

STAR WARS

Light and Shadow(Tales of the Jedi Fiction)

by Paul Danner

"The Jedi who fall are the most dangerous of all." - line from a children's rhyme

Dray watched the bright red star disappear into the darkness of the horizon. His thoughts were a jumbled mass, and as the sun vanished so did his hope of untangling those chaotic feelings... It was always worse at night, when he had nothing to do but stare up at the endless expanse of black sky and consider his plight.

He had come to this world at the edge of the Galactic Frontier to try and salvage his very soul. The Republic's Astrogation Survey Team had yet to explore the planet, so it had no designation. Since he made the discovery, Dray figured he should also give his new home a name... He called it Vigil.

At first, the verdant forest planet seemed like a perfect place for introspection and healing. However, its pastoral beauty only caused Dray more pain as he came to a terrible realization. The idyllic serenity of the environment served as a daily reminder that such tranquillity would never again be his... In the past, Dray had been the master of his emotions, but peace was now merely a fleeting dream.

He fled civilized space in order to escape his troubles. But there was never any escape, no matter where he went... Not even on Vigil.

Dray often contemplated leaving, but to go where? He would merely be hunted down as he was before, and Dray was tired of running. So he remained on the planet - both his paradise and perdition....

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He stretched out a tentative hand, like an infant reaching for its mother. Almost immediately he experienced the tingling sensation of the Force surging around his fingertips. A small chill touched the base of his spine with the knowing caress of an old lover.

Dray sighed and rested himself in the small clearing under a canopy of wide-leaf arcosia trees. The delicately sweet smell of the foliage drifted through his nostrils and he drank in the aroma.

Sitting cross-legged with his hands folded across his lap, Dray closed his eyes. The scent of arcusia swept into his lungs. He quieted himself down until all that remained was the sound of his own breath.

Dray opened himself up to the harmony of nature... The shrill calls of the prismwings taking flight conjured up a breathtaking image of the brightly colored birds streaking a rainbow through the sky. He concentrated on distinguishing between the soft hoots of the other avians, the snuffling cries resounding from a hundred species of animals, and the tinny warbles of the bewildering array of insects.

His breathing became slower, more exact, falling into an almost lulling rhythm. Dray tried to remember the meditative exercises taught to him by his Master, Ven-Mah Tyrrahl. He had not been able to call upon them in a very long time.

Since...

A sharp pain nearly cut through his concentration, twisting like a vibroblade in his gut.

He would never forget that day.

His meditation had come to an abrupt end when Yeres Threem burst into the botanical garden. The Vultan Jedi adept was demanding answers and Dray had none to give his friend.

Dray's face twitched as he relived the awful moment.

Threem was beyond reason, attempting to kill Dray, but that hardly mattered. Threem knew the truth and therefore had to die.

For what? a familiar voice demanded to know. Dray could not identify it, so for the moment he ignored it.

Dray could still hear the clash of their lightsabers, feel the haft of his weapon vibrate in his hand, smell the horrid cauterization of flesh.

Then he was standing over the body of one of his closest friends. Dray could still see the terrible, empty look on the Vultan's face. Those dark eyes like dull transparisteel accusing Dray of betrayal long after Threem had stopped breathing.

It was the first Jedi that Dray had killed. It would not be the last...

Other memories began to flood his mind, threatening to disrupt his contemplation. Dray took a cleansing breath, let go his focus, cleared his thoughts.

He tried again and suddenly heard the words of his Master echoing through his head.

Try and you will always fail. Success is not a goal. It is a conscious decision.

Dray increased his concentration.

The characteristic sounds of his adopted planet fell away as he searched for something else. Sweat beaded on his forehead, matting his hair, and dripping down his back in icy rivulets. He released his awareness of the physical body and grasped for something greater.

For a moment Dray feared the ability was lost to him... No... Wait.

There.

He heard it, hushed at first but growing ever stronger. The heartbeat of his new home... The resonant geothermal pulse that warmed the cold rock.

Dray slowly timed his own heartbeat to Vigil's, and they became as one. The crude vessel of the body could no longer contain his spirit. Dray did not fully abandon his physical form, but embraced it into the whole of his being and moved beyond. Into nature. He was the rocks, the trees, the animals, the lakes, the dirt. The world.

It was not enough.

He reached for the stars above, into the galaxy that surrounded him.

Into the very heart of the Force.

He felt his entire conscious being lifted into a place that words could never describe. His body was engulfed in flame and then dipped into a vast ocean of ice. He continued to rise, and as he did he felt his mind begin to open. It could not fully encompass what he was experiencing, but he knew he was about to reach a plateau. The most beautiful woman in the galaxy was wrapping him in her arms and pulling him higher and higher.

Something abruptly stopped his ascension.

He heard the rumblings first, the terrible thunder emanating from great stormclouds clearing the horizon. Then came the lightning, unnaturally violet and unerringly vicious. The winds roared with fury and nothing could stand against them.

The great storm tore at the land mercilessly, striking at Dray's own heart. The sky that had borne him aloft suddenly released him. Dray found himself falling...

Falling.

A coldness like he had never felt swept over him, chilling his breath even in the temperate clime of Vigil's forests.

The storm was coming for him; fueled by fear, rage, hatred. Dray braced himself, but knew there was no hope of surviving the onslaught.

Then came thunder like no other and Dray thought it was the first strike of the dark side storm. The anticipated attack never arrived and Dray realized the jarring sound was not a manifestation of the Force after all.

It was reality...

His eyes snapped open and the trance was lost. The dreadful storm was gone as quickly as it had arrived.

Dray immediately saw the streaking arc of light cutting through the sky; like a falling star only much closer. Whatever the object was it had just entered the atmosphere, burning as bright as any sun.

It seemed to take forever to complete its descent. The flaring object disappeared momentarily behind the tree line and Dray felt the coldness of a metallic craft sheltering three lifeforms. He could feel the vital pulse of each being and for an awful moment, their emotions were also his to experience - fear, hopelessness, despair. A familiar tingle rippled down Dray's body as the dark side began to feed...

Suddenly, there was an explosion so great Dray felt it from over a mile away. The ground shook as if wracked by a rampaging herd of angry bantha. Dray lost his footing and rode the rest of the aftershocks flat on his back.

All was silent once more.

Dray was already up and running.

* * *

He stumbled through the last few meters of tangled underbrush, nearly landing head-first in the impact trench that stretched across the valley.

Dray followed the track, running parallel to it, and estimated the size of the ship that may have caused the sizable furrow. His heart triphammered inside his chest as he closed in on the unnatural crater that yawned like an open wound.

He skidded to a halt at the lip of the smoldering abyss and surveyed the situation. The vessel was some sort of scout craft; too small to be a freighter and not enough armor or weapons to be a fighter. The ship had split into two large sections and each half was a raging inferno.

Dray slowly descended the dirt mound and moved toward the fiery remains, keeping one arm protectively over his face. He made his way over the minefield of flaming debris to what he guessed was the cockpit. He

could see two bodies completely engulfed. For their sake, Dray hoped they died on impact.

As sweat poured off him like rain, he carefully began moving away from the blazing inferno.

He wasn't sure what stopped him... Whether it was a slight tremor in the Force or a faint plaintive cry. Maybe it was neither; just his imagination riled by his failed attempt at a meditative trance.

Whatever the cause, something drew him back to the downed craft. He stepped closer to the other half of the broken ship and peered into the conflagration. That's when he saw her, a young girl no more than seven years old. Her blond hair was soaked with perspiration, her eyes wild with fear. The girl's mouth moved again and again, though Dray couldn't make out what she was saying.

He could get no closer than a few meters because of the raging wall of fire. The girl could not come to him, her right leg was trapped under a large cylindrical power coupler.

"Can you hear me?" Dray called to her.

The girl did not answer him. All of her attention was focused on the cockpit. "Mommy! Daddy!" Tears rolled down her cheeks as she cried out again. "Help me!"

"I'm trying," Dray said under his breath. He waved his arms at her, hoping her eyes would at least track the motion. "Look at me, princess!"

She finally did. The girl was struggling to free her leg, but succeeding only in getting the limb wedged further.

"Listen, don't try to move, okay?"

Time was slipping away quickly, as measured by the metallic groans of the ship's superstructure as it tried to hold itself together. It was a futile battle against a relentless foe.

Dray had to make a decision and quickly. "I'm going to help you. Just hang on..."

He cleared his mind and concentrated on the fiery barrier that stood between himself and the girl. Holding his arms in front of him, Dray started forward like a sleepwalker stumbling through a dream.

Sensing a new victim, the flames licked at his hands, his face, his clothing. But Dray did not feel the blazing tendrils trying to coil around him. His entire body shimmered as he absorbed the intense heat and walked through the boiling barrier as if it were a waterfall.

Dray emerged unscathed on the other side, in the broken aft of the ship. The girl was staring at him now with perceptive hazel pupils. The fear had vanished, replaced by confusion.

He prepared to manipulate the Force again, this time to lift the heavy cylinder off the girl's leg. Dray wasn't sure why, but instead found himself reaching down to grasp the heavy machinery. He bent his legs and lifted for all he was worth. The cylinder screeched in annoyance at being disturbed, reluctant to release its grip, but with a final grunt of exertion Dray managed to free the girl from her make-shift prison.

As Dray quickly wiped the sweat from his forehead, he considered his actions. The first method would have been easier, but an unnecessary reliance on the Force to do something just as easily accomplished with a little sweat. He had a sudden fleeting image of depraved Sith overlords sitting on their thrones, using the Force to attend to their every insignificant need. Some were so bloated from years of inactivity their limbs had all but atrophied.

A shrill whine from above banished the disturbing imagery from Dray's mind. The roof of the craft was about to give way and land on their heads.

Dray carefully scooped up the girl in his arms, surprised by how little she weighed. He pressed her small face against the front of his sweat-soaked tunic. Turning away from the expanding heart of the blaze, Dray gathered the Force to shield them both from the smothering heat.

Building up a head of speed, Dray lunged clear of the sizzling mess... Just as the scorched metal finally collapsed into itself. His thighs ached from the strain of keeping his body balanced as it ascended the steep pit, but his arms were otherwise occupied.

Dray continued running in order to escape the lingering clouds of acrid smoke drifting lazily from the abyss. His legs gave way soon after and he stumbled to his knees. He placed the girl down on the cool grass and felt his chest heaving. Dray had inhaled more than his share of the foul fumes and his body thudded to the ground, wracked by a violent coughing spasm.

After what seemed to be an eternity, Dray finally took a cleansing breath. He greedily drank in another, then another until his respiration was once again a process free of pain.

Dray checked on the little girl and to his surprise found her staring right at him. He unconsciously shuddered... No, more like she was looking through him.

Those blue-green eyes, wise beyond their tender years, drilled into him like a plasma cutter. "I think you're evil," she said matter-of-factly. "Usually I can tell, but not with you..." She paused for a moment, then frowned. "You saved me. How come?"

Dray's mouth opened and then closed as a million thoughts battled for dominance in his head.

The girl abruptly turned away, staring back the flaming wreckage. "I'm doing it again. My momma says sometimes I ask too many questions and hurt people's feelings." For the first time she actually sounded like a frightened child. "She's dead now. So is my daddy."

The girl looked back over at him, tears pouring from her eyes. Before he knew it her small hands were wrapped around him and his tunic was wet with her sobs. Dray felt her tiny body shuddering uncontrollably against him and suddenly he had difficulty swallowing as his throat tightened in sympathy. He took in a long breath through his nose, quelling his surging emotions.

Dray desperately wanted to tell her everything would be okay, but could not. That would be a terrible lie. "I'm sorry," he whispered, but the comforting words sounded hollow in his own ears. They could never be enough to ease such tremendous pain. "I'm sorry," he said again and held her tightly until she was all cried out.

* * *

Dray wasn't sure when she finally fell asleep, but he was near exhaustion as he carried her back to his camp site. He sat a few feet away watching her curled up in his bedroll, sleeping soundly considering the nightmare she had just survived. Before he knew it, dawn had crept over his shoulder.

The sentry duty wasn't really necessary - there weren't any predators on Vigil that could pose much of a threat to him - but he performed it anyway.

As he kept watch over the girl, Dray realized why the girl had such an odd affectation about her... There was a great concentration of the Force held within that small frame, yet so untamed and unharnessed he didn't quite sense at first. But now... Now he could not help but feel it, drawing him like a homing beacon.

An idea struck him and he acted upon it before he could even debate the merits or flaws. He focused on the sleeping form in front of him, summoning up his considerable abilities. As gently as he could Dray reached out to her mind, trying to open her thoughts to him. Tentatively he began to probe the girl's consciousness, a normally slow process made almost interminable due to his circumspect manner.

Bracing himself, Dray prepared to enter her deep subconscious. That was where a Force-sensitive being maintained a protective barrier that would prevent another Force wielder from penetrating his or her inner mind. This powerful 'shield' violently pushed back such an intruder... The stronger the push, the greater the being's strength in the Force. It was a technique often used by Jedi Masters to sense the potential of their students.

Dray centered himself and stepped across the threshold...

It was as if someone had shot him out of a proton torpedo launcher, straight into the heart of a supernova.

Dray let out a scream so high-pitched his own ears could barely hear it as he was flung through the verdant forests of Vigil. He cut a green swathe through the underbrush, his body smashing tree branches to splinters. His stomach heaved as his flight lasted impossibly long before coming to a jarring end in a small lake. Dray landed with a hearty splash in the icy water... Nearly half a mile away from his camp.

He floated there in the water, contemplating what he had just experienced. He wasn't sure how much time had passed before he noticed the girl standing at the edge of the lake. Her hair was a morning jumble and she stifled a yawn with a hand as she stared at him in bewilderment. "Are you okay?"

Dray's head was pounding hard, the rhythm beating out a single word that played in his mind over and over.

"Incredible."

* * *

"What's your name?" he asked her over lunch. It wasn't the most nutritious meal, but he had very little left in the way of prepackaged 'healthy' rations. He did his best to offer her a good mix of berries, meat, and an assortment of desiccated victuals ready-to-eat. Those little silver bags, stamped with the seal of the Republic, were the bane of every soldier but would always do in a pinch.

"Nova," she finally replied. "My name is Nova."

"That's very pretty." He smiled at her, but she kept a neutral expression.

"Thank you." She chewed thoughtfully on a tranglo berry. "I like this place. It reminds me of my aunt's garden. Only bigger." Her eyes wandered for a moment before settling on him. "Why are you here?"

"You know, you can call me Lian if you'd like."

She nodded and said: "Did you come here because of your heart?"

Dray arched an eyebrow, studying the girl. "My heart?"

"I can feel it. I think it weighs more than my daddy's ship." A shadow passed across her face for a moment and Dray thought she was about to start sobbing again. Surprisingly, she did not. "That's why I thought you were evil at first. Because of the things you did." The shadow was back, only more like a storm cloud now, borne of intense concentration. "Bad things."

"I..." The words died on his lips. How could she know?

"I know because you told me, Lian. Only I don't think you meant to. But it was there..." She pointed a small finger at his chest, right

toward the space his physical heart occupied, but knew that wasn't exactly what she was referring to...

Dray knelt down next to her. "I think you have a very special gift, Nova. Has anyone ever told you that?"

The girl nodded slowly, but her attention was no longer directed at him. Her eyes widened, and he felt a twinge of fear run through her. A moment later he knew why as a subtle pulse vibrated through the Force.

Nova sensed them just before he did and she had no formal training. Amazing, he thought as he spun a graceful circle. Midway through the revolution, his lightsaber burst to life with a soothing hum. The golden blade shimmered like a mirage under the afternoon glare sending ripples of heat down his body.

Two beings emerged from the thick foliage, both dressed in midnight blue jumpsuits. They advanced with the sinuous gait of true predators. Their movements were mirrored in uncanny unison and Dray noticed an unmistakable resemblance. The intruders were brother and sister, probably twins. The only appreciable difference was hair length, his was shorn and shaven, while hers was a flowing ebony jungle.

Both radiated the icy heat of the dark side. Dray could smell it on them with the bittersweet piquancy of a finely aged roke wine. The male was the weaker of the two and neither one alone could overpower him. Working together, however... That was a different story, altogether.

At the moment, however, they were solely intent on Nova.

"They're evil," Nova said to Dray, her voice strong and assured.

The twins continued to eye the girl, almost hungrily. Dray was summarily ignored. Considering he was the self-appointed caretaker of the world they were currently trespassing upon Dray felt that was just plain rude.

"Excuse me," Dray said and casually switched off his lightsaber. He nearly smiled as he noted their confusion.

Their eyes danced over him and he could feel the soft murmurs of their minds touching his, prying for information. He allowed them to remain long enough to sense his formidable power and then banished them with but a thought.

The male, Xash was his name, spoke first. "You are Jedi."

"But not Jedi," his sister said. Sindra's head cocked slightly as if unsure of how to proceed.

Dray studied the adepts for a few moments, deciding on the best course of action. "You are observant," Dray finally said, "but not too smart." He waved his hand as if dismissing them from his presence. "Take

what you will from the wreckage of the ship and then be gone from my home."

The twins exchanged a rapacious look - somewhere between a smile and a snarl - and then Sindra began to laugh. It was an ugly sound full of cruelty. "Our master wishes otherwise. The girl will come with us." Her face became serious, the coldness of her visage hardening her beauty. "Stand aside or die."

"Big words from little adepts. You are both weak." Dray favored the twins with a hollow smile and a dangerous hiss. "I smell your fear."

Sindra started toward Dray but her brother apparently wanted the honor. "Leave him to me."

Without another word, the orange blade of Xash's lightsaber flashed into existence and he launched into a furious attack. The first strike, though powerful, was a bit slow.

Dray easily side-stepped and delivered a hard, open-handed slap to the back of his opponent's head.

Xash rolled with the impact and quickly returned to his feet. The male adept was enraged and obviously intent on revenge. He drew back his saber and started to advance.

Dray displayed the patient smile of a teacher whose student has just made a fool of himself. Dray winked at Xash then re-ignited the golden lightsaber, swinging the hilt around at a leisurely pace. The gilded blade finally extended with a soft thrumming of energy.

Outraged by Dray's show of disrespect, Xash lunged forward - leading in with a blinding flurry of strikes. Dray swiveled with practiced ease, dodging each attack and countering with his own.

The sabers clashed, sparks flying through the air. Xash pulled back and drove ahead with a quick slash toward Dray's throat.

Dray twirled his blade, catching Xash mid-strike and spinning Xash's saber through its own momentum. The move spun the weapon right out of the twin's grasp. Unfortunately for Xash, his right hand was still attached to the handle.

The severed appendage, clutching reflexively to the hilt, fell to the ground.

As Xash stared mutely at the stump of his arm, Dray planted a boot in Xash's chest. The blow toppled the surprised adept and he hit the ground stunned.

Dray readied his lightsaber, but before he could finish the job something caught his attention... The sound of Sindra igniting her own weapon.

In mid-turn, Dray felt the tip of her blade bite into his back. He ignored the wracking pain of his burned flesh and quickly followed through on his counter before Sindra could do any further damage.

The strong parry drove her back, giving Dray some breathing room.

She advanced slowly, the deep crimson blade held in a loose two-handed grip.

The two combatants began to circle.

Dray took a tentative swipe high to test her defenses. She countered easily. Sindra was quick, agile, and lithe. That wild mane of hair trailed behind her like a living thing.

Sindra moved the lightsaber high over head - the classic first-position of attack. The girl was well-trained indeed.

Dray adopted a lateral stance - the classic answer. He wasn't exactly an amateur either.

As expected, her blade arced through a downward strike. He parried with a sharply angled up-thrust. Sindra absorbed his defense and moved into a counter-parry that nearly disarmed him.

Gold and crimson flashed through the night.

They stepped back and circled again.

Dray took the lead in the deadly dance, delivering an overhead strike that abruptly became a feint and quickly cut low. Sindra inverted her saber and blocked the attack, allowing the impact to direct her blade toward Dray's neck. He parried, driving the tip of her blade downward; she was ready for it and their blades quickly locked together.

The two warriors paused long enough to offer one another an almost imperceptible nod, a grudging measure of respect.

Again they circled.

Sindra unexpectedly launched into a blinding series of slashes. Dray was hard pressed to block the flurry, but succeeded. Barely. Their last furious exchange left his chest aching for air, so he stepped back to momentarily catch his breath. It cost him.

Instead of taking the opportunity to do the same, Sindra came at him like a mad howler beast. Dray found himself forced into an ungainly riposte that became useless when her vertical downstrike abruptly transformed into a wicked slash that opened his right shoulder. He winced in pain and stumbled away.

Her eyes were glowing with hate, the fuel of the dark side. Dray could feel the power surging through her.

He felt a familiar, desperate craving surging in his belly. The soft whisper that had controlled his life the last few years began its soft serenade, but it had no effect. He was not yet angry and therefore his silky mistress could not help him...

Sindra exploded into another series of fluid strikes that sent him reeling back. He carefully measured her attack pattern and managed to catch her blade with the tip of his own. His unexpected parry forced her saber upwards. Right where he wanted it.

Dray attempted to sweep her left leg out from under her, a move that usually gave him the upper hand but Sindra's reaction time was better than he expected. She dropped a hand from her saber, using it to block his extended leg. An instant later she jabbed her other arm forward, using the haft of the weapon to smash Dray in the face.

The blow split his lip and knocked him to the ground. Instinct and years of training allowed him to retain his hold on the saber, which he waved back and forth to ward off any further strikes.

However, a follow-up attack was not forthcoming. She merely stood over her fallen opponent silently... Then she began to laugh.

Dray gingerly touched a hand to his throbbing lip, though he already knew it was bleeding from the sour taste in his mouth. He stared at the crimson stain spreading across his fingertips and his eyes narrowed to slits.

Her incessant cackling continued, sending a tidal wave of heat washing through his body. Dray's insides boiled as if his body temperature had suddenly risen to a feverish degree.

Dray heard the intimate whisper again. The silky voice grew louder, thundering in his ears and echoing through his brain as it infused his body with a burst of pure emotion.

Anger.

His heart raced as the raw fuel was quickly converted into energy. An ancient Corellian battle cry escaped his lips and Dray jumped to his feet, delivering a vicious two-handed swing powerful enough to split Sindra in two.

Recognizing the danger, Sindra quickly brought her saber up and deflected the vicious strike just in time. She staggered under the weight of the brutal offensive and was forced a few steps backward.

He shadowed her every move, rapidly closing the gap between them. Dray knew she had ceased her mocking laughter, but he could not get that terrible sound out of his head. All he wanted to do was kill her.

What was so wrong with that? he pondered, knuckles white from his death-grip on the lightsaber.

Nothing, came the whispery voice, growing louder and lovelier by the moment. Nothing at all.

Dray smiled, savoring the blood smeared across his lips. He craved more.

Sindra saw it in his eyes and it obviously frightened her. The tide of the battle had abruptly turned and she was on the wrong end. "I had you beaten," she said in a whining voice.

"Never dwell on the past." Dray grinned, an unpleasant sight. "If I were you, I'd be more concerned about your future. Or the lack thereof."

"No..." Sindra was retreating as fast as possible without turning her back on him.

"Lian!"

Nova's shrill call shook him out of the dark reverie. He was slightly disoriented, like someone startled out of deep slumber.

Dray glanced back in time to see Xash charging. The wounded limb, severed below the forearm, was tucked down at the twin's side. Xash snarled as his remaining hand swung a lightsaber in the direction of Dray's head.

With no time to turn, Dray lifted the blade up over his shoulder and then down again, successfully blocking Xash's strike. Unfortunately, it also left his front unprotected. A bad circumstance for Dray that Sindra immediately attempted to take full advantage of...

She had withdrawn herself from saber range, but had a variety of other nasty tricks at her disposal. One hand shot forward, serving as a focal point for her power.

Dray gasped for air as his heart began to constrict. He tumbled to his knees, the pain quickly becoming unbearable. Invisible claws tore mercilessly into his chest.

Sindra's face twisted into a vile facade and she hissed like a serpent. Her outstretched hand trembled as if she really held Dray's heart, gleefully digging in her nails to squeeze out every last drop of life.

Xash stepped back, obediently waiting to deliver the killing blow.

The lightsaber slipped from Dray's numb fingers and deactivated. He could not find his breath. His heart skipped, then faltered, and then stopped.

His anger grew stronger.

He inwardly called to the dark storm, begged for its providence. The kind mistress with the voice of whispery coils answered him. He could feel her silken breath tickle his ear.

Dray opened himself to the blinding rage, always seething like a second skin under his flesh. The hate swirled to a single-minded maelstrom of rage.

And the rage made him powerful.

His fingertips jerked outward and his fury erupted as crackling bolts of power. Force lightning streaked toward Sindra, enveloping her in a snare of electrical energy.

She cried out from depths of her being and sunk to the ground as spidery lances snapped voraciously around her.

Dray's heart jumped to life, the chilling sensation turned to fire, and he was free.

Xash had been watching in shock as his sister writhed in the dirt, so he was late in delivering the strike that a moment ago would have beheaded Dray.

It would be his final mistake.

Dray dropped flat on his back to dodge Xash's belated assault. As the high swing passed harmlessly above, Dray twisted his head around and gestured at his attacker.

Xash flew nearly a hundred feet before slamming into the trunk of a huge arcoscia tree with a resounding crunch. The body slid to the ground and, if there was any doubt from the impact, Sindra's shriek told Dray all he needed to know. The uncanny link all twins seemed to share had been severed like a string. Xash was dead. Renewed strength coursed through Dray, power given life by the anger that still burned within. He needed only flick his wrist and the golden saber flew to him, igniting with a joyous burst.

Four quick strides brought him to Sindra and he watched impassively as her body continued to convulse. Tiny electric charges crackled through her clouded eyes, across the cavern of her open mouth, and dancing down the rest of her body.

Dray raised the saber to finish it.

A voice, strong and sure, demanded to be heard. Tyrrahl... A Jedi does not kill an unarmed foe.

The velvet whisper answered and Dray echoed the words: "True."

He brought the blade down and Sindra's laughter finally stopped.

"But I am no longer a Jedi."

The breeze died away and then there was only silence.

Dray turned from the carnage and saw Nova's face - a mask of absolute horror. He had a resurgence of pain in his heart for a moment but it disappeared as quickly as it arrived.

The rage was also gone, scattered like dust in a hurricane. He was just Dray, breathing heavily and drenched in sweat. He was tired, hurt, and aching all over.

But there was something else, too. Something he had not felt in a long time.

Shame.

He opened his mouth to explain, to say something, but Nova was already sprinting away into the forest. He started to give chase, then realized he was too weak. Exhaustion had set in with frightening speed.

Drained physically and emotionally, Dray slipped down to his knees. He glanced warily at the bodies, at the bloodshed he had wrought. The twins shouldn't have come here, he rationalized, and the girl is not my responsibility.

That tingling whisper became his own voice. Of course not. Why bother going after her?

"Why?" he asked again, this time aloud.

He received no answer.

* * *

Dray awoke from the nightmare screaming. A thin film of sweat covered his body and he shivered in the crisp night air.

The nightmare was all too familiar. His failure at Tyrrahl's test... The Citadel of Shadows.

No.

Dray refused to remember the incident. He needed to think of something else. He shut his eyes tightly.

And found himself staring into her face.

Cayli.

It was the day she learned of his betrayal. She did not believe it at first, refusing even after she saw Threem's corpse. It had to be a mistake, she said. Dray could never have fallen from the light. Not Dray. He was the strongest of all. Tyrrahl had predicted great things of every student he trained, but Dray... Dray was special.

It was not until she stood at the door of his quarters that she finally accepted the truth. For those trained in the Force, the stench of the dark side was one that could not be washed off or masked with fragrances. Dray practically exuded the sickly sweet scent from his pores.

Cayli was silent. The tears in her eyes cut deeper than any word ever could. It opened up a wound within Dray's soul, and there wasn't the tidy cauterization of an injury delivered by a lightsaber.

She was gone before... Before what? he wondered, before he could explain?

There was no explanation that would satisfy her. He had chosen his path of his own free will.

As with Nova, he had started to go after Cayli but those whispers folded around him like a blanket.

Even now it twisted his stomach into a sick knot. Waves of nausea took hold of him and would not let go until his stomach heaved itself barren.

The whispers came again as they always did when he relived that night. Usually that soft purring voice lulled him back to sleep, but now...

He did not go after Cayli.

That was a terrible mistake.

He lost the only love he had ever known, ever wanted. The only love that mattered.

For what? he demanded to know

The lady of whispers answered, wrapping him in her shadowy embrace... Your destiny.

Dray moaned and tossed in his sleep. He recalled one of the first days of his training.

* * *

Ven-Mah Tyrrahl sat down on the tree stump, feeling every one of his seventy years. The old man sighed as he watched the lightsaber haft spinning end over end through the air. The Jedi Master raised a hand, using the Force to stop the weapon's progress.

"You must learn patience," Tyrrahl said.

Dray shook his head in disgust, squatting down to rub the tail of his sweat-soaked shirt across his forehead. "When you agreed to train me,

you didn't say it would take an eternity to master the simplest of skills."

"These are the building blocks. Without a solid foundation, a house will crumble at the first storm."

"I ask for guidance and you give me children's sayings."

"You cannot become an expert overnight, Lian. Years of study and dedication are required before..."

"Why? I'm eager to learn. The others..." He glanced at the assembled group of students in the distance. "Why keep us all together if some can't keep up? Let me move at a quicker pace."

"The machine is only as strong as its weakest part."

"More platitudes!"

Tyrrahl shook his head and tried a different tact. "Tell me, when retreating from a battle would you abandon the lame of your group, the wounded? Leave them for dead?"

Dray's eyes grew cold. "I don't run from a fight."

"Answer the question!"

"Of course not."

"Everything you learn has applications that aren't always apparent immediately. You must learn to trust. There's too much you don't understand yet."

"Then teach me..."

"If it were only that simple."

"It is if you make it so."

Tyrrahl shook his head. The impetuosity of youth never failed to amaze him. There was so much this boy did not know but thought he did. "Beware," the Master warned, "the dark side offers a quick and easy path, but the destination is not what it seems. Your impatience in these matters could prove to be your undoing."

Even without his Jedi intuition, Tyrrahl could tell Dray's attention was focused elsewhere. Tyrrahl paused mid-sermon and allowed his gaze to wander, until Master and student were staring at the same thing.

It stood like a dark sentinel atop the jagged cliffs of Monfreen's northern peninsula, overlooking an ancient whirlpool of water whose great maw could swallow all but the largest starship. The keep had stood empty for as long as Tyrrahl could remember and the local lore, usually

colorfully descriptive of such an intriguing landmark, was surprisingly indeterminate. The aptly-named Citadel of Shadows held no grand tales of adventure.

Tyrrahl had visited the keep only once, stepping inside the monolithic gates with the fearful eyes of a young child instead of the resolve of a Jedi Master. The place was teeming with the dark side. Perhaps that strong concentration of the Force, albeit an evil one, was what drew him to Monfreen in the first place...

The Jedi Master willed away the memories. His concern at the moment was not his own experience with the Citadel.

Dray wore an expression that both terrified Tyrrahl and excited him. He had seen it before... On his own face, just before he entered the castle.

"Without the proper composure, you may easily find yourself in a dark place where you do not want to be, with no way out."

Dray finally gazed back at his Master. "The Citadel."

"You've felt its pull, have you?" Tyrrahl said, staring at something on the ground.

Dray's eyes were drawn once more to the towering spires in the distance. "There is a coldness there, such as I have never felt. The dark side dwells within."

Tyrrahl fought to keep his voice neutral. "You wish to go there?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Only those adepts prepared to move on to the next phase in their training dare set foot in that place. It is a dangerous test, possibly deadly if the Force is not your ally. Do you think you're ready for such a burden?"

"I'm not afraid of anything."

Tyrrahl lowered his head. He silently wondered how many times such an exchange had occurred between master and student. "Then don't let me stop you."

Dray tightened his grip on the lightsaber's silver haft and started walking.

"Trust in yourself and you cannot fail."

With one final glance over his shoulder, Dray nodded solemnly and went off to meet his destiny.

* * *

Dray was still asleep, his pupils dancing to a furious beat behind his eyelids. His mind refused to recall the incident at the Citadel, even in a dream.

Other images began to take form, familiarly haunting yet at the same time something was different.

It was night and he was alone - in his life, in the world, in the galaxy.

Her face emerged from the shadows. Her lightsaber pulsed like a beacon in the darkness.

He knew he should deflect it but he couldn't lift his own saber. He had always been the better duelist, the best Tyrrahl had ever trained. He might have easily beaten her, disarmed her... Killed her.

But he could not move.

So he watched as she swung her glowing blade toward his neck.

Dray's mouth was open, but no sound emerged.

He merely stared at the face of his would-be killer. At first he thought it was Cayli, as it always was.

But this time it was different; it was not Cayli...

This girl was much older, but the features were unmistakable. It was Nova.

* * *

Nova was in terrible danger.

Dray knew it as sure as he knew his own name. His head was a chaotic swirl of emotions he could not even begin to count. He had experienced too much in the last few hours to properly put into perspective.

And he had little time left to help her.

But did he want to?

Dray gathered a cleansing breath from the cool night air and began reciting the words ingrained in his head by Tyrrahl.

"Emotion, yet peace."

The voice of many whispers responded: A true warrior knows that peace is but a respite between battles. The sharpest blade is your own fury.

"Ignorance, yet knowledge"

They hide the real power from you. You must take it from them or be forever a slave to your Masters.

"Passion, yet serenity."

Only droids have no feelings. Are you no better than an automaton of the light side?

"Chaos, yet harmony"

Order must be imposed on the savages of the galaxy. Only then can true civilization thrive.

"Death, yet the Force"

Those who truly command the Force can escape even death. They make you think you are weak so they can control you.

Dray let out a guttural cry... Of anger, frustration, helplessness. He stared up accusingly at the coldly shimmering stars.

"I never asked for this!" he screamed at the impassive points of light. Momentarily overwhelmed, he bowed his head. Dray spoke softly, barely audible. "I didn't choose the way of the Force."

A gentle voice answered him. This time it was not that silky whisper. "No, Lian. The Force chose you. And now you must choose your own way."

He did not recognize it at first, though he soon realized it was not a single voice that spoke to him but rather an amalgam of many he already knew: Cayli, Master Tyrrahl, Nova... And one other that spoke so forcefully he wasn't quite sure of its origin. Then he knew; it was his own.

* * *

Nova shivered inside the small cage, afraid to touch to the shimmering bars of energy that held her prisoner. Her hands still hurt from the futile escape attempt a few moments ago.

She watched her captor going about his work, completely ignoring her. The man was thin, almost sickly, with a ragged cough. His frail form was cloaked in voluminous purple robes and elaborate jewelry. A ring adorned every finger, resulting in a insectile clicking whenever he wrung his hands together. He was bald with a heavily-scarred face and dead eyes. Every time he looked at Nova with those awful eyes, she unconsciously trembled.

The man was currently scowling at an obstinate portion of his ship's engine. The monolithic craft looked too heavy to be spaceworthy.

After a few moments of tinkering, sparks sizzled through the night sky. The man erupted into a string of colorful vulgarities as he withdrew his singed fingers from the compartment. Apparently, he was used to being obeyed.

The man whirled abruptly, eyes wild as they searched the forest.

"Did you think you could hide yourself from me?" he demanded to know.

In response, Dray stepped out of the brush and smiled. His fingers were calmly interlaced, the lightsaber swinging lazily at his side. "Had I wanted to approach you with stealth, my saber would have been at your throat as we speak." Dray glanced at Nova, held in the pulsing cage. He recognized the prison - a renowned Sith design that worked like a energy vortex. Anyone held within was cut off from the Force.

Dray shifted his focus back to the man. "You took something that was not yours. I suggest you give it back."

The man cackled in obvious amusement. "I am Thannor Keth, Sorcerer of the Sith. I answer to no one, and especially not to some Jedi whelp."

"You mean the same Jedi whelp who just deprived you of your adepts?"

Keth's smile faded. "So it would seem. A shame, really. Xash was mechanically inclined and my ship is in need of minor repairs." Keth held up a hand. "Perhaps if you fix the damage, I will overlook your transgressions and allow you to live."

Dray gestured at the ship's open engine systems with two fingers extended. "You mean that little part over there?" As he pointed, the systems erupted into a shower of blinding sparks.

Keth screeched in fury and started toward the burning compartment.

Seizing the moment, Dray ran to Nova, lighting his saber in mid-sprint. With one massive swing, he cleaved the energy bars in half and freed Nova. He jerked the girl to her feet and over his shoulder, slipping away the lightsaber so as not to give away their position.

As Keth battled the flames, Dray and Nova sprinted off into the night.

* * *

Nova clung to Dray's neck, her eyes practically lit from within.

"Are you going to take me home now?"

Dray grunted as he ran, too winded at the moment to answer.

"I'll do my best."

"Okay," she said biting down on her lower lip. "But you have to promise not to do the bad thing anymore."

Dray stared at her for a second. "The dark side..."

Nova nodded emphatically.

"I'll do my best," he repeated.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Satisfied, Nova tightened her hold. Dray glanced over his shoulder, hoping his distraction would buy them enough time to make it to his ship.

An arcing bolt of violet lightning lanced through the woods, slamming into Dray's back. He lost his hold on Nova and both went tumbling to the ground. Smoke drifted up from the wound and he lay there stunned.

"Fool!" More purplish energy crackled from Keth's hands, dancing between his fingers with the intricate beauty of a spider's web. "You don't know the power of the dark side!"

With a pronounced groan Dray slowly got back to his feet, eyes suddenly cold as he met Keth's gaze. "I am familiar with it..."

That caught the sorcerer for a moment. "Then you must know the futility of your actions." The electricity calmed for a moment as Keth stretched out a hand. "All you have to do is give me the girl and I will leave you in peace. Then it would be for you as it was before all this."

Dray glanced at Nova's bright face and smiled bitterly. "If only that were true," he said softly.

Keth sneered. "There is nothing so pathetic as a disgraced Jedi desperately clinging to that last fraying strand of his morality..." The Sith sorcerer made a grating, unpleasant sound that might have been a laugh. "This will be even easier than I anticipated."

Keth's eyes pulsed with crackling lightning that writhed down his torso, finally pooling at his fingertips. "You will now learn the error of your ways."

An echoing snap-hiss brought Dray's lightsaber to life. The gleaming gold blade pulsed with a molten energy as he held the graceful

weapon in a two-handed grip before him. Dray nearly smiled as he said, "Maybe I already have."

Keth hissed and launched a phalanx of lightning from his hand.

Dray swung his saber up to meet Keth's electrical strands. As the arcing bolts began to shimmer down the blade, Dray swung the saber around and slashed at a nearby arcoscia tree. The large trunk was thicker than Dray was tall but the lightsaber, charged with the Force lightning, cleaved the thick bark in two. The excess energy discharged harmlessly into the air.

Dray grinned a challenge. "If that's the best you can do, I suggest you leave now before you embarrass yourself."

Keth answered with a guttural snarl. His right hand curled into a claw and something began to form within the palm. An iridescent sphere of energy swirled into existence, shining as if Keth had plucked a star from the sky above. Without a word, the Sith sorcerer hurled the shimmering bolt at Dray with uncanny accuracy.

Dray swung his saber to meet the orb, but to his shock the tip of his blade passed right through the globe of light. Dray was suddenly wracked with pain as the sphere made contact with his flesh. A thousand voices suddenly screamed with fury in his head, threatening to split it open.

Dray forgot where he was as pure unthinking hatred washed over him and he began to drown in a sea of anger that was not his own. He gasped for air, falling to his knees. He did not relinquish his grip on the lightsaber, but continued swinging it wildly as if to ward off some unseen foe.

Looking on in horror, Nova started to approach Dray, but the unpredictable play of his saber kept her at bay.

Keth watched with a bemused expression, his lip curling slightly. "It is over." The sorcerer chuckled softly as he began to gather his powers for the deathblow.

Dray lowered his saber, eyes wild, face covered in a sheen of sweat. He had never experienced such agony before, physical or mental. He had to do something though, and soon, for Keth was about to finish him off.

Dray heard the whispery voice that had been silent for so long. You've been a fool. The only way to defeat Keth is at his own game. Cry out to me again, Dray. Beg me for help and I will heed your call.

For what seemed like an eternity, Dray was torn in confusion.

Yes, Dray thought, it was the only way... Rage rippled below his skin like a physical entity.

Then his eyes, burning with anger, fell upon Nova. The girl stood watching him, her face betraying no emotion.

No. The fury melted away and for the first time in a long time, Dray felt as if he was truly at peace. He had made a promise. And he was going to keep it, even if it cost him his life.

Keth's eyes burned with victory as his formidable power took shape. Brilliant strands of dark side power formed to enmesh Dray. The lattice of energy began to sever the connection between him and the Force.

Dray could feel the strength slowly being sapped from his body. He had already accepted his fate. Ignoring the sharp spasms wrenching his body, Dray turned to Nova. With his last bit of energy Dray projected his thoughts into her mind, telling her to run before it was too late.

She did not move, though Dray knew he had successfully touched her thoughts. Dray didn't have time to ponder the situation. His vision was becoming blurred and shades of gray began to blot out everything else.

Dray felt like a droplet of water hanging from a rock over the ocean. He was about to begin that final descent into the endless sea, where his spirit would seep into something greater. For now though, he hung suspended...

The long-awaited fall never took place.

Instead he heard Nova's voice calling to him, echoing through him. A resurgence of power manifested itself and he saw her ghostly image extend a hand to him.

Dray reached out and when his hand touched hers, there was an explosion of harmonic brilliance... The celestial illumination of the light side.

His eyesight returned as a dazzling shield flared into existence to protect him from Keth's attack.

With a cry of agony, the sorcerer was blasted off his feet as if struck by a proton torpedo.

The shield vanished as quickly as it formed and Dray collapsed. He weakly turned his head to make sure Keth was no longer a threat... The only thing left of the Sith sorcerer was a scorched and tattered robe.

When he looked back, he saw Nova's face above his. Tears streamed down her face as she knelt over him.

Dray smiled at her and then closed his eyes for what he believed would be the final time.

The last thing he remembered was her hands, small and cool, pressing against his forehead and then he knew only darkness...

* * *

Dray awoke in his bedroll, groggy and confused. The first thing he saw was Vigil's crimson sun, shining high above. His entire body ached but it felt good to be alive. The next thing he saw was Nova, sitting cross-legged nearby, watching over him silently.

Dray started to talk, but already felt her presence in his mind and there was nothing to say. So they exchanged a simple smile and he went back to sleep.

* * *

Dray checked the start-up sequence for the third time, patting the side of his ship lovingly. He never thought he'd have need of the Lady of Light again. Dray hoped she wouldn't hold it against him.

He climbed into the pilot's chair, making sure Nova was secured beside him. He engaged the Lady's repulsorlift engines and stared out the viewscreen with a mixture of relief and trepidation as they ascended into the stars.

Dray allowed his gaze to linger over his adopted home and knew without question he would return to Vigil one day.

The emptiness of space around him all at once brought on an attack of nausea. Dray could still feel dark side poison flowing through him. He knew more than anything he wanted to return to the light, to be bathed in its warm and tender embrace.

It would not be an easy journey, but at least he was embarking on the first step.

Ossus. The center of Jedi learning; where Nova needed to be, to begin the long process of honing her amazing skills. It was also where Dray would have to confront those he had betrayed.

He had been lying to himself when he thought he could move on to any sort of future without first dealing with his past. As Master Tyrrahl always said, Lies are most beautiful when the truth wears an ugly facade.

It would be a perilous journey, even without old friends and loved ones trying to kill him. He was an exile, one of the Fallen, and he would be hunted every step of the way.

Dray wondered if Cayli was still on Ossus, wasn't quite sure if he wanted her to be there.

"She's very pretty."

The voice shocked him from his reverie. Dray looked at Nova questioningly for a moment, then realized...

"Yes, she is," Dray said with a faraway smile.

"Do you still love her?" Nova asked, though Dray was sure she already knew the answer.

His voice was soft and choked with old emotions given new reign.
"Until the day I die."

"Maybe you should tell her that."

Dray shook his head, smiling at Nova's earnest response. His mind's eye recalled an image of Cayli and her unassuming beauty was enough to make his tarnished soul beam with joy and hope.

He glanced at Nova and nodded in thanks, for his new ward had helped him find something he thought was long-lost... Hope.

And at that moment, all was right with the galaxy.

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