fortress.

Chapter Fifteen

The Emperor's throne room was dank and cold. It was part of the fortress that had been sealed off indefinitely. Even to those not sensitive to the Force, this place contained evil. Lighting had long been cut off and the only illumination streamed through three perpendicular windows surrounding the Emperor's throne. Kayla stared at it from the base of a grated stairway. At her side, Lord Skywalker studied her.

"Emperor Palpatine still reigns here," she breathed. "I feel his presence." Luke kept silent. Traces of the Emperor's life-force still lingered even years after his death, enjoying old stomping grounds. They were traces only, scents picked up by a hound. Again he was tacked back by this revelation as years before, he had been asked specifically to seek out any remnants of evil in this place. At that time, in his naiveté, he had found none. The Dark Side had opened his mind in ways he could not fathom. He watched her slowly ascend the flight of stairs but remained at its base.

"Palpatine has no power here," he finally assured her.

"Perhaps he doesn't," Kayla replied and took the throne. "But I do."

"How does it suit you, Empress?" It was the first time Luke had addressed her as such. So he had given up his foolish pride in order to serve her. Kayla smiled, delighted.

"Wonderfully."

"I'm sorry," he muttered. The Empress looked down at him.

"Why?" With resolution, Luke began to ascend, step by step, to the dais. He felt a sensation of rising from a deep ocean, struggling to reach above the murk.

"I bring you here to give you an ultimatum," he said. "I will not allow you to destroy the New Republic. I will not allow you to take your place as Empress. I will not allow you to raise our daughter as your heiress. You must turn away from the Dark Side." He knelt and took both of her frigid hands. "Or I'll be forced to take your life and then my own." Kayla Storm raised her left eyebrow but the rest of her expression remained fixed.

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

"I'm deadly serious," he responded. "And I know...it is not Light." She sighed his earlier teaching.

"There is Dark, there is Light, and mostly there is gray." Storm removed the bloody rag from his hand and examined the cut. There was a

gentle ripple in the Force as she traced the gash with her finger. With her touch, the wound healed but remained scarred. It was the second time she had come to his aid in such a manner. Luke stared at his hand and tried to carefully mask his amazement.

"You see that the Force can be used for purposes other than destruction, " he remarked.

"I see the Force as a tool to be used any way I wish," she corrected.

"Yet to you, I am purely evil." Luke shook his head. "Just incorrigible, opportunistic, a bit sick. I was worse."

"Why then, the ultimatum? You should kill me outright and get it over with." Skywalker was silent. He looked past her and through one of the giant windows. A fire raged uncontrollably several kilometers off. His doing. Streams of water attacked it from all directions but seemed to do no good. There were mixed feelings where Kayla Storm was concerned, all twisted and jumbled in their complexity. It was no wonder that she'd toyed with him from the start with her cute maneuverings, her wicked seduction. The conception of their daughter was the perfect lure. It was just no good. He gazed upon the object of his inner turmoil and was unable to answer.

"Palpatine was right," she decided softly. "I was to learn all I could before murdering you in your sleep. Upon this, all depends, he said. But I wanted you as my henchman."

"I will not be possessed," Luke said, almost to himself. Indeed, he had been consumed. The time was getting close. His heart began to thud wildly in his chest.

"Then he was right." They both rose and she continued.

"I wish it could be otherwise."

"Turn away from this," he implored. "Let go of your hate." Kayla smiled and touched his lips with one finger.

"I don't hate you, Luke. To be Empress is my birthright and not even you will block my path." Luke saw this to be true as her lightsaber ignited and hummed close, casting eerie blue shadows across his face.

* * *

The acting President was not a happy man. He paced the ruined office with great agitation and the duped Sergeant Paulus felt small and idiotic beneath the painful stare. He cowered a bit lower in his seat as Bel Iblis paused to give him another stinging rebuke for the umpteenth

time. Half a dozen mechanized office clerks buzzed through the room, trying to get at least the physical chaos under control. Paulus allowed himself to breathe a bit more deeply as Organa Solo and her husband were escorted into the office under guard. The chief of state would now shift gears.

"What is the meaning of this?" Organa Solo demanded. "We've done nothing wrong." Bel Iblis scowled and slowly said,

"You were visited by your brother and allowed him to escape."

"Allowed?" Leia returned the hard look and gestured to her useless legs. "I couldn't very well prevent him, could I?"

"He'd already left when I arrived with security," Solo lied. He glanced at his wife uneasily. It was only half a lie. Luke had departed when he entered the apartment, but they had been waiting outside for at least five minutes before that. The guards had received copious payments to keep their mouths shut about the entire matter, to which they parsimoniously agreed. Leia had wanted to speak with her brother privately and he at least had to give her that. Luke had left her physically unharmed but something he must have said shook Leia to her very core. She'd cried in his arms for a long time before the guards were ordered to bring them here, refusing to tell him anything, as usual. Han Solo was anxious for a little retribution.

"Four soldiers were found slain by lightsaber near the Millennium Falcon. Calrissian was found unconscious in Skywalker's cell, nearly strangled," Bel Iblis growled. "It was not wise for you to be alone with him, Leia." She leaned forward in the disability chair and gripped the armrests.

"Is Lando all right?"

"Yeah," came a husky reply. Han turned and Leia strained her neck to see Lando Calrissian, escorted by Mara Jade and two young toddlers. Jaina and Jacen squealed in delight and threw themselves at their parents to be covered with grateful kisses.

"They found me coming out of the infirmary," Lando rasped and massaged his tender throat. "I don't understand everything the kids tried to tell me, but it sounds like they had quite an adventure."

"Where Anakin?" Jaina demanded. "Where Winter?"

"I left Anakin with the droids for a few minutes so we could meet with Garm," Leia soothed. "Winter got hurt during the quake but she's being cared for. It's going to be fine."

"I'd hate to disagree with you," said Bel Iblis. He looked down at the frail woman and wondered how much more she could take. She looked small, like her children, seemingly dying from some terminal illness that ate away at her spirit. Although frustrated, he tried to soften his tone. "The search teams have been unable to find Skywalker or his companion."

Something within Han Solo seemed on the verge of explosion. He lowered Jacen to the ground.

"I wanna look for him."

"I can find him," said Mara. "I have some sensitivity to the Force. It could be used as a kind of remote detection." Han nodded at this and stepped closer to the acting President.

"Give me a search team and I'll guarantee Skywalker will be apprehended."

"Captain...Mister Solo, you are a civilian," began Paulus. "I don't think..."

"That's right, Paulus, you don't," stung Bel Iblis.

"Give Solo and Mara Jade anything they want. Skywalker must be found before there is any more carnage." The sergeant jumped to his feet and started to follow Calrissian, Solo, and Jade toward the door.

"Han," Garm added quietly, looking at the princess of Alderaan and the children who crowded her unfeeling lap. The smuggler paused in his exit. "If Skywalker is killed he cannot be held accountable for his actions. I want him alive." Han scowled.

"We'll see." Leia buried her face in Jaina's pale brown hair and wept silently.

* * *

They circled as the weapons crossed in a cascade of sparks.

"You know I'd rather die than give up my destiny," said Kayla through the beams of perpendicular light. "You'll have to kill me and your daughter. Are you prepared to live with that, my lord?"

"No. I am not." The green lightsaber whirled and thrust at the chest of his novice. She blocked the attacks with some effort, backpedaling from Luke's suicidal intensity. He kept her off-balance and she was never given a respite as was so often required during her training sessions. The practice was over and she was never given a chance to consciously call upon the dark power of the Force. That power would somehow have to come from within. The lightsabers locked for a moment, then there was a flurry of light and her weapon clattered uselessly down the stairs. Kayla took one more backwards step before feeling the cool, transparasteel window against her back Palpatine, help me.

"No one can help you now," Luke snapped, cruelly mimicking her own words . His gaze became piercing. "You're trapped. Turn away or I'll kill us both. I will kill us."

"You were always such a romantic, Luke." Abruptly, Kayla Storm somersaulted over Luke's head. He swung his laser blade at her but missed. The Empress laded agilely at the foot of the stair way and caught the lightsaber of Anakin Skywalker with an outstretched hand. To step away from the darkness was impossible but it could not be allowed to exist. He would not allow a new Empress or, in himself, Emperor. The threats would not stand idle. With an ever so slight gesture from his own hand, the one that had been lost, Luke reached forth and found Kayla's throat.

"NO!" was her choked scream. She heaved for breath but air was ripped from her lungs. Her windpipe constricted painfully as she clawed at the invisible vice. The bones in her neck cracked. Her temples pounded as blood vessels screamed for oxygen. The Empress fell to her knees and doubled over on the floor as the room faded into blackness. Another moment an she would die. A few more seconds, Luke decided grotesquely. It couldn't have been more simple. Yet there was one more task to be accomplished.

"Luke," the voice of Anakin Skywalker echoed hauntingly throughout the throne chamber. "You have stolen your father's hallmark. You have taken your father's place." Skywalker released the death drip and whirled toward the tall windows. Kayla slumped unconscious.

* * *

The prissy talkdroid was distressed beyond repair. The apartment of his mistress was horribly ruined, the human infant wailed incessantly for his mother, his glimmering gold paint was irrevocably tarnished with some kind of disgusting excrement, and all the astromech droid could do was sit and twitter humorously.

"I don't see what humor you're finding in any of this," he flustered. Artoo whistled sharply as Threepio lowered himself into a chair to rest his servo-drivers. Anakin Solo seemed to prefer this to the constant pacing and quieted a little.

"No, of course I'm not going to sit on the baby. It's a colloquialism," snapped See-Threepio. Princess Leia and her assistant entered into the apartment with Jaina and Jacen in tow. Winter's arm was propped by a sling and she had received superficial scrapes to her face.

"Artoo, Threepio, thank you for picking up the glass and looking after Anakin for me."

"Not at all, your highness." See-Threepio stood as Winter relieved him of sitting on the baby and continued, "Although I must say these kinds of activities do not coincide at all with my programming. It was a most...humbling experience." He meant humiliating, but something else in his programming would not allow him to be so rude. Artoo twittered the correction for him. "Hush now!"

"Are you sure you can handle this for awhile, Winter?" The nursemaid quietly nodded. Leia turned her gaze to face the droids.

"I need you two to come with me. I have to save Luke from himself and Han from doing something he might never forgive himself for."

"Oh dear," fretted the talkdroid. "Quite right. Come along. Artoo, we need to rescue Master Luke again."

"Mommy, let me help," said Jaina. "I wanna help Luke."

"No. Your uncle's...sick. I don't..." The princess of Alderaan hesitated, disliking the half-truth. "I don't want you to catch what he has. Promise me you'll stay here." The little girl pouted, but nodded compliance. Leia leaned over in her disability chair and kissed her twin toddlers. She glanced at Winter. "I'm not sure when I'll be back, or if I will. I want you to take the children if I don't return."

"I understand," the servant nodded again, frowning. Leia paused and gently said,

"I know you love them. I won't come between that."

"Take care, Leia." Winter gazed after them as they left and crouched to gather the twins in her arms.

* * *

Luke's expression became ashen as he stared at the two apparitions that stood reflected in the glass. One was the calm, serene figure of Anakin Skywalker, at peace with the Force. The other, Darth Vader, stood enshrouded in tumultuous darkness. Somehow they were the same man, yet more dissimilar than any two could hope to be. The young Dark Lord stared speechlessly upon both good and evil.

"My son," Vader began, "you are everything I'd ever hoped. One more strike and Kayla Storm dies. Then you can consume her power and take your place as Emperor. All along I knew this to be your destiny. All along I'd seen this, hoped for this, for my son. It is time."

"No," Luke breathed. This was the straw that would break his already tortured mind. "I don't intend to survive the next hour."

"My son." It was Anakin's turn to speak. "I warned you of the dangers and yet you did not take heed. Kayla Storm was to be converted, not destroyed." The Jedi rasped,

"You asked the impossible!" The elder Skywalker spoke prophetically, "Nothing is impossible..."

"...save that which I believe to be impossible," Luke finished angrily. "Yes. That's just fine!"

"Take arms against her now," coaxed Vader, "and finish the work." Luke gazed pleadingly at Anakin Skywalker.

"What are you doing here? Both of you?"

"We've come to help," they said in unison. It was comical, and infuriating. Luke raised his hands to his head and nearly screamed,

"Father, you give me nothing but grief!"

"I can assure you that was not my intention," said Vader.

"You yourself noted that your own identity was being consumed by the Dark Side and the teachings you uncovered on Anoth, hence your murderous and suicidal intentions," Anakin sighed. "I will not allow you to go on like this."

"Less a Dark Lord and more a raving maniac," his alter ego rumbled. "Control never was a strong point in you, young Skywalker." Such a cartoonish running commentary on his state of mind! This had to be some cruel trick of the imagination. Luke laughed out loud at the irony. The laughter was not normal, but diseased at his very soul. It came like bile burning its way up from the pit of his stomach. It would not cease until he looked down upon the crumpled woman below and the ill humor died hollowly.

"My father comes in two persons to decide my fate," he muttered under his breath, incredulous. "One says to kill Kayla Storm; the other, to redeem her. Anakin." He turned toward the good one. "How can we possibly be redeemed? I don't have any clue."

"By love."

"How ludicrous," Vader rasped. "Kill her now."

"My son redeemed me by love." Luke's true father smiled gently. Young Skywalker looked upon the enigmatic figure of Darth Vader and wondered at how alike they had become. The Teachings of the Sith had been destroyed in battle, but the knowledge of such evil would always be with him, though silent, and for as long as he chose to live. His prosthetic hand clenched into a fist. Vader.

"Are you saying this is all a twisted fairytale? If I only kiss her lips, the sleeping beauty will awake to be my happy bride?" He fought

down an other maniacal laugh. "Father, kissing those lips has landed me exactly in the position I am now.

You are a fool!" Vader's nod was imperceptible. Anakin let the remarks pass with infinite patience. He explained with saintly confidence,

"It is true your reckless affair has nearly destroyed you. It is true that all of your mistakes in judgment as of late are due to her influence, even from the very beginning. It is true that she has started you down a path of self-annihilation and your knowledge of the Sith may very well complete that path."

"The New Republic was corrupt..." Luke began to argue.

"Had Kayla Storm not entered your life, you would not have been so quick to leave it," Vader told him. "'A vehicle towards your own enlightenment.' She served her purpose in that, at least."

"Her purpose?" The troubled son fought his anger. "Are you saying you somehow arranged this?"

"All spirits and all living things make up what you know as the Force. If you believe that your destiny is predetermined, then yes, we had a hand in it," said Anakin.

"I do not believe this." The Jedi gave in to his exasperation and began to pace the floor. "Father, how could you do this to me?"

"It is a lesson you will not soon forget," purred Vader.

"I've learned nothing," Luke realized. "This whole thing was due to my failure. What can I learn from failure? I want to speak with Ben. Where is Ben?"

"It is Kenobi's wish that you deal directly with your father," Vader replied.

"Calm yourself, Luke," cooed Anakin. Luke stopped his pace and gave his good father a sullen look.

"Blast you. If you'll just give me a moment, I'll finish what I've started and we'll continue this debate in the afterlife." He began a slow descent to Kayla Storm, lightsaber ignited. Anakin Skywalker lifted his hands to him.

"Luke," he beseeched, "think back to a more innocent age." Luke paused and half-turned to look at them both. He could almost see the twisted, sardonic grin masked by Darth Vader's black helmet. The elder Lord of the Sith growled,

"I am so deeply moved. How absurd." This time, the Jedi decided to ignore him and closed his eyes. Remember.

It was hot, as usual. The blowing sand was choking, but the children could have cared less. Beru Lars looked upon her ward and the neighbor girl kindly as they played just outside the homestead, mentioned they would be eating in a few minutes, and turned back to the task of preparing a spicy bean stew. They didn't hear over the blustering wind. Young Luke leaped out from behind a corner, yanked hard on the girl's long braid, and bolted for the maintenance shed. Kayla squealed furiously and, toting a toy laser rifle, stalked carefully after him. The boy crouched lower behind Uncle Owen's new landspeeder, his smaller, not nearly as fancy, toy blaster gripped in both hands. Kayla was spoiled. It wasn't fair Maxamillian always bought her the neatest stuff. Being eight was sort of difficult when the only other person to play with was some ugly girl.

"Gotcha!" She jumped down from the landspeeder and fired the war toy in Luke's face with a synthesized Phhheeeew!

"That's not fair!" The boy complained. "I wasn't ready!"

"That's the point, stupid," she quipped. "You're not supposed to be ready. Now you gotta kiss me." Luke made a face and stood up.

"Let's play again. I know I'll beat you this time."

"No way. Pucker up, Skywalker." The boy yanked her braid a second time, ducked under the landspeeder and ran for his life.

"Skywalker, you dummy!" Kayla screamed after him. Young Luke risked a backward glance to see if she had given chase and plowed right into something hard, and noticeably shaggy. He fell backwards into the sand and squinted up at the obstacle. A Bantha. Actually, five of them. All mounted by sandpeople with their tattered leather and masks of bone. He screamed for his uncle who came running with a laser rifle that was definitely no toy.

"You leave him alone," he growled to the gathering. "Luke, get inside with Kayla. Move!" The boy scrambled to his feet and ran for the homestead, followed by his friend. They dashed inside and jabbered hysterically at Beru. Her normally complacent expression furrowed and she set aside the meal to watch her husband argue with the trespassers.

"Owen, I hope you don't do anything foolish," she muttered.

"Aren't sandpeople supposed to like..eat people?" Luke panted. Beru smiled.

"No, Luke. Normally, they keep to themselves. I wonder.. ." The argument apparently came to some sort of resolution and Owen Lars threw up his hands in exasperation. He waved to his wife and the children to come out. Luke and Kayla hung back behind his aunt, horrified by the ugly bone masks.

"Owen?" The moisture farmer shrugged.

"The shaman wants to perform some kind of rain dance here. I dunno what he's talking about. Sounds like a lot of hooley to me, but we could use the moisture." Beru nodded.

"All right. Should I bring them something to eat?" Luke rolled his eyes. Good old Beru, always being overly hospitable. And he thought there was going to be some excitement. Imagine if they had killed off his aunt and uncle and took him and Kayla into their tribe. What if they had Owen for supper instead of that gross bean stew? Kayla folded her arms across her chest.

"This is lame." The shaman of the tribe jumped down from his mount in one graceful movement and began to wag a curious looking staff over the sand. His companions began to hum ominously and Luke felt a shiver run up his spine. The shaman traced a humanoid figure in the sand and, as the intensity of the humming increased, quite suddenly impaled it with his staff. Kayla startled violently at Luke's side. He looked to his uncle to see that Owen Lars was staring dumbfounded at the sky. Clouds had formed. The shaman whirled and danced around the speared outline in a frenzy, whispering the same name again and again. Chala. He stared through the hideous mask at the human children and beckoned them to join in the ritual.

"C'mon," Kayla pressed. Luke shook his head and shrunk back next to his aunt. "Come on, Luke!" She tugged at his loose tunic but he shrugged away. "Boy, you really are stupid."

"Kayla, I don't think..." Beru said but trailed off as the girl bounced into the dancing. "Well, it probably won't do any harm." Owen just kept staring at the sky. The clouds rumbled.

"I'd better get the harvester ready..." In a climactic rush of fanatic emotion, the shaman scooped up a handful of sand and heaved it skyward. The heavens opened wide and it began to rain. Owen whooped. Beru laughed and Kayla squealed in delight. The boy just gawked as his friend tossed fists of sand into the air. But the shower was brief and soon the clouds dissipated, revealing again the hot suns of Tatooine. Owen looked down at the evaporating puddles around his boots.

"Damn," he grumbled. Young Skywalker approached cautiously as the shaman crouched before Kayla Storm.

"Chala dorri nach mouda," he rumbled lowly and stroked her cheek with the weird staff.

"Chala con dih bourra nouch."

"What did he say?" Kayla asked Owen excitedly. Luke's guardian scratched his chin.

"I'm not sure. I think it's some kind of blessing from their rain goddess. Imagine that." His expression turned sour and he waved his rifle. "This didn't do me a damn bit of good! Now get off my land!" With a disgruntled wave of his staff, the shaman climbed aboard the Bantha and

goaded his steed into motion. Owen and Beru Lars watched until they were a safe distance away.

"Come inside, Luke," said Owen. "Kayla, you need to head home." His guardians left them. Luke watched his friend carefully.

"That was weird." Kayla grinned from ear to ear. "They did that for us, Luke. For us." He pulled her braid and Kayla stole a childish kiss. The boy flushed in crimson rage and she ran. Perhaps the event was somewhat insignificant, unimportant to anyone but himself, but the mystical dance filled his memory with the hope of warmth in a normally callous people. The man grown gazed upon Anakin Skywalker with a nagging ache in his chest. The sense of being that young boy, of being Luke Skywalker, returned with intensity. He learned he was fallible. He felt Jaina was nearby and looked for her. It was only his imagination. But perhaps the girl was trying to reach out to his spirit. Luke closed his eyes and silently told her he would be all right. His mind shifted from a sensitivity to evil to a sensitivity to that which brought life.

"What would you have me do?" he managed to ask.

"Go to her," the elder responded, "and you will know what must be done."

"Destroy her," Vader rumbled impatiently. "Your friends will come to kill you regardless." Luke lifted his chin and cast the Dark Lord a triumphant look. "You lost a long time ago, Vader. Leave me."

"Of you, my son, I will always be a part." The Jedi stared at the apparition, then to Kayla Storm. Then that part would have to be vanquished. His father was right in that Han was on his way with revenge on his mind. He would have to work quickly. The specters disappeared as Luke jogged down the grated stairway. Kayla groaned, then coughed, as Luke gingerly turned her onto her back. Her neck was bruised from the attack, Luke realized and felt his heart plummet. There were many things he wished he could change, but could not. He helped Kayla sit and she gaped at his tears.

"I'm sorry," he spoke in a husky whisper and held her. It seemed the wind was knocked from Kayla's lungs once more. She pulled away and looked at him.

"I don't understand..."

"The Dark Side of the Force is gone from us." Luke's voice was lucid and held a tone of finality. "We are no longer lost."

"I don't understand," she repeated, and shook her head in pain and confusion. "I had a dream about the sandpeople, and our daughter..." Luke kissed her gently and hesitated, as if grasping onto a final resolve.

"We can have this family." Kayla eyed him warily and rose to her feet. Luke Skywalker had nearly murdered her and now came a proposition? The future she had been intent on completing seemed insignificant and her

thoughts scattered like autumn leaves as she tried to sort the events in her mind. The unborn was conceived in evil through her dark manipulation. Luke reached out to touch her cheek but retreated as Kayla flinched away.

"I can't stay here." She stepped away a few paces, needing distance, time that was not allowed. It was suffocating. It was impossible. Luke gave her the space, knowing he would not be able to fight it.

"What will you do?" Kayla shook her head absently.

"I don't know." The Jedi turned only slightly to listen. They were coming. Close now.

"Kayla, I want you to promise me something. I want you to set aside the Force and never use it again. You are strongly inclined toward the Dark Side and in the end, it may destroy you." She looked at him brazenly.

"I can't make promises, Skywalker. Not at this point." He approached and rested his hands on her shoulders, speaking in a quiet tone.

"I'm sorry I failed you." Her emerald eyes smoldered but Kayla would not respond with apologies.

"Good-bye, Luke." As she moved to leave, Luke's grip on her shoulders tightened and he channeled all of his desperate emotion into one final, passionate kiss. It was an impulsive act completely unbecoming of a Jedi Knight, but truly, he did love her, even when she did not. And he loved her despite all the pain.

"Please stay," he whispered. Stunned, Kayla just stared at him.

* * *

They were gathered together. Han Solo looked back at the dozen soldiers, then to the Wookiee Chewbacca, Mara Jade, and Lando Calrissian who stood on either side of him. Whether or not they were all believers in the Force mattered not a whit. The son of Vader was in that throne chamber making plans to resurrect the Empire. Friend or no, Skywalker had to be stopped before he caused any more damage to Coruscant, to the New Republic, to his children, and to Leia. Mara had promised to be, in a sense, their radar. And to use the Force to whatever advantage her limited abilities could offer, so long as Lord Skywalker was brought down.

"Remember what I told you," Han reiterated. "Don't take any chances. Skywalker could kill us all just like that." That was enunciated

with a fingersnap. He and a few others turned in surprise as Artoo and Threepio rounded a corner.

"Might we be of some assistance, Captain Solo?" inquired the prissy talkdroid. Han shot Chewbacca a skeptical glance.

"Great." He scowled as the droids were followed by his crippled wife.

"You always said short help was better than none at all," Leia grinned.

"Not you!" He barked and turned on See-Threepio. "What the hell are you thinking, bringing her here?"

"I-I-I...." the droid stuttered in response. Solo pointed to the princess in the disability chair.

"Yes, See-Threepio, there is some way you can be of assistance. Get her out of here!"

"Right away, Captain Solo."

"Wait," she commanded and glared at her husband the smuggler. "See-Threepio is my protocol droid, just as Winter is my assistant. You have no right to order them around." Han gritted his teeth.

"Leia, get out of here." Leia folded her arms.

"You need my help." The smuggler laughed bitterly.

"What?"

"You need me to make sure you don't kill my brother."

"Princess, our weapons are set for stun..." offered Paulus.

"Stay out of this!" snapped Han. He crouched down to his wife's level.

"Sweetheart, I almost lost you once..."

"It's not going to happen again," Leia assured him. "Please, Han. I know I can talk him out of whatever it is he's going to do." Solo frowned sullenly, quiet.

"Han." Calrissian was messing with the door's control panel. "I need Artoo to crack this security code. I've never seen anything like it."

"I won't allow you to use him unless you let me help," she stated.

"Not like we really have a choice, Solo," muttered Jade. Han rose to his feet and growled, "You drive a hard bargain, your holiness. Hook

on up, Artoo." Leia nodded and the squat droid whistled his compliance. He trundled close to the door and stretched out an appendage meant for plugging into computer outlets. Immediately he screamed as torrents of electricity cascaded over his metal hull.

"Not again!" See-Threepio exclaimed. "Oh, Artoo! Pull free!" The R2 unit shrieked hysterically until his servomotors finally complied by jettisoning him across the hall. The poor mechanical emitted a plaintive whimper before toppling over in a cloud of smoke. Mara brushed a long lock of auburn hair from her eyes.

"They just don't make R2's like they used to."

"Oh dear," sighed Threepio.

"It is a computer outlet." Lando double-checked and frowned at Solo. "Unless it's an added safeguard."

"Go figure." Han scratched his head. "All right. We're gonna have to blast through this thing." They stepped aside and Solo couldn't shake the feeling of escorting his wife into a deathtrap.

* * *

Kayla gazed into his cool, love-torn blue eyes and found the words to speak.

"I look at you and I can't forget what I've done." Luke shook his head.

"We've both done horrible things. It doesn't matter anymore, Kayla. All that matters is that we've turned away." She touched the tear on his cheek and felt her own wet her face.

"I have to go." Lasers seared through the ancient metal and the doors burst open with a resounding crash. Kayla Storm startled violently but Luke would not release his hold.

"Now it's too late," she gasped. "Now, you've killed me."

"Be calm," he whispered sternly. "These are my friends. If we could only explain..."

"How do you explain the unexplainable!" She cried and ripped free of his embrace.

"Be at peace," he told her. "Don't do anything to provoke them." And yet, the former Imperial Commander brimmed with nervous energy. Skywalker took a deep breath and turned slowly through the acridic smoke

to face the friends that had come to kill them. Mara Jade placed her hands on her hips and snipped,

"Well, Mister Jedi, looks like this Imperial dame really has you by the..."

"Luke..." He saw Leia and closed his eyes to reach out with a message of peace. She started forward but Chewbacca promptly ripped out the power supply and pushed her disability chair out of the way.

"You've got five seconds to surrender, kid!" Solo barked, but the heavy blaster in his hand shook. Luke set aside the intensity of Kayla Storm and studied the group objectively. Not so different from his companion. Anger and fear were barely controlled in all of them save Leia. Anger at him. Fear of the Force.

"I'm sure we can settle this peacefully," Luke began. Jade sharply inhaled.

"Something's happening..."

"Shut up and surrender!" Han shouted. The Wookiee hefted his bowcaster. The Jedi opened his mouth to comply but caught a glimpse of movement on the edge of his field of vision. He whirled toward Kayla Storm.

"Don't!" "Han!" Leia screamed. The lightsaber of Anakin Skywalker took flight for Storm's outstretched hand in a rush of air. Immediately, Solo's blaster fired twice in reflex. Kayla shrieked as the lasers met a deadly mark and Luke caught her in his arms as she fell. He lowered her gently to the ground and cradled her head in his hands. She gripped his tunic and said with agonizing pain,

"I named her, Luke. I named her Chala." Luke nodded and stroked her dark hair, looking upon her in pained silence. The goddess' namesake would never see the light of day. In this moment of shock, the guard kept their distance. She finally spoke again, weaker.

"I am sorry."

"I forgive because I love you," he whispered. Luke cupped her cheek with his left hand, the hand she had healed with such ease. He wished he could do the same. Maybe there was time. Maybe he could alter destiny. "Kayla, it will be all right." An almost wistful smile passed her lips.

"Yes," she breathed. "There is no death; there is the Force." Her emerald eyes closed before she was swept into the tide. There is no death; there is the Force, Luke repeated to himself. The body did not vanish as Obi-wan and Master Yoda's had, but then, they had been prepared for death. Or perhaps Kayla's turn from the Dark Side was incomplete. He touched her lower abdomen where his tiny daughter rested. Good-bye, Chala. The fetus stirred, her heartbeat pounding frantically from a lack of oxygen. Luke's stomach clenched and he pulled his hand away, refusing to witness both deaths. Numbing grief washed over him and he barely felt

his wrists clamped into bonds behind his back, barely heard the stinging remark Calrissian had for Solo. Something about weapons being set for stun. Han shouted that it was set for stun. It must have malfunctioned and it wasn't his fault, of course. The Wookiee howled. Mara scoffed. Leia was silently horrified. So that was it. Luke Skywalker was jerked to his feet and faced his long-time pirate friend with grim resolution. The Dark Side was gone from him and so was Kayla Storm, and his child. Han would never realize the depth of this part he was destined to play. Perhaps that was for the better. Lando tried to restrain him as he approached the Jedi.

"Easy, Han. It's over now." Han shoved a finger at Luke's face.

"You have a lot of explaining to do, you low-down, dirty, rotten..."

"Yes," Luke interrupted quietly. "I will be held accountable. Kayla Storm will not." Their eyes met and the frown that creased Han Solo's countenance became more deeply etched. Luke ignored the comforting presence of his sister as she moved the chair closer and touched his elbow tentatively. He tilted his head and felt it happen. Chala, the innocent, his unborn daughter, dissipated into the binding energy that was like the air around them. He breathed that air so intrinsic to life and was taken away without struggle.

Epilogue

The biosphere was constructed as part of Luke Skywalker's restitution for his crimes against the New Republic and the planet of Coruscant. It housed merely one eighth of the population while the rest suffered through the harsh environment without. The fortress of Emperor Palpatine had been demolished to rid them of the terrible haunts that resided there and in the imagination. Now stood tremendous, white buildings with large open windows, and courtyards with gardens to give the filtered air a sweet scent. Leia Organa Solo leaned heavily on her cane and looked at Chewbacca, her husband, the twins, and her two-year old son perched atop Han's shoulders.

"Ready?"

"Yeah." Han nodded shortly. "Yeah, it's been too long." Leia looked into the courtyard where her brother sat. A faint image stood before him and the two seemed to be engaged in deep conversation. She smiled a bit. It was about time Ben Kenobi showed up. Just like Security, never around when you really needed him.

"What is it?" Han asked, unable to see the ghost.

"Just wait here a minute," she told him, and began a slow amble toward the Jedi. Ben smiled kindly at her and vanished. Luke rose from

the marble bench. The black robe had been shed and his face was shaved clean. He wore a casual white tunic and brown pants, looking somehow lighter. Here, there was no need for automatic entries. In his painstaking design and construction of this place, Luke thought it important that doors remained open. In this second attempt at self-rule, all things must remain open. She greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and they sat.

"Free at last?" she asked. Luke grinned softly.

"As of half an hour ago. Two years never seemed so long but this..." He gestured to the courtyard, the building, the biosphere at large. "This helped pass the time when I was not in meditation."

"It seemed the just thing to have you do, under the circumstances. Do you feel you've made amends?"

"I'll never feel that," Luke responded immediately, then looked down at his folded hands. "I never will."

"I guess I'm not altogether unhappy to hear that from you." Leia hesitated for half a moment, then plunged forward.

"I saw Obi-wan." His gaze lifted and the Jedi studied her carefully.

"You've come to see if I'd truly turned from the Dark Side. I have, Leia. You have to believe me."

"I know." She touched the smoothness of his face. "Well, now I know." They embraced. "Right now I'm not more certain about anything else." Leia continued, "Luke, I wanted to bring my family together before I start running around with my head cut off again. Garm has appointed me as his Minister of State." Luke proudly held her at arm's length.

"He has!"

"Oh! Garm'll keep her busy, all right. But I know she wouldn't be happy doing anything else." They both looked at the Wookiee, Han Solo, and his three children. He lowered Anakin to the ground and the boy clutched at his mother's long skirt, giving Skywalker a wary look. Meanwhile, Jaina hopped onto her uncle's lap while Jacen tried to climb on his shoulders, only half succeeding.

"Anakin, this is your uncle Luke," Leia introduced.

"Bad man," the toddler quipped. "You scared mommy." They all gaped. Jacen and Jaina paused in mid-scramble to eye their uncle skeptically.

"How can he remember?" Leia questioned, stunned. "Surely the twins would remember more clearly. And Jacen was so upset..."

"He's quite strong with the Force," Luke commented and reached over to tousle the boy's dark hair. "The twins have always had each other

while Anakin was, in a sense, alone. Maybe it was harder on him, with the Dark Side so widespread at that time." Anakin whined and hid behind Leia.

"Anakin..." she warned.

"It's all right," said her twin. He leaned back and whispered to the boy. "I'm not such a bad man anymore." Anakin seemed to accept this and darted off into the gardens, followed by Jaina and Jacen who overtook him quickly, lost in the flowers.

"Hey!" Han shouted with no response. "I'd better go get Anakin before he eats somethin'."

"Allow me." Leia snatched up her cane and stood. "You need to talk and I need the exercise. Excuse me." They watched her go. Leia's limping gait remained dignified. There was always something about the former princess that remained dignified, even in the thick of things, and especially now.

"So whatever happened with Mon Mothma?" Luke asked. Chewbacca began to softly chortle. Han smirked wryly.

"Well, in light of all the political crap she pulled, the Senate has her doing a little community service. Shoveling Bantha excrement." Skywalker's face twisted in disgust.

"Ohhh. I think I got the better deal." Han shoved his hands into his pockets and glared at his boots.

"Winter quit. Leia's got me playing househusband most of the time. Can you believe that? It's gonna be hell with her and Bel Iblis gone for the next five months. Damn campaign."

"I think you'll get by." Luke grinned slightly and watched a small flock of birds soar overhead.

"The zoologist must have arrived with our wildlife." Han kept glaring at his boots. "Huh." Two years. Two long, blasted years since Luke's arrest and the death of Kayla Storm. Not a word had passed between them in that time and was this all he could think to say? The Senate had been relatively forgiving of the Jedi as all of the circumstances of his corruption were appraised. It was Han's own ego that had prevented apologies and he knew it. But parenthood was a humbling experience with twin four-year-olds and a toddler. No more swashbuckling for this pirate; his ankles were firmly chained to the ground. He sat on the bench and enjoyed a little humility.

"I'm sorry about the girl. It was my fault." Somberly, Luke examined the thick scar on the palm of his left hand. Kayla Storm possessed the power to heal, yet in the time since her passing, the pain of her death and the death of his daughter still lingered. Ben was sure it would fade with more time, but perhaps she would never leave him completely. His life seemed a discovery of losses and more losses.

"It was meant to be," he said finally. "Kayla Storm had the courage to face the inevitable." Han scratched the back of his neck.

"You know I don't buy all that destiny stuff. I should've checked my blaster. I shouldn't have fired in the first place. Luke, it's my fault."

"You're not to blame!" Luke blurted, then said in a much quieter tone, "There is no blame."

"Yeah, well, I feel like a real jerk," Han continued, avoiding Luke's gaze. "I hated you. I've never hated anybody like that. Jabba was nuts and Vader was terrible but...I just don't get what happened."

"I was becoming like Vader," Luke explained. "You were right to try and put a stop to it but why and how are useless questions. The important thing is, we turned away from the Dark Side." Han frowned deeply.

"And I killed her. I think I should've been the one put in detainment."

"Han, just forget it. I really don't want to talk about this."

"It's been nagging at me, kid." Solo leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "I'm just sorry, that's all."

"So am I." Skywalker looked at him for a long moment. He had forgiven the old pirate some time ago for an act that was insignificant compared to his own sins. One death compared to the deaths of thousands. Still, the thousands were faceless, nameless individuals, and the face and name of Kayla Storm haunted his dreams at night, along with the imagined specters of his unborn Chala. Forgiveness had been a hard thing but the apology made it seem easier. Finding some mercy for himself was the more difficult task.

"I really am."

"Ya know, that Mara Jade has shown more than a passing interest in you. Maybe..."

"Mara Jade wanted to kill me," Luke interjected. "Why is it all the women in this galaxy want to do me in?"

"I dunno. Maybe it's the haircut. Lord knows that beard didn't help matters." Skywalker grinned in spite of himself.

"Right. I'm sure that's it, Han ." The pirate sighed abysmally and crossed his ankle over his left knee, leaning back. There was a definite shift in his sense, and Luke thought the sigh an overblown exaggeration of an upcoming scheme. He waited until, at last, it came.

"Ya know," the smuggler said in mock despondency, "Leia told me last night that all this death and destruction is just part of our nature

as men." The younger man pursed his lips. "Sounds to me like a political agenda.

Does she think there's any hope?" Han scoffed.

"Says we're trainable. If Leia is ever elected President, we're both gonna be in deep trouble."

"Han, ol' buddy, we've been in deep trouble ever since we met her," Luke quipped.

"Sure, but she's already got me on a leash. I'm just trying to look out for your best interest..."

"...because I can't seem to look after myself. Thanks, Han." Luke smiled and Han clapped him on the back good-naturedly. It felt good to banter back and forth with this old friend. It lifted his spirits and, for the first time in years, he felt like the young farmboy on the desert planet Tatooine. He decided to retain that part of himself, nurture a little bit of humor that so easily escaped him. Despite this, despite the dangers the Force sometimes posed to his soul, the numerous journeys he had undergone that resulted in pain and death, loss and victory, Luke also concluded that to leave his former life behind had been right. They silently watched Leia recline in the sweet flowerbeds as the children played. Chala and her mother lived in them and around them through the Force. For the citizens of the New Republic, for the inhabitants of Coruscant, but most especially for the Jedi Luke Skywalker, this was a place of rebirth.