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STAR WARS
THE HIGH REPUBLIC



PATH OF DECEIT

TESSA GRATTON • JUSTINA IRELAND



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AND
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STAR WARS
THE HIGH REPUBLIC

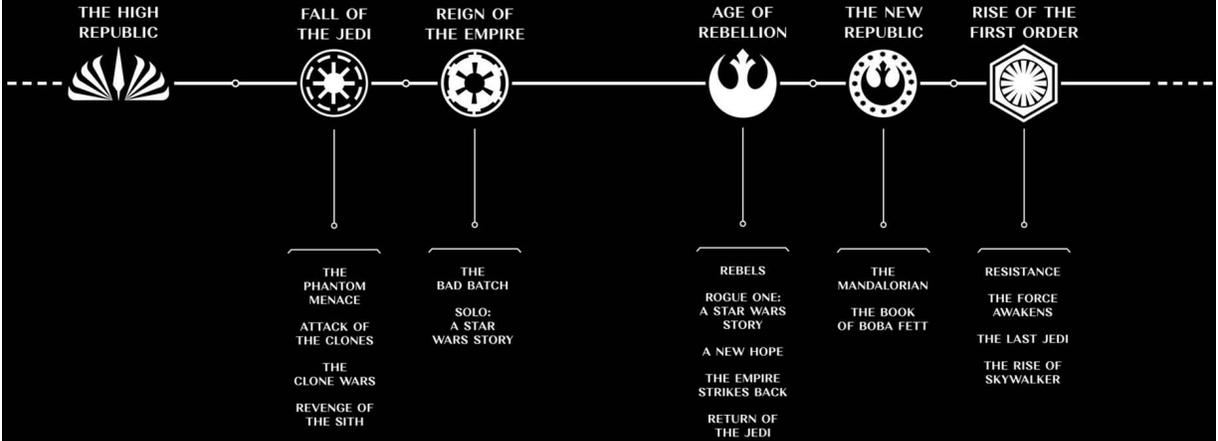
QUEST OF THE JEDI

It is a time of great exploration. In an effort to unite the galaxy, the Chancellors of the Republic, working alongside the courageous and wise Jedi Knights, have dispatched dozens of PATHFINDER TEAMS into the farthest reaches of the Outer Rim.

But it is also a time of great uncertainty. Communication is unreliable, and tall tales of mysterious planets and monstrous creatures abound. Prospectors and pirates roam the frontier, and the worlds of Eiram and E'ronoh are locked in a FOREVER WAR.

And on the far-off planet of DALNA, a new threat to the galaxy is beginning to emerge. . . .

STAR WARS TIMELINE





PROLOGUE

Radicaz Dobbs, known as Sunshine to his friends and far worse to his enemies, landed his decrepit pleasure yacht in the docking yard on Dalna, a nothing planet in a nowhere part of space. The frontier was full of hardship and scarcity, but Sunshine had never seen such a terrible docking yard. The area was little more than a mudhole, and the dockmaster hadn't bothered giving him coordinates but instead mumbled through the staticky comms something that sounded like "Set it down anywhere" as Sunshine cleared the upper atmosphere. "Anywhere" being a large open area that looked like the aftermath of a bantha herd migration. As Sunshine set down his ship, the *Scupper*, he wondered just how there could be a collector of rare Force-related artifacts in such a miserable outpost.

But he did not think on it *too* long. Credits were credits, no matter where they came from.

The ship touched down without incident, and thanks to its decrepit appearance it wouldn't attract much attention, not even in the most pitiful excuse for a dockyard Sunshine had ever seen. And if the dockmaster did a random inspection, they would find nothing amiss. The inside of the *Scupper* was no more impressive than the outside. The deck was old and scuffed, and there was a peculiar smell that never really came out, no matter how many times Sunshine had his maintenance droid, DZ-23, scrub the walls. But the disrepair hid powerful sublight engines, a number of coded safes, and a cutting-edge databank and navicomputer. Sunshine liked to keep ahead of the competition, no matter the role he was playing.

Once Sunshine had landed the ship and tucked away some of the rarer artifacts destined for better buyers, he packed up the remaining items and wrapped them carefully before placing them in a knapsack. He wouldn't take in all his loot at once, only a few items at a time. He might be rather new at fencing items, it being just one of the many things he did to get by, but he was a quick study. It was a rathtar-eat-rathtar galaxy, and Sunshine was determined to stay off the menu.

He was just about ready to go when there was a sudden pounding on the outside of his ship. Sunshine punched in the code and the boarding ramp lowered, the stabilizing legs at the end settling with a squelching sound that made Sunshine shudder. When he peered down to see who had been hammering the side of his ship, he saw a massive Nautolan dressed in strange blue-and-gray robes, blue paint smeared across his brow and decorating his hands and bare arms. But that wasn't the most noticeable thing about the man: his head tentacles had been shorn away, leaving behind blunted and unnatural stumps. It was a brutal reminder that despite the man's kind smile, the galaxy, and its citizens, could be very, very violent.

"You must be Sunshine," the Nautolan said, holding his palms to the sky and bowing low. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance. You may call me the Herald."

Sunshine felt a deep sense of unease. "How did you know who I am?"

A smile tugged at the man's lips briefly before disappearing, and when he straightened, his large liquid black eyes held not a bit of guile. "The Mother asked me to meet you here. She dislikes Ferdan and avoids the city as much as possible. Being around so many living things can sometimes affect her ability to commune with the Force. If you'll follow me?"

Sunshine did not want to follow the Nautolan, but the woman he'd exchanged messages with had promised quite the payday if he was able to provide interesting artifacts. So Sunshine, who had a very large bill coming due to the Hutt Cartel for some gambling debts, touched his waistband to ensure his blaster was still there before following the Herald.

“Our compound is not far,” the Herald said, leading the way to a slightly less muddy road out of the small settlement.

“We’re leaving Ferdan?” Sunshine asked.

“Yes. Our people’s compound is outside of the city.”

“This is what passes for a city here?” Sunshine said, looking at the people watching them go. For the most part the residents did not seem to mind their passing, but there were a few who stopped and made a sign Sunshine recognized from the rykestra tables as meant to ward away bad luck. He hefted his knapsack and glanced at the Herald.

“Yes. Dalna is peaceful and sparsely populated. That is why we, the Path of the Open Hand, chose this place as our home. There is very little in the way of distractions. You’ll want to hurry, though. This is the rainy season, and during this time of year you’re likely to get soaked if you dally outside too long.”

Sunshine tried to walk faster, but he was short and stout, and the Nautolan was tall and massively built. By the time the first buildings belonging to the Path came into view, he was huffing, and despite the Herald offering a number of times to take his knapsack, Sunshine still gripped it tight. There was something about this strange man and the odd reactions of the people of Ferdan that had set Sunshine on edge.

When Sunshine and his guide rounded a gentle curve in the muddy road, a knot of people waited for them, all of them wearing garments similar to the Herald’s. Sunshine realized there was a pattern to their garb, with some wearing more blue than gray and the older members having more ornamentation, including oddly beaded necklaces and rich blue face paint. The lone human among the group, a brown-skinned woman with soft curls and bright eyes, wore silver, the cut of her robes noticeably better than the others. Her smile was calm and welcoming.

“Sunshine Dobbs, the Force welcomes you freely,” she said, doing an abbreviated version of the Herald’s bow: hands open, palms held to the sky. She did not bend at the waist or close her eyes. Instead she merely inclined her head toward Sunshine, her eyes locked on his.

Sunshine blinked, forgetting himself for a moment. His wariness melted away. "Ah, you must be the Mother."

"Please. Call me Elecia. The Mother is a title, not the name I go by." She flashed a smile, and a warm sensation began to spread through Sunshine, like when he'd had a bit too much to drink. "These are some of our Elders. They assist me in making difficult decisions."

"Ah, there are no hard choices to be made here," Sunshine said, sensing an opportunity. He hefted his knapsack and grinned. "Every artifact I have is a delight to behold, and resonates with the Force in every imaginable way."

Elecia's smile widened. "Oh, I certainly hope so. Come, you must be exhausted after such a long trip. We have some refreshments in our main hall."

They made their way through the compound, and Sunshine only vaguely noticed the children playing in the grass, all of them smaller copies of the adults: robes in blue and gray, blue face paint. There were older kids lying around, boys and girls talking to one another, and a group of younger kids played a complicated game of keeping a small sack aloft within a circle without using their hands. It would seem so utterly normal if it wasn't for the strange clothing and face paint.

But despite the novelty of it all, Sunshine found his gaze returning again and again to the Mother. So much so that one of the Elders, an elderly Twi'lek woman with wizened lekku, noticed and smiled at him.

"She is beautiful, is she not?" she said.

"Uh, I, yes. Yes, she is."

"It is because the Force shines through her," the woman said. "She speaks for it, and in exchange the Force blesses her with poise and beauty."

Sunshine frowned. "Is she a Jedi?" he asked. He didn't much care for Jedi and their mind tricks.

The old woman hissed and drew back. "No! The Mother is a prophet. She understands the Force must be free, not wielded as a weapon."

"Here we are," Elecia said, turning back over her shoulder to smile at Sunshine. "Elders, I would ask you to join us but you should see to

your meditation. The Herald will brief you on what is decided after, if that is okay?"

One by one the Elders nodded and peeled off from the group, walking toward the entrance to a cavern. Elecia turned back to him.

"I hope you don't mind. I figured it would be nice to have some privacy."

"Oh, um, yes," he said, words failing him. There was something quite intoxicating about the woman, so much so that he found it difficult to hold a thought in his head. Perhaps it was the planet. The air smelled sweet and fresh, and flowers bowed their heads in the breeze. It was an idyllic setting, to say the least, and Sunshine found his attention wandering. He wanted to stay here, in this lovely place with this lovely woman. Just the thought of leaving seemed impossible.

But then the Mother touched the back of his hand, and the strange sensation disappeared, bursting like a popped bubble. "Mr. Dobbs, are you okay?"

"Sunshine, Miss Elecia," he said with an uncertain smile. "Sorry, I wasn't myself for a moment."

"Sun sickness," the Herald said with a definite nod. "It happens sometimes. The dual suns of Dalna can be a bit strong to those who haven't lived in such an unrelenting light."

"Let us hurry inside to conduct these matters," the Mother said. "There are some refreshments that should help you feel better."

They entered the meeting house, which was, like the rest of the compound, clean and well maintained but completely unadorned. There were designs set into the walls with a strange rock, but nothing more. Sunshine had expected something like the Jedi Temple on Coruscant: spires and paintings and the like. He had gone once when he was young, although he couldn't remember why or with whom. He just remembered feeling small.

But the Path didn't make him feel the same way. Instead he felt warm and welcomed, like discovering his family after a very, very long time.

There was a bare table set aside, and the Herald indicated it with a sweep of his hand. "You may place your wares here while I fetch

the refreshments,” he said. As he moved away the Mother came over to inspect the items one by one as they were laid out. Sunshine tried to say nothing and focus on laying out the items, but the Mother made him nervous, and when he was nervous he had a tendency to ramble.

“So, you’re a Force user?” he began. The Mother frowned, and he immediately sensed it was the wrong thing to say.

“No, I am a prophet. I do not use the Force. I commune with it and try to share its will with all those who will listen.”

“Oh. The Herald said you disliked town because it has too many people.”

The Mother picked up a bracelet, frowned at it, and immediately put it back. “The Force is life itself, and being around too much of it can be draining.” She paused for a moment, as though considering. “Imagine a crowded room, with everyone yelling at each other in myriad languages. That is what traveling to a town is like for me. Noisy. Chaotic. Not pleasant at all. It’s why I prefer to stay here, where I can commune with the Force in a more manageable way. Even better is to be out amongst the stars, on our ship, the *Gaze Electric*. There it is only the harmony of the galaxy, the Force and its beautiful inhalations and exhalations.”

Sunshine paused, watching the Mother as she spoke, her eyes shining. He felt something in him shift, and he knew that he would work very hard to make this woman happy. And that was that. A smile from her would be enough.

But then the Mother was frowning at him. “Are you okay? You have a very strange expression on your face.”

Before he could answer, the Herald returned with a tray, two glasses of tea upon it. The Herald handed one to Sunshine and another to the Mother, but made it clear he would not partake of the refreshments. Once each had a glass, the towering Nautolan cleared his throat.

“This is an impressive set of artifacts, but I do not think it is what we are looking for. We originally contacted you looking for an artifact known as the Rod of Ages. It is part of a set. There are two others: the Rod of Seasons, owned by the Hynestian royal family, and the

Rod of Daybreak, which is rumored to be secured in a museum on Jedha.”

“Ah, yes, yes.” Sunshine drank deeply of the tea before turning once more to the wares he had laid out. It was mostly baubles and bits. Junk, really. But he’d counted on these backwater denizens not knowing the difference. “I am afraid that is pretty much a thing of legend. But! I do have a very nice bracelet here rumored to have been owned by a Lord of the Sith.”

“These are not what we are looking for,” the Mother said, disappointment clear in her voice. “Our group aims to liberate the Force in all ways, and that includes by obtaining Force artifacts so that they can no longer be abused. I am so sorry you wasted your time coming all the way out here. You were swindled. None of these items echo with the Force.”

Sunshine frowned. He could feel his opportunity slipping away. “Are you sure? This chalice, at least? It belonged to a Jedi who single-handedly ended a planetary civil war!”

The Mother gave him a sad smile, as though he were a child protesting an early bedtime. “I am quite sure. Don’t worry, we will still cover your fuel costs as agreed.”

“Wait! I have one item you haven’t seen.” Sunshine hefted the knapsack. He’d brought the jewel on a whim, since it was the oddest item in the collection. “This came from a far-off planet, on the other side of a maelstrom. An uncharted wonder of a planet, full of life, ruled by the Force.”

The Mother raised her eyebrows. “Truly?”

“Yes,” Sunshine said, pulling forth the jewel from his bag. It was grotesque in its size, with roughly the heft of an overweight tooka cat. Too big for jewelry, too gaudy to be a statement piece. More than that, the few people he’d tried to sell it to had been repulsed by the thing, as though it were something foul instead of a luminous purple orb.

But the Mother gasped aloud as she saw it fully revealed from the depths of the knapsack.

“Oh, yes.” She took the object as if it weighed very little, and her face became rapturous as she cradled it to her chest. “It sings with

the Force, alive and wondrous! Oh, the Force delights in this liberation. We shall take it, Sunshine. Please, name your price.”

Sunshine blinked, and he realized that he didn't want to leave. Not yet. There was something about this woman that was good and true and honest, and while Sunshine had always wanted to be good, he had never had much use for honesty.

“Perhaps, in exchange, you could allow me to help you locate more of these Force artifacts. Help you liberate the Force.” The Mother frowned, and he realized that he hadn't actually asked for anything for the strange jewel. “For a small finder's fee, of course.”

There was a pause, where Sunshine thought perhaps he had overstepped. But then the Mother smiled—at him! Only him!—and he realized he'd been terrified that she would say no.

“Sunshine, that is a very good idea. It will be a delight to work with you.”

Sunshine smiled. All this time he had been looking for a place where he felt wanted, and he had finally found it on a nothing planet in a nothing part of the galaxy.



ONE

When Jedi Padawan Kevmo Zink had been assigned with his master to the Outer Rim, he'd expected months of exploration, bizarre vistas, smugglers and thieves, dirty bars, run-down droids, pirates and moisture farmers, and maybe if he was lucky some time on Jedha. He had not expected to find himself balanced precariously on a rusty skimboard at the front of an absolutely massive herd of gold-striped grass sharks, all seventeen thousand of them barreling down the prairie right at him.

But it was *incredible*.

"Kev, move!" His master, Zallah Macri, yelled from the far edge of this band of prairie. He could barely hear her through the comlink, under the rumble of tens of thousands of clawed feet scraping through the grass and kicking up bright red dust.

Pressing down on the back of the skimboard with his heel, Kevmo shot forward and leaned into the movement to twist up and around. His robes snapped in the wind as he switched on his lightsaber, giving it a good swing right along the front edge of the herd.

Grass sharks screamed, leaping away, those at the front jabbing with their twisted tusks and knocking into those behind them in a violent domino effect that turned the herd incrementally. Toward Zallah, who'd take the next swing. Kevmo whooped in delight, waving his glowing yellow lightsaber at her like a signal flag.

Zallah, a tiny figure on her own skimboard, lifted higher and flew elegantly along the new front edge of the herd.

For hours they'd been playing this game, keeping the herd moving because they sure couldn't stop them. The grass sharks migrated every five years, dozens of smaller herds meeting up north of there to make the trek to their huge southern mating ground. For as long as there'd been a settlement at the edge of this prairie, the mass migration had taken the herd through a canyon a little to the west, bypassing the trade post with its hundred or so citizens waiting just over the ridge at Kevmo's back. Something this year had triggered the herd to shift in a different direction, and if the Jedi didn't keep them diverted, the settlement was ground meat.

Fortunately, another Jedi, Azlin Rell, was working on a fix. He just needed to do it a little bit faster.

Kevmo kept his attention split between the glow of Zallah's cool blue lightsaber and the grass sharks just below his skimboard. They were six-legged and striped gold, with massive crunching teeth and twisting tusks. Not really what he pictured when he heard *shark*. One lifted its snout and screamed; the call echoed throughout the herd until Kev couldn't even hear himself thinking.

To his right, the little red sun was setting, a hazy glow spreading across the sky as the red dust rose from the herd. They'd forced the animals into a huge circle twice, pushing them north before the head of the herd course-corrected back south again. Kevmo was tired and didn't know anything about this species or if they'd even stop at nightfall. The dark was not going to help them keep the herd out of the wrong canyon. "How's it going, Azlin?" he asked into his comlink. "I'm not sure how much longer we can keep this up—and if the sun sets..."

"The settlement should be evacuated by now," Zallah said, her voice scratchy.

"I've almost got it," Azlin said. "Just a few more minutes and See-Nine will—"

The rest of Azlin's assurance cut out as Kevmo's skimboard faltered with a high-pitched wail and pop of oily smoke.

Kev yelped and threw himself to the side, using a burst of the Force to unlatch his boot from the board. He pushed on the Force with all his strength, shoving his body away from the herd.

He slammed into the hard ground, which knocked the air from his lungs. Then he rolled up onto his feet and kept running, lightsaber tight in hand. The herd behind him was a roar of pounding steps, grunting, and squeals, and Kevmo had to make it to the outcropping of boulders at the foot of the red-rock ridge. Zallah was yelling something through the comlink, but he couldn't quite make it out or stop for clarification. Kevmo finally hit the first boulder and leapt, grasping at the lichen-covered stone. He dragged himself up and into a crouch.

The herd angled away, dodging the boulders and twisting away from the ridge. A flash of blue alerted Kev to Zallah's presence. She whipped past on her skimboard, lightsaber out, darting down and back, startling the leaders of the herd with the saber. It was painstaking, but they angled away again.

Kevmo's heart pounded in his ears, louder than the herd or the vibrating boulder under his feet. He grimaced at the ache in his skull. Now that he was still, his hip and ribs throbbed with pain from his fall. That rusty old skimboard! At least it had lasted that long. He'd be fine, but he really needed to eat. When he wiped sweat off his brow, the dark blue skin of his hand came away smeared in muddy red dust. *And* he needed a bath.

Suddenly, though there'd been no shift in the light or air or in the Force as far as he could tell, and no change in what Zallah was doing, the whole attitude of the herd of grass sharks seemed to change. They didn't swarm so chaotically but took off for the western canyon as if every single one of them knew exactly where they were supposed to go.

Kevmo stood up, stretching on his toes eagerly. He shaded his eyes from the setting sun with one hand and touched his comlink with the other. "Whatever you did, Azlin, I think it's working."

"Good to hear," Azlin said.

Then Zallah said, "I'm going to trace the herd for a bit longer, to make sure it continues working. Azlin, will you come fetch Kevmo? My apprentice has lost his skimboard."

Kevmo grimaced. "I'm fine!"

“On our way, Zallah,” Azlin acknowledged, both Jedi ignoring his protestations.

It still took a while for all seventeen thousand grass sharks to pass, and now that Kevmo could flop down on his boulder to wait, he appreciated the proportion of what they’d done even more.

Kevmo had been Zallah’s Padawan for nearly two years, the past four months of which they’d been working out of the new Jedi outpost at Port Haileap on a wild variety of missions. Several were the sort he’d expected: they’d escorted dignitaries and diplomats, babysat a couple of criminals, and investigated a smuggling ring trying to get in with the Hutts. Just three days earlier they’d rescued a team of hyperspace prospectors who’d crashed in the middle of a superstorm on the ocean moon of Amloch. They’d been due back at Port Haileap, but before they left the Amloch system, Zallah had hesitated and determined they needed to stay one more day. Nothing had happened in Amloch, but their delay meant they were right where they needed to be to hear Azlin Rell’s short-relay distress call and get to Tiikae just in time to divert the herd away from the settlement. Exactly where the Force wanted them.

Kevmo sprawled back, leaning on his hands, and grinned. He loved the Force, and he loved this work. The rumble of the herd filled the whole prairie valley, the little red sun cast hazy light against the edges of the ridge, and the sky turned a gorgeous violet. He was worn-out, hungry, and filthy, but it felt great.

The frontier was fantastic. He didn’t think he’d mind if he was out there forever.

The hum of an engine warned him the herd was truly moving off, their noise fading, and he turned to see Azlin’s shuttle buzzing toward him. He stood up and waved both arms, laughing. The shuttle slowed down and hovered near the boulder. The landing gear lowered with a huge rattle, and Kevmo hopped down, then dashed for the ramp. He waved red dust out of his face and jogged inside, calling out, “Thanks, Azlin! I’m on board!”

The ship moved under him, and Kev reached out to steady himself on the bulkhead. It was a standard single shuttle, smaller than the one he and Zallah worked out of—and often lived in. But Kevmo

knew the way directly to the cockpit. He nearly tripped over a short astromech droid with green markings, double tread rollers, and a funny little pincher sticking directly off the top of its dome that definitely wasn't typical.

"You must be See-Nine," Kevmo said, bowing slightly.

The droid beeped and turned easily in the tight space, leading Kevmo around to the cockpit.

The sun shot brilliant red through the viewscreen, lighting up the controls.

As Kevmo stepped in, the human Jedi with tan skin and short dark hair who could only be Azlin Rell glanced over his shoulder. "Thanks for your help," he said, then directed his attention back to the controls. The ship tipped as it picked up speed. "Zallah messaged me that she'd meet us at the port where your ship is."

Kevmo took the copilot chair, resisting the urge to sprawl into a relaxing stretch. Zallah wouldn't let him get away with such a thing, so he'd better not embarrass her in front of another Jedi. But Kevmo did smile. "This was really incredible. I can't believe we just did that! How did you move them?"

"We determined they use the magnetic field of the planet to choose their migration path, and the field has changed enough since the last mass migration that they shifted too close to the settlement."

Kevmo sat up straight. "You did not change the whole magnetic field of the planet."

Azlin slid him a look, as if he was embarrassed. "No, of course not. See-Nine helped me reconfigure a comms beacon to trick them."

Kevmo laughed brightly. "Trick them!"

C-9 beeped with a tone so clearly proud Kevmo didn't need to be good at binary to understand it. But Azlin shook his head. "It's our job," he demurred.

Instead of snorting, Kevmo just smiled. "Yeah," he agreed. "But still pretty incredible."

"It's just like a trick we used on Alderaan," Azlin said. "Used to keep night-lether flocks from flying into the tallest buildings."

Nodding, Kevmo leaned forward to get a good look at the settlement's lights, coming up around the ridge. He hadn't had a chance to see anything on this planet yet—other than seventeen thousand grass sharks and a whole lot of red dust. “So what's the best thing to eat around here?” he asked Azlin.



An hour later Kevmo was warm, clean, and ensconced in a booth in a smoky tavern with flickering lights, eating a bright red stew with tiny boiled seeds that popped when he chewed them. Azlin ate the same, and Zallah had finally joined them, having taken her turn in their shuttle head after Kevmo. She was Soikan, and her short white hair was slicked back after her shower. Zallah was tall and elegant and seemed to have been carved from ice—from her high brow and thin features to her silver skin, lilac eyes, and impeccably cool demeanor. But as she sat, she shot Kevmo a slight smile, which he took as total approval and grinned back at her.

Early on, Kevmo had not understood at all why she'd wanted him for her Padawan. He was gregarious and unable to stand still, ran hot, accidentally flirted with nearly every life-form he came across, and was overly tactile. Zallah did not like to be touched. Kevmo knew how to keep himself to himself and had only gotten better at soothing his own sparking nature, but he was a lot for most people.

Of course, Zallah was perfectly suited to guiding him as he learned how to engage with the Force—and people—with delicate precision instead of just overwhelming enthusiasm. And she'd known that. She said to him once, when he'd been struggling to rein in his tendency to fling himself directly into the Force, that she needed him, too. She said Kevmo reminded her that sometimes surrendering completely to the Force was the right thing to do.

Kevmo wouldn't really mind if he was her Padawan forever.

Zallah sat and signaled the server for a portion of the stew. Azlin slid her a mug of local sour tea, and she thanked him, took a sip, then said, “After the meal we need to go, Kevmo.”

“Already?”

“We’re needed on Hynestia. Someone stole an artifact from the queen there—it’s already been five days, while the message bounced around.” Zallah paused, her displeasure at the decrepit communications of the frontier obvious. “The Hynestians are demanding Jedi involvement, and we’re closer than Oliviah and Vildar.”

Kevmo swallowed a mouthful of stew and asked, “Why do they want us?” He didn’t know much about Hynestia, except they were very established on their homeworld and in its surrounding system, so more in contact with the Jedi and the Republic than a lot of the planets on the Outer Rim with less access to credits and tech. “Do they just want outsiders?”

“The stolen item is apparently a Force artifact of some sort.”

“Oh!” Kevmo nearly knocked over his mug.

Zallah sipped her own tea and raised an eyebrow at him. He settled himself and glanced at Azlin, who was doing his best not to smile at Kevmo’s enthusiasm.

“Azlin,” Kevmo said, leaning toward the slightly older Jedi. “You should come with us.”

“I need to finish up some reports and repairs here, and head back to Jedha to check in with the outpost,” Azlin said calmly.

While Kevmo couldn’t imagine passing up a chance to chase thieves in favor of filing reports, which could surely be done during transport, he supposed everybody was different—even Jedi. “That’s too bad,” he said. “I wanted to hear more about what you’ve been doing out here for the last couple of years.”

Azlin shrugged. “Same as you, I guess.”

Kevmo peered through the reddish light at the human, trying to decide if he was teasing him somehow—but no, Azlin seemed earnest. So Kevmo nodded and said, “Yeah. Same as me.” Then he raised his mug in a salute.



TWO

Marda Ro closed her eyes before dipping three long gray fingers into the pot of brikal-shell blue. She touched her fingers to her forehead and pulled the blue across in a gentle wave.

The pigment smelled faintly of the chalk they used to give weight to the crushed brikal shells, and a little sweet from the binding agent. Marda breathed it in and smiled at her reflection in the slightly tarnished mirror. She had only recently grown into her majority and been recognized as a fully fledged member of the Path of the Open Hand. She could finally wear the symbol of the living Force in threefold: freedom, harmony, and clarity. The waving blue lines filled her with a sense of rightness.

She stood, complete and ready for the day ahead. Her personal cell was small, only used for sleeping on the floor mat and holding her sparse belongings: two long undyed tunics and undergarments, a thick wool cloak, hair sticks, the pot of blue, a crystal-dust file for her sharp nails and teeth, and a shallow bowl of water in which floated three vivid purple leaves.

Marda touched one leaf to set them all spinning and opened her door with a glancing touch of the panel. Her sandals awaited her at the threshold, and she walked out into the reddish dawn. It was late spring on this side of Dalna, and the sky glowed violet as the first sun rose behind the triplet of snow-capped volcanoes. Marda's cell was one of several clustered like honeycomb at the southern edge of the Path of the Open Hand's commune. From her doorstep the meadow fell away toward the river and the sunlight shone against purple-red

leaves of the willowy trees. Crickets and grass frogs sang, and the lompop flowers were just beginning to snap open along the road toward the main compound, making their namesake pops as Marda walked past. Because she had time, Marda took the long way around to the commune's central garden, enjoying the easy beauty of her world.

As she went, Marda picked up a few stray petals and leaves and a pretty pink marcrow feather, taking only what had already fallen. Having come to the Path as children, Marda and her cousin grew up foraging for food and goods, farming under their own labor, and accepting gifts freely given from their neighbors in the nearby town of Ferdan. This way of life had instilled within Marda the habit of collecting anything that seemed either useful or simply lovely. She enjoyed finding value in what others discarded and beauty in the refuse of the natural world. It all served a purpose, even if that purpose was putting a smile on Old Waiden's face with the gift of a feather.

Marda had a small bouquet by the time she reached the garden where several other members of the Path had already gathered to share breakfast. She scattered the petals along the end of the long table and tucked the feather into Old Waiden's wiry black hair. The human Elder gave Marda a bowl of porridge in return, along with a soft smile. Marda perched on the bench and listened as her fellow early risers discussed the acolytes who'd gone out foraging before dawn, how the newest dedicants had settled in, and the progress of construction on the Mother's great venture: a ship to take the Path throughout the galaxy. The *Gaze Electric* was nearly complete, and Marda hid her eagerness in the last of her porridge. She longed to step into the ship and go with the Mother and her closest acolytes, the Children, up into the stars. Marda's cousin Yana was one of the lucky Children. Plucked from among the rest of the members before she'd even worn her own blue free Force icon, Yana had served the Mother for the past three years. At the same time, the Mother had chosen Marda to oversee the Littles, the actual children of the Path's members, who needed to be taught the basics of the Path's philosophies and farming techniques—not to mention reading and writing. Now that Marda was fully of age, she wanted to join the

Children and her cousin, too. Take her skills at teaching and her pure understanding of the Path of the Open Hand to proselytize across the Outer Rim. To act on behalf of the Force.

That was Marda's calling. She knew it. She could *feel* it.

"It will be nice to see Ferize and her partners again," said Efrik, one of the adult humans in the outer circle of acolytes. "Nobody is as good at finding sarroot as Er Dal."

Marda spoke up. "I believe the hatching will be today."

Efrik grinned, and the anticipation rippled down the entire table. Ferize and her partners had been isolated in their nesting cell for nearly six weeks. "That's wonderful," Efrik said. "What an auspicious day for it—Ferdan's day of rest is today, and the Herald and the Council of Elders suggested we invite those newcomers from the refugee ship from Eiram that landed two days ago here for shelter."

"It will be a good way to welcome new siblings," Jezra'lin added—they were a Mon Calamari child, and their bulbous eyes blinked as they spoke.

"We need the people after this winter," Mykge said sourly. His pale, sallow skin clung to his bones, and Marda lowered her gaze so as not to let him see her disapproval at his attitude. It had been a very difficult winter for the Path, thanks to an awful streak of freezing weather and a too-wet summer before. They'd been very hungry and very cold for months. But that was the way of life in harmony with the Force. That was the freedom of the Open Hand. And the Mother provided for them better than they'd provided for themselves before she arrived.

"Refugees won't have much to bring," Efrik told Mykge.

Marda took a fortifying breath. She needed to be willing to defend the Path even from its own members if she wanted to be chosen to work at the Mother's side. "What they have will be enough, if it is freely offered."

Silence followed her words. Efrik grimaced but nodded, and Jezra'lin leaned toward Marda. They said, "May I go with you to check on the hatching?"

"Please," Marda said, and finished her porridge.

Someone else brought up gathering sphere vines from the branches of the river trees to string up around the garden to make it more festive in honor of the hatching and welcoming new refugees. As they all considered the best decorations and if they had enough honey left to make string candy, Marda washed her bowl and returned it with the others, kissed Old Waiden, who minded the communal pot, and beckoned Jezra'lin to follow if they still wished.

Together they walked deeper into the compound, under six arching water pines, toward the entrance to the underground complex housing the Path's storage rooms, communal winter cells, and nesting cells. Jezra'lin chatted the entire time about nothing much at all, which Marda found endearing. The Mon Calamari was like a happy little bird, hopping several steps for every one of Marda's, their movements jerky but filled with life.

The underground complex was built into natural caves in these foothills of the ancient mountain chain. From above, the Path of the Open Hand appeared to be a group of thirteen or so small buildings plus five clusters of personal cells, built with bricks of the vivid dark-pink local granite. But two of the buildings concealed natural sinkholes that had been modified into safe entrances to the caves. The first settlers who'd founded the Path over a century before had discovered the caves like a gift from the Force—warm, ready-made homes for them. They'd built up the walls of the sinkholes over time, carved small channels through the rock for light and air, and installed a very modest system of plumbing pipes, making everything quite livable.

Marda keyed in her access code, then she and Jezra'lin descended. The air was warm and damp underground, and lights blinked to life as they progressed.

The hum of the nesting cell reached them almost immediately, and Marda smiled at Jezra'lin—the hum was how she'd known the hatching would be soon. At the door to the cell, Marda scratched gently with her sharp nails. She heard a voice inside and nodded for Jezra'lin to open the door. It slid aside a crack, and they slipped in quickly before closing it, to preserve the damp warmth the Kessarine preferred for incubation.

Jezra'lin took Marda's hand as their eyes grew accustomed to the soft pink-silver glow. The nesting cell was the same dark-pink stone as the rest of the caves, but the dome was streaked with striations of sun opal that glittered and gleamed between layers of rock. On the surface directly above them, small puddles of opal faced the sky, and as the sun rose, the veins drew light down into the nesting chamber. The fine gravel whispered under their sandals as the two approached.

Five perfectly spherical eggs leaned together in the center of the cavern, shining like dull yellow pearls. Ferize crouched beside them, a hand on one and her tail unfurled to cup the eggs—and her two partners, both of whom were smaller than Ferize but with several tails each. One snored softly, his head buried between two eggs; the other waved webbed fingers at Marda. She held her hands open, palms out, and nodded in greeting. Then she nudged Jezra'lin to do the same. Together they went to kneel beside Ferize.

“Will it be today?” Marda asked softly.

“Within the hour,” said the Kessarine mother.

Marda reached out and placed three fingertips against the nearest egg, careful with her sharp clawlike nails. The egg's shell was warm, and very hard. When they'd first been laid, they'd been softer, almost jellylike. Marda traced three wavy lines against the egg and murmured, “The Force will be free.”

Ferize's cheek frills dipped in the smile of her species, so Marda offered the same to the remaining four eggs while Jezra'lin nearly vibrated with excitement. As Marda left her hand on the last egg, it wobbled under her palm.

Both Ferize's partners sat up in sharp attention. They slipped nearer, speaking quickly in their own language, then the one who had waved at Marda said, “Time.”

The three Kessarine began to hum along with the ambient purr of their eggs but changed the tone here and there. Marda clutched her hands together and said to Jezra'lin, “Hurry and go tell the Elders.”

The Mon Calamari hopped up and dashed out.

In the hazy pink-silver light, Marda watched the first egg crack. The parents hummed and cooed encouragingly, and before the first

baby was born, another egg started to break, too. Marda gathered shards of shells and tucked them into a nook in the cavern wall for later. Her entire body buzzed with the thrill of birth, as if she could feel the Force itself growing stronger with the new life.

Sweat trickled down her spine as she took one of the babies, holding its furred little body in both hands as Ferize wiped fluids out of its nubby frills then turned to the next egg, leaving Marda with the baby. It weighed so little, breathing fast with a little distressed whine. Marda kissed its sticky forehead and laughed, giddy. Its tiny egg teeth jutted out like tusks, and she knew they'd fall away soon—she wondered if she ought to be ready to catch them. Did they have use? Marda smiled big enough to show her own sharp teeth, though the baby's eyes were barely open, squinting and crusted with hatching fluids. Oh, she should wash it.

Just then Ferize handed her another baby, and Marda cradled them both while the parents focused on the remaining eggs. Marda sat with her legs crossed beside the sink and ran some cool water into the basin. She settled the babies in the crooks of her knees and carefully washed them.

By the time all five eggs had hatched, the first baby's eyes were wide, and it chewed on the end of Marda's sleek black braid. One egg tooth had fallen out, but the second baby's were intact.

"Marda," came the familiar, laughing voice of her cousin Yana. The older girl crouched beside her, fully dressed in her green-and-gold Children's tunic, complete with boots and blaster strapped under her arm. Marda frowned at the weapon.

Then she realized the nesting cell was filled with members of the Path. At least thirty, crowding against the opal-striated walls, smiling and caring for the newly expanded family. Ferize and her partners leaned into each other's shoulders, their tails tangled comfortably together.

"Oh, everyone is here," Marda said. She handed one of the babies to Yana, who grimaced but accepted. Marda stood with the other baby in her arm and tapped on her cousin's bare gray forehead. "Where is your icon?"

“I was in a hurry,” Yana said, snapping her sharp teeth playfully at the baby she held away from her body in both hands.

“Like this.” Marda showed her, but then Yana laughed and instead gave the baby to Jezra’lin, who was bouncing on their toes beside her.

“I don’t need to hold them. There are so many willing and eager. But come on, Cousin, let’s get you cleaned up, too.”

Reluctantly, Marda took the baby in her arm to Ferize. The Kessarine tugged Marda’s braid affectionately, and Marda let her cousin drag her away from the nesting cell and up into the daylight.

Marda sighed contentedly as Yana pulled her through the compound and out into the fields. “Where?” Marda said, and Yana snorted and jerked her chin toward the river.

Then they raced. Yana was older and stronger, with sturdier boots, but Marda was quick—she lost anyway, and Yana waited at the bank, then shocked Marda by picking her up off her feet and tossing her straight into the water.

Shrieking, Marda let herself fall under, fully dressed, and sank to the muddy river bottom. She stretched out, reveling in the sensations of the current as it dragged at her body and pulled her hair free of its braid. The river surrounded her, and even when she shot up gasping for breath, it stuck to her skin and hair, and Marda delighted in it. It was life, it was the Force, it was freedom of the Path. They had five new lives among their ranks, and more refugees would join them; she knew it.

Once clean, Marda wrung out her hair and tunic, then put it back on before climbing out to join Yana on the bank. Her cousin leaned against a tree, absently playing with the coils of bark shedding from the trunk. “Ready?” she asked.

“I need to reapply my blue,” Marda answered. “There’s some in my cell.”

They walked in silence, companionable on Marda’s side, expectant on Yana’s. But neither spoke until Marda had changed into a fresh tunic and offered Yana the pot of blue to apply. They did it for each other, murmuring, “The Force will be free.”

Marda couldn't remember a time before she lived with the Path of the Open Hand, but she suspected Yana did. They were the only two Evereni there, or anywhere that they knew of: with long bones and bright gray skin, sharp teeth and nails, and solid black eyes that reflected only dark blue. One man in Ferdan had called them "planet killers" once, and Yana had snarled at him, but Marda didn't mind. Evereni were part of the Force, too. They'd been very young then, before Yana had found her place among the Children, before Marda truly understood the freedom of the Path.

With the matching waves of blue across their foreheads, it was even more obvious they were related, though Yana's work and rank had bulked her up, while Marda remained lithe and bony from lack of rich foods. But it suited them both, giving them a sharp danger that Yana used to every advantage and Marda mitigated with downcast eyes and a gentle manner until she seemed more delicate.

They headed back for the main compound garden to help with the festivities. Their companionable silence remained until a freighter ship blasted off from the nearby town of Ferdan and shot across the sky. Its engine whine scared a flock of marcrows that scattered like the rainbows of a prism against the deep blue sky.

Yana paused to watch the freighter disappear up into the atmosphere and said, "We're leaving again tonight."

Marda bit back a gasp. "I want to go."

"You can't," Yana said dismissively. She started walking again. "It's not your kind of work."

"I can do whatever you can do, Yana," Marda insisted. The back of her neck heated with excitement, despite her still-wet hair hanging heavily. "I can reach out to new people. I can recruit! Spread the word. It's all I want. I am good at it."

"Prideful," Yana teased.

"Truthful," Marda countered. "It's important to be confident when we represent the Path."

Yana touched her wrist. "It's Children only."

"I'm ready. I can serve the Mother—I know I can. She is so much in harmony with the Force, with the Path, Yana. I can learn how to be part of a ship, part of the Children."

Yana glanced sidelong at her, with something in her expression Marda didn't understand. It was too suspicious. "You know what else we do."

Marda felt her cheeks heating. "Liberate Force artifacts from those who would abuse them."

"Liberate." Yana snorted with amusement. "It's stealing."

"It's necessary for balancing the Force, to serve the Force." Marda lifted her chin stubbornly. "The Mother has visions, gifts from the Force, so that you know where you're needed, how to acquire the artifacts."

"I know how it works, Cousin."

Marda softened her voice. "I'm a fast learner. You could teach me."

Yana stopped. She studied Marda. Sometimes Yana did something with her expression and eyes so even Marda couldn't read her. Marda knew Yana believed in the Path and served the Mother diligently, and even enjoyed the missions offworld. But sometimes she worried that what Yana wanted for the future was a divergent path from her own.

Finally, Yana said, "You can ask, but she'll say no."

Marda clicked her sharp teeth determinedly.

The central garden courtyard rang with conversation and tinkling bells, sphere vines in every shade of green and blue bobbing from ropes across the yard. There were streamers and bouquets of everblue branches, and white incense smoke curled up from the four corners. Marda saw Ferize and her partners cushioned on blankets and holding their new babies for everyone to greet. On the long table were bowls of cider and small towers of honey candy, a few bottles of gnostra berry wine probably from town, and candied fruit and boxes of pastries certainly from town. Most people wore the simple tunics of the Path, but there were others, newcomers and visitors. Two small droids near the road to town projected competing music, and Marda nearly laughed as they fought with percussion.

But then she saw the Mother.

Ah, she was so handsome and bright, in her silver-lined blue tunic and elaborate hair wrap. She smiled as she talked with a handful of

townspeople. They leaned toward her, as affected as everyone when the Mother drew their attention.

Though Marda had intended to have a sip of cider and say hello to the guests of honor first, she felt that same compulsion and walked directly to the Mother. Her head pounded. This was the moment. It had been a glorious morning, a morning with new hope and expansion of the living Force. Auspicious, Efrik had said, and, oh, yes, it was. Marda thought maybe she was glowing, too, with harmony and life.

As she reached the Mother, the Mother turned and caught sight of her. Her warm brown eyes widened in pleasure, and before she could speak, Marda sank onto her knees.

“Mother,” she said, hands open at her sides. She tilted her chin up. “Mother, let me go with you. Let me stand with you, hold my hands open with you, and spread our message, no, our true comprehension of the Path with the people of the Outer Rim. I am ready.”

The Mother studied her as those gathered near fell quiet in a hush of anticipation. Only the clashing music from the droids interrupted the soft breeze and the chatter of Marda’s found family.

As the Mother reached out for her, Marda smiled. The Mother touched Marda’s temple, just at the edge of her blue lines. She caressed her cheek, a loving gesture, and Marda leaned into it.

But then the Mother, with that beatific smile, said, “No.”



THREE

Yana Ro leaned against one of the tables of food, a feast for the Path but a pittance compared with the abundance the Children enjoyed regularly offworld, and picked through a pile of fruit. She wasn't hungry; it was just something to do besides watch her cousin embarrass herself once more.

But despite the annoyance she felt at knowing Marda wouldn't heed her advice, Yana wasn't quite able to keep her gaze off of her cousin as she approached the Mother and fell to her knees.

"You glorious fool," Yana whispered, knowing the exact moment the Mother rejected Marda's plea once again. Her shoulders slumped, despite the Mother's hand on her temple. Marda wanted so badly to be one of the Children, but despite her obviously deep faith in the Force and the Mother, she was too earnest to be a thief. Even a righteous one.

"Oh, no. Is Marda pleading her case again?" came a familiar voice.

Yana looked over her shoulder to see Kor Plouth, daughter of the Herald and Yana's long-term girlfriend, approaching. The Nautolan wrapped her arms around Yana's middle, head tresses nudging Yana's ear as she hooked her chin over Yana's shoulder. Kor tilted her head and frowned, her large, pupilless dark eyes narrowing. "You're upset."

"Frustrated," Yana clarified. Sometimes the sensitivity of Kor's head tresses and their ability to detect the small pheromone changes

that emotions caused in Yana's body were annoying. But Kor pried only because she cared, so Yana reached up and stroked a tress lovingly. "Marda will never end up one of us. And it hurts me that she keeps pursuing it."

"You can't fault her for having goals. Especially lofty ones," Kor said, curling her hand around Yana's throat in a caress. Yana melted into it just as Kor stepped away. "Come. Cincey is readying the briefing. You won't want to be late."

Yana nodded and gave one last look to Marda, still kneeling in the grass but surrounded by a few of the Elders, who comforted her with pats and soft words, before following Kor's long strides across the plain.

Most of the dwellings of the Path were in the network of caves underground, an economical lodging that the Elders said the Force had naturally provided. But there were a handful of ramshackle outbuildings, as well, squat houses for the largest families and those who were too frail to make the trek underground. Behind all this was Cincey's domain, a building that seemed little more than a hovel. But in reality, it was the nerve center of the Path, a place where communications were sent and received.

Sending messages to loved ones outside of the Path was not forbidden, but it was definitely discouraged. Contact with those outside the group could easily tarnish the Path. Cincey, a human of no more than twenty years with dark skin and a sharp laugh, managed the communications, censoring the outgoing messages when necessary on behalf of the Elders. But a far more important job was the information they collected. That data eased the way for the Children to fulfill their true purpose offworld.

Cincey twisted their hoverchair around when Yana and Kor entered, a smile on their face. "Finally! I was about to send Treze to find you."

A pink-skinned Mikkian perched on a nearby table, his head tendrils waving as he listened to the conversation. He twirled a throwing knife between his fingers and snickered. "I can't believe you two went to that recruiting feast."

“It wasn’t just for recruitment. The Kessarine hatched. There is also new life to celebrate,” Kor said, her dark gaze daring Treze to say something. Of all the Children, Kor was the most dedicated to her belief in the teachings of the Path. Her family owed everything to the Path, and since Kor’s mother, Opari, had fallen ill, they’d become even more devout. Which was really saying something since Kor’s father was the Herald and spent most of his time in service to the Mother and the Council of Elders.

Treze thought it was all a bit silly and often said his family had joined the Path to avoid their debts more than anything else. Cincey joined under the Mother’s influence, because it was better than thieving in the lower levels of Coruscant. Yana didn’t remember a life before the Path. She and Marda had been brought to Dalna as children after a terrible attack that had killed their grandparents and Yana’s sire. The Path was all Yana knew, but when she heard Marda or Kor talk about how the Force should be free, fervor lacing their words, she was hard pressed to feel anything but bored. The Force was just one more piece of the galaxy, nothing that special as far as she could tell. Except in how fanatical people could get about it. But the Path was home—for now. As much of a home as an Evereni could have.

While Yana did not care about the Path, she did love the work of the Children. And it was difficult not to want to impress the Mother. Since the Mother had arrived several years before, with her Force visions and passion for liberation, the Path had felt safer. Grandeur.

And even Treze watched the Mother with awe.

“So, what are we looking for this time?” Yana asked.

Cincey poked a few buttons, and a holo flashed to life: a narrow stiletto with a black blade. “It’s a Force dagger, and the message said explicitly we aren’t to unsheathe it. Apparently it’s rumored to be evil or something, and meant to cut someone off from the living Force with a single slice.”

“That’s impossible,” Kor said, leaning away from the holo in horror. “The Force is part of us. Part of everything.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Yana murmured, perching on a high stool while Kor sat next to Treze on the room’s lone table. Treze murmured

something to Kor, and her glance slid over to Yana, but Yana ignored it. It was probably just more of Treze's bantha fodder about never trusting an Evereni. Yana knew the reputation her kind had throughout the galaxy, and she'd talked to Kor about it more than once. Kor understood, and nothing Treze said would be able to twist her feelings. Yana found that a little naive but also endearing. Almost enough to fall in love.

To be Evereni was to learn trust was weakness, and it was one of the lessons Yana had taken to heart. She remembered the stories of how their family had been slaughtered in the dead of night, and she'd been out in the galaxy enough to know life was bite or be bitten. It was one of the reasons she wanted Marda to remain on Dalna: let one of them be better than the rest of their kin. Marda trusted and cared for others; she had never learned to lock her soft heart away. Going out into the galaxy would break her. Not everyone was as kind as the Path. Not every place had the Mother.

"Yana, do you think you can slice it?" Kor said, pulling Yana from her thoughts.

Yana blinked and looked at the holoprojection in the middle of the table. The stiletto had been replaced, and she squinted at the mock-up of the security system. "I guess we'll find out," she said, not bothering to admit that she'd missed whatever Cincey had been saying before. The human had a bit of a temper, and Yana was in no mood for one of their usual tantrums.

Still the side-eye look Cincey gave her made it clear that they knew she hadn't been paying attention. "Okay, so just to go over this one more time: The dagger is being kept in a Republic storage locker in Port Haileap, among a collection of several other weapons, which may or may not also be Force artifacts. The message we got from our contact said the evil dagger clouded her vision of the others. The docks and station itself are all pretty new, but they haven't had time to really put any security protocols in place. You all set up with the usual song and dance. 'Join the Path, protect the Force, blah blah blah.' Treze will trigger this fire alarm over here in the main corridor to distract the officials there while Yana slices the security system to open up the secured area. Kor will grab the goods, and once they're secured, you'll join the rest of the Children in trying to gather new

members for the Path. Any questions?” Cincey said, looking right at Yana.

“How’re we getting there?” Kor said.

Cincey nodded. “Treze finished repairing the malfunctioning array on the *Harmony* this morning, and Yana, you have the new registration ready?”

Yana nodded. “I started as soon as we got back last time. The Herald is worried about unwanted attention after the object we liberated from Hynestia.”

The Herald was the original leader of the Path, guiding them under advice from the Elders, though now everyone listened to the Mother’s word first. She was a prophet, after all. Kor’s father was a serious, solemn man, with violently shorn head tresses because of an incident in his youth. Like so many members of the Path, he’d come to Dalna when he was still very young, looking for a place where he was accepted and appreciated despite his disability. He had resisted the Children’s work initially, but the Mother’s clear understanding of the Force and obvious passion for collecting Force artifacts for safekeeping had won him over. Instead of simply living in harmony with the Force, they acted to create better balance in the galaxy.

“It was a glorious act,” Treze said with a wistful smile, his pink head tentacles waving slowly, mesmerizing in the way they undulated. “In and out before they were any the wiser. Why can’t they all be that perfect?”

“Because some people forget that not everything is an audition for a holo-show,” Kor said, standing. “Let’s get going. The sooner we can get there and back, the better. I don’t want to miss Naming Day for the hatchlings. It’s bad enough that we missed the hatching.”

“The Force will forgive the trespass. Especially once we finish funding the build of the *Gaze Electric* and we can spread the message of the Path throughout the galaxy,” Cincey said. “You leave tomorrow, but it’s going to be a quick turnaround. You’d better not miss the naming. The Herald is not quite as forgiving as the Force.”

Yana, Kor, and Treze left Cincey’s and began to walk toward Ferdan, the nearby town where they docked the Path’s ship. There were rooms there where they would stay the night, out of sight of the

Path, to better prepare themselves for their upcoming work. Yana knew it was because the Herald wanted to obfuscate their comings and goings as much as possible. But it was also a chance for them to cut loose before a big job. Once in town they would shed their robes and have fun, their responsibilities forgotten for one glorious moment before the work began.

Kor linked her arm through Yana's, and Yana grinned at Treze's narrowed eyes.

"What were the two of you whispering about?" Yana said when the Mikkian stomped on ahead, clearly annoyed at Kor's display of affection.

"Oh, nothing. Just his usual static."

Yana nodded along as Kor changed the subject to a discussion of the Kessarine hatchlings. But secretly she was wondering at what point Treze would outlive his usefulness.

Because as soon as that happened, Yana would show him just how treacherous an Evereni could be.



FOUR

As the skiff broke the Dalnan atmosphere, Kevmo Zink could not keep still. His left heel dancing lightly against the metal deck was the only outlet for his energy. The rest of him focused on guiding the controls as he piloted them toward the docking beacon at Ferdan.

Kevmo couldn't see the town yet but skimmed over the peaks of three volcanoes toward the purple-and-green forest at their feet. He wanted to pull up and turn the ship for a joyride around the northern edge of this supercontinent while the red suns blazed. Skiffs performed excellent split rolls, and the sky was perfect. But they were on a hunt, and Kevmo knew from experience that the argument that aerobatics genuinely helped him with his focus and his relationship with the Force would not fly with his master. And...it was probably for the best.

"Kevmo," the Soikan Jedi said in her coolest voice.

He stopped his leg and smiled apologetically without glancing at her. Taking a deep breath, Kevmo stilled his thoughts and calmed the threads of his constantly reaching awareness. He checked the skiff's bearings and flicked the communication switch, indicating their approach to the beacon. In the Outer Rim the smaller ports were often unsupervised, and Ferdan was no exception, with only a droid managing the beacon. It made absolutely no sense that the Hynestian Rod of Seasons had been smuggled all the way out to Dalna. Yet there they were.

The Hynestian queen had been furious to have her rod stolen and demanded the aid of the Jedi, but the culprits hadn't left anything behind. They'd been in and out with surprising ease, given the security of the palace. The theft had taken place during a time when many different groups of people had visited the capital city, more than usual thanks to a local festival. Kevmo and Zallah had sifted through immigration evidence for hours looking for any possible leads, and their best one was that a missionary group from Dalna had registered with the port authority for two days. And there was a rumor that there was a buyer especially interested in Force-related artifacts on Dalna. The planet hadn't been a priority for the Jedi because nobody had been hurt and until then there hadn't been obvious thefts involved—as far as they were aware. Everyone had a right to the Force, as long as any artifacts were legally and safely acquired.

This part of Dalna, from above, looked like a fertile agricultural paradise to Kevmo. Snowcapped volcanoes circled the river valley. Tall purple and spreading red-green trees lined the river, spilling into a rolling prairie that glistened with wide opal deposits like pools of rainbows. The town of Ferdan didn't look like much, but Kevmo bet they had really delicious fruit and baked goods there.

The droid managing the port beacon acknowledged them, and Kevmo nudged the skiff into its final descent.

It was a simple drop, and the moment the landing gear made contact, Zallah unlatched her safety harness and left the cockpit. Kevmo put the skiff through its shutdown procedures and joined her to grab his things. They'd be staying in Ferdan, because even though Kevmo and Zallah weren't currently assigned to a Republic Pathfinder team, part of their mission remained doing that work: introducing themselves to the locals to learn as much as possible about their needs and opinions, scouting potential locations for future temple outposts, and looking out for Force-sensitive children.

Most of the planets they visited had their own sentient indigenous populations, but nothing like that ever evolved on Dalna, and the planet had been settled off and on in a remarkably haphazard way. Probably thanks to the unstable belt of super volcanoes basically ringing the whole planet. They'd been quiet for more than a century, though, and Ferdan was the heart of one of several agrarian centers

—as well as an apparent smuggler outpost and open market. Right in the middle of a huge underground caldera.

At his bunk, Kevmo stuffed his cloak in his bag and tied his heavy black braids into a club at the nape of his neck, careful to pull the tiny Padawan braid free to fall forward over his shoulder. Then he tugged it, a reminder of his old habit when he'd first put it in, because the presence of that specific braid comforted him, reminded him he belonged—just like the bright gold clan tattoos striped across his blue cheeks.

Then Kevmo grinned at himself, excited, and hurried to join Zallah where she waited with her hands clasped calmly behind her back. She did not look at him, but when he stepped beside her, vibrating with anticipation, there was a tiny impression at the corner of her ice-blue lips. He'd learned to read it as a micro expression of amusement.

She tilted her head in inquiry, and he nodded: he was ready. He reached out and hit the lever to open the skiff.

Calling the strip of pinkish land where Kevmo had set down the skiff a port turned out to be extremely generous. Kevmo laughed lightly at the squelch of mud when the boarding ramp extended. But the air smelled good—like rain and astringent flowers behind the exhaust. He centered himself as quickly as possible and followed Zallah down the ramp.

The town spread out in short one- and two-story buildings of pink stone and gnarled pale wood that clearly had been pulled out of a river. Like many frontier settlements, it was a combination of thrown-together local build and prepackaged housing. To Kevmo it felt full of potential. People there didn't have a lot, but they used every advantage.

They stopped in the port office, and Kevmo filled out the required registration for parking their skiff, then paid the charge plus a little extra. He couldn't help it. There were only two other ships at port, a cargo hauler and a run-down, obviously repurposed pleasure cruiser. Ferdan needed the credits.

As they headed into town, Kevmo took in everything he could while Zallah drifted at his side. The streets were full of people from all

over the galaxy. Kevmo recognized many species—Mon Calamari, human, Chagrian, a family of Grans, and even a Wookiee very far from home—but there were several people totally strange to him. Everyone had the weary look of refugees and rustic farmers, and paid little attention to Kevmo and Zallah, despite their Jedi robes and the lightsabers hanging from their belts. Zallah drew looks for her elegance and cold demeanor, but Kevmo slipped under the radar. There they were only as threatening as any new face. Kev liked that—the nearer one got to Coruscant, the more opinions everybody had about Jedi, and those opinions, whether good or bad, got in the way of their work.

At a broad crossroads, Zallah paused. Her glance directed him to the tavern across the way and the flickering holo projected from the first-story eaves declaring rooms for rent. Kevmo nodded.

“I will acquire rooms and seek information in the bar,” his master said. “You head into that market for supplies and do what you do best.”

Kevmo nodded and handed her his pack. She meant make friends with everyone he came across. By sundown he’d have the start of a network of gossip in Ferdan.

Zallah studied him for a moment, then said, “Remember the difference between trusting your feelings and enthusiastically expressing them.”

A laugh bubbled up from his chest, but he managed to choke it back and only smile in response. The blue-white skin around Zallah’s eyes tightened in her version of an eye roll.

With a jaunty little bow, Kevmo turned on his heel and was off in the opposite direction of the tavern, toward the busy market.

The afternoon sun gleamed off the dark metal of the booths lining the market street as sellers yelled out in several languages but mostly Basic. Kevmo passed ruby-red fruits and leafy orange vegetables, candied nuts, grass hens already plucked and strung up by their legs. He chatted with an old Rodian tending a booth with personal sun shields, charming her into describing a map of the neighborhoods in town. A family of humans all covered in freckles and selling water purifiers and jars of pickled vegetables elaborated on the local

population, including the newest camp of refugees from Eiram and E'ronoh, and the nearby cultists called the Path of the Open Hand. Those were the ones who'd been on Hynestia Prime, but Kevmo tried to hide his deep interest in the target. The market teemed with people from across the galaxy, bumping into him, yelling, laughing, haggling—and Kevmo breathed it all in.

He wanted to stop in the middle of the market, surrounded by all that chaos and life, and just plop down to meditate. The Force thrummed around him: Kevmo was fairly certain he could vibrate with it if he closed his eyes and let go. The Force was so brilliant, just like the suns blazing overhead, and it was noisy with light and life.

Kevmo did have to pause in the shade of a juice stand, just to remind himself to center. He was one being, part of the living Force but his own. It was those boundaries he needed to hold, what separated him from others, from the ground and sky and stars. He needed to block out the glorious crush of life around him, and he needed to buy himself and Zallah some dinner.

Reaching for the Force, he welcomed the warm flow of it, letting himself feel how it pulsed in his heart, and then just as it flooded through him, he carefully, purposefully narrowed his connections. The Force dimmed, distant stars instead of the blazing sun, and Kevmo smiled.

He wiped sweat from his brow, flicked his braids back over his shoulder, and opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was a beautiful girl in plain undyed robes, surrounded by children and flowers. Her black hair was sleek and twisted into a knot at her dark gray neck, adorned with tiny white and yellow blossoms. Three blue waves marked her forehead, reminding him of his family tattoos. She smiled sweetly as she turned one of the children around, directing them to offer a small bouquet of those same flowers to a passerby. As Kevmo stared, the girl suddenly looked back at him: her eyes were solid black, as black as space, and for a moment he could swear he saw stars shine in them.

Kevmo didn't even try to stop himself from heading her way.

She stood in a cluster of younglings—a Rodian, a Mikkian, two adorable Klatooinians, three humans, a Gran, and a tiny Mon

Calamari literally bouncing in place. They occupied one of the rusty tables at that end of the market available for anyone's use, selling—no, giving away—flowers. White river roses floated in water-filled bowls, and scraggly bouquets of meadow blossoms and wilting orange starium and random feathers were scattered across the table. They had a small banner with Aurebesh words painted in vivid blue: *The Path of the Open Hand. Freedom, Harmony, Clarity.*

Oh. He'd come right to them.

Kevmo stopped within arm's reach of the table and smiled at the girl. "Hi."

Her lashes fluttered as she glanced away. "Hello." Her gaze moved back to his, as if she couldn't do anything but look at him.

An introduction stuck to Kevmo's tongue as he studied her, feeling even warmer than before. His lips parted, but none of his usual easy conversation fell out. He wanted to—

Suddenly, the girl darted forward to grasp the wrist of the Rodian child who was in turn reaching for Kevmo's lightsaber. "Hallisara," the girl said with a bit of panic as she snatched the Rodian's hand away.

Kevmo angled his body back, letting out a light chuckle. "Hallisara, is it?" He crouched. "It's not a toy, but here." Unclicking the lightsaber, he held it carefully in both hands. "You can touch there along the grip, gently."

The little Rodian's turquoise antennae twitched, and she reached out to place one suckered finger exactly where Kevmo had indicated. Her big black eyes widened even further, and she said, "Oh," very reverently. Kevmo thought Rodians saw a different light spectrum than Pantorans, but he wasn't sure what. To him, his lightsaber was gorgeous, plated with red gold and an alloy that reflected the sun like mirrors, but maybe the child saw something totally different.

"What is it?" the girl in charge of all the younglings asked.

"A lightsaber." Kevmo glanced up at her. "A weapon."

Her pretty mouth turned down. Her deep black eyes were incredible, even when she was concerned. Kevmo could see the light in them still, and the sweep of darker gray shading back toward her slightly scalloped ears. He had no idea what her people were. She was entirely new to him. And he didn't want to believe she was a

thief. He stood, holding her gaze as he reattached his lightsaber to his belt. "My name is Kevmo Zink," he said. "I just landed on Dalna."

The girl blinked and smoothed her hands down her plain tunic. "I am Marda Ro, from the Path of the Open Hand. These are our older Littles." She indicated the nine children surrounding her. One of the humans hid behind Marda's arm, the Mikkian twisted two of her vivid yellow head tendrils together, the two Klatooinian siblings stuck out their lower jaws to display their big blunt teeth, and the rest grinned at him.

"I like your tattoos!" cried the bouncing Mon Calamari, blinking their bulbous eyes one at a time.

Kevmo laughed. "Thank you, youngling. They were for my birth family." He'd already had the tattoos when he was taken to the Temple, and while he honored the lines of Pantoran poetry, the Jedi were his family. He flicked his gaze to the blue waves on Marda's forehead.

She reached up as if to touch but did not quite. "These are for the Force."

Kevmo startled. "The Force! The Path of the Open Hand is about the Force?" That would explain why they were involved in stealing Force-related artifacts. If they were.

Marda nodded slowly, either shy or hesitant in the face of his enthusiasm.

Recalling his master's advice, Kevmo reined himself in a bit. "I know the Force," he said gently.

Just then the smallest of the human children squeaked as a bright blue honey glider leapt off his shoulder, where it must've been tucked under his tangle of red hair. The glider spread its wing membranes and slipped through the air to land on the dome of the Mon Calamari's head. The child giggled while the abandoned human boy's face scrunched into grief, and the Mon Calamari said, "It must be my turn, Simi!"

The older Klatooinian barked, "A gift freely given, Simi!"

Hushing the teasing children, Marda gently tugged Simi's tangled curls to soothe the crying human. She slid Kevmo an apologetic look. He wanted to brush his knuckle along her high cheekbone.

Kevmo looked abruptly away, a little shocked at himself. He was not supposed to be thinking such things.

He gathered himself together by remembering how careful he needed to be with his attachments, and how susceptible he was to fancy and enthusiasm. He'd need to spend extra time meditating this evening and maybe wear himself out completely drilling his lightsaber forms. Still, even though this was all foremost on his mind, Kevmo risked looking back.

Marda waited patiently, unashamed to be caught staring at him while he composed himself. The pull of her gaze remained strong as a tractor beam. Kevmo managed a crooked smile.

Returning it, Marda scooped one of the river roses out of a bucket. It dripped against the metal table as she offered it to Simi. "Will you make the gift to our new friend?"

Kevmo waited patiently for the human boy to crawl under the table and pop out onto the street beside him, rose cradled in his cupped palms. Kevmo crouched again.

"A gift freely given," Simi said almost too softly to be heard over the chaotic market.

Kevmo reached with the Force to lift the rose out of Simi's hands and floated it the brief span between them until he could catch it on the very tip of his first finger.

Expecting laughter or maybe even some delighted applause, Kevmo frowned at the sudden dramatic silence. He turned to see all the children gaping, and beautiful Marda looking at him with abject horror.

"Stop!" she cried, and Kevmo was so startled, the river rose tipped off his finger and fell to the ground.



FIVE

Marda's day had lightened considerably when she first saw the Pantoran boy's smile. She'd been feeling melancholic after the Mother's rejection of her plea to join the Children the day before. Despite the new hatchlings in Ferize's nest, the lovely day, and the pleasant tangle of the Littles under her charge, she had not been able to unspool the thread of disappointment twined around her throat. Disappointment and something worse: a gnawing guilt that she'd never be enough, no matter how hard she worked, no matter how hard she believed, because she was Evereni. She didn't even know why her people were mistrusted. Nobody would tell her. As if she was just supposed to accept it, like gravity and sunrise. Evereni were not worthy of representing the Path to the galaxy. Except Yana was allowed, so it had to be something wrong with Marda herself.

The Mother, putting a hand on Marda's cheek, had tasked her again with the Littles. "You are the one I can trust with the sparks of belief in their young hearts. You nurture their understanding of our Path, Marda Ro, here in our home. This home that we share must remain true, and you are its caretaker. Will you accept that for me?"

Marda had nodded and lowered her eyes against stinging tears. The Mother was a true avatar of the Force, existing in perfect harmony, clarity, and freedom with it. As she willed, so Marda must do. "I accept," she whispered, and she meant it—only, the galaxy was so massive, so great. She knew she could expand to fit it.

There had to be something wrong with her if she could not be content with this purpose freely given to her. Marda had tried to bury

her uncertainty under soft smiles and softer hands as she led the Littles to forage for beauty along the river and in the rolling meadows. Gifts from Dalna into their hands, gathered and prepared to become gifts from their hands to the wanderers of Ferdan.

They'd settled at the available table in the market, the one Grandfer Aurin—an old Umbaran who sold used droid parts—often saved for them. They did not wish to join the Path, but they liked the way Marda preached about living with and for the Force. Eff, the younger of the Klatooinian siblings, loved Grandfer Aurin and sat on their lap for the first hour of gifting. The other children played games and tied bouquets and waved happily at passersby, only occasionally arguing as Marda welcomed everyone to the table, offering her faith in return. Jerid, a brown-skinned human boy, the oldest of the Littles with Marda, teased Utalir, who was only nine, that her sun-yellow head tendrils were prettier than the flowers and he wondered what would return to the Path if Utalir offered herself as a gift freely given. Marda had found it necessary to separate them, urging Jerid's little sister, Vemian, to unlatch herself from Marda's hip, where she liked to hide and imitate everything Marda did. Meanwhile, Tromak hid under the table rolling pebbles into the square, Jezra'lin would not stop bouncing, and Hallisara, Simi, and Ferali wouldn't stop competing for the affection of the honey glider who had attached itself to Simi a few weeks earlier, taking advantage of the boy's willingness to share his porridge. The honey glider was a good omen, though, the same bright blue as their brikal-shell paint from eating the larvae of the arthropods.

The antics of the Littles distracted Marda from the worst of her melancholy, but it had clung to her nevertheless in that busy market, as she felt like the only person on the entire planet who wasn't allowed to leave.

Then the Pantoran boy. He drew her attention suddenly and unerringly: tall and appealing in layered robes simply made, in colors not dissimilar to her own, with elaborate black braids, warm blue skin, a smile that showed off blunt teeth, and pretty gold markings across his face.

When he caught her gaze, he came straight for her, as if he knew her already.

Marda's stomach flipped.

He stopped at her table, grinning at the children but not taking his bright yellow eyes from her for long. His skin was nearly the same blue as the brikal shell, the gold vivid. She wanted to touch the markings, find out if they smeared or were indelible, or maybe just blossomed on his skin naturally. Like tiny trails of sunseed.

Then he spoke, and she spoke back, and he was from offworld. Of course; everyone was. But he had just arrived, from the stars, and something inside Marda pinched in longing. The Pantoran boy—Kevmo—was good with the Littles. Liked them. And he knew the Force. That was how he said it. *I know the Force.*

Breathless, Marda thought this was why the Mother had denied her again and again: this moment, this boy. For Marda to be there that day. She felt the certainty bubbling up as if she would giggle.

Then.

Then he abused the Force.

"Stop!" Marda cried, reaching out. She grasped at Vemian, still holding her hip, and turned the human girl's face away as if that could protect them all from what Kevmo had done.

"Marda," he said when the river rose fell to the dusty ground, the gift freely given dashed at their feet.

Shaking, Marda lifted her jaw and tried to be fierce. "You do not know the Force."

He watched her mouth, wide-eyed, then licked his bottom lip. Marda knew what had happened: he'd seen her sharp teeth; he knew she was Evereni, and he would leave.

That was for the best. Kevmo Zink used the Force for a game! The consequences of unbalancing the Force such as he had done could lead to the death of living beings! And he'd done it to tease a child. Marda swallowed her grief away and let indignation rise. She walked the Path of the Open Hand. She would explain. "The Force is not a tool. It is only itself. Life. Light. Everything that connects us. Not a tool."

Kevmo leaned closer, expression serious. "It can be. We use the Force if we can, use it for the betterment of the galaxy, for everyone."

“How can you know you are bettering the galaxy when you cannot predict the effects of touching the Force?” Marda struggled to sound calm, mostly for the sake of the Littles, who paid avid attention, eyes wide, antennae attuned.

“My training is quite thorough,” Kevmo said. “Of course I know the effects of using it.” Suddenly all the flowers lifted off the table to hover delicately in the air between them. “It is exact, especially on this scale. No one is in danger.” He said it coaxingly, voice soft.

But Marda stared at the trembling pink and yellow petals before her. “Please,” she whispered.

“This is a gift,” he continued, slowly spinning the flowers into a gentle spiral, a rainbow galaxy. “You believe in gifts freely given. That’s what you said?”

“Uh-huh!” squeaked Jezra’lin, then clapped their hands over their wide mouth.

Marda squeezed her hand into a fist. More people were staring at them, including Grandfer Aurin.

Kevmo said, “Being able to use the Force like this is a gift. It flows through me, is part of me, and using it is like using my hands or my ears or my voice.”

She couldn’t help glancing at his mouth as he spoke, and focused there as she said again, “Please stop.”

The flowers fell. Marda closed her eyes in relief for a moment. “You can know what you do here, but how can you predict the consequences in the Force? Use it here, for nothing but teasing? For—for impressing me?”

The boy grimaced.

Marda pressed on. “This incident here alters the Force, changes it in ripples, pulls it, directs it, and those changes change other things, out in the galaxy. Who is to say that your tricks here have not set in motion ripples that will result in something dangerous where you cannot see it?”

“That’s not how the Force works,” he insisted.

“Yes, it is.” Marda very nearly bared her teeth. “It is not to be controlled.”

“Jedi don’t—”

Marda gasped. “You’re Jedi?”

Kevmo paused, lips parted, and very slowly nodded.

“You *do* control the Force! You seek to bend it to your will! I know of the Jedi.” How stupid that it felt like her heart was breaking. There were Jedi on Jedha, and she’d heard so many stories of that great world, the different ways of priests and wanderers and witches who came together there at the temple. Jedi came from the Core Worlds, with their own ways that were the opposite of the Path’s.

“That’s not true.” Kevmo leaned urgently toward Marda, putting his hands on the table. “We don’t impose our will on the Force! But—”

“You use it. The Force must be free, Kevmo Zink. It is for us to live in harmony with it. Part of it. Not using it.” Marda clicked her teeth just slightly, to keep from gnashing them, to keep from crying. She should have known he was Jedi the moment he named his weapon a lightsaber. But she had always avoided thinking about them, and knew so little.

Kevmo looked at her with something akin to longing, and she paused. This gulf between them was vast, though only moments before she’d felt so right and good about meeting him.

Finally, the Jedi said, “The Force is warm, and bright. It is life. And using it—” He glanced at the Path banner, hand-painted by Marda and Er Dal and Old Waiden years before. Kevmo turned his hands over so the paler blue skin of his palms faced the sun. “Using it feels right. Good. Like basking in starlight.”

The pit of Marda’s stomach opened, because he sounded like she did when she begged to go with the Children into space. She shook her head. “Give out the flowers, everyone,” she said, reaching for little Simi. “Ferali and Utalir, fold the banner, please. Let us go from here.”

The Littles quickly grabbed flowers and dashed across the street to hand them to the sellers and buskers they knew, a final blessing before they left. Marda knew she was running away. She collected the pan of chips and credits and coins they’d been given and tucked it into a small bag before giving it to Tromak for safekeeping. She did not look at Kevmo again.

Until she turned to leave and he said, “Marda Ro.”

She paused and deliberately glanced at him over her shoulder.

“Will I see you again?” he asked, gaze intent, hands moving, flexing, as if they could not find a way to rest.

Every part of Marda wanted to promise, just one more time, to leave him with a last gift freely given: hope. But it was better this way. She said, “No,” and ushered the Littles before her, never looking back.

She had to bite the tip of her tongue to manage it. The sharp taste of her blood put her firmly back in her body.

It took only until they were just out of the market, the Littles in a chain as they walked, hand in hand in hand, for Jezra’lin to pipe up, “My older sibling was Force-sensitive! I wonder if they could do that with the flowers. I hoped I would be.”

“Not me,” Jerid said. “It’s easier to follow the Path if you can’t even be tempted to touch the Force. That’s what my mama said.”

Hallisara said, “That weapon was incredible! It was pretty, too. I wonder what it does.”

“What’s a Jedi?” Utalir asked softly, tugging at Marda’s sleeve with bright yellow fingers.

Marda paused. Jerid took advantage by saying, “Warriors! They fight monsters, I heard.”

“Monsters!” shrieked Simi, startling the honey glider, who had once again hidden in the boy’s red tangles.

This was getting out of hand. Marda said, “That’s enough.” She stared at the chain of Littles and nodded hard. “Come this way, and I’ll show you something important.”

They skipped and cheered a little as they fell back in line.

Marda led them out of Ferdan toward the compound but veered south to the quarry and construction grounds, where many parts of the *Gaze Electric*—the parts unique to the Path of the Open Hand, not droids or hyperspace or shielding—were being built. Members of the Path were using the big kilns to heat various metals intended for the giant molds at the edge of the grounds. Steam and smoke rose into the blue sky, and the *ting-ting* of hammers was like bells. Droids stepped here and there, hauling the glittering pink granite from the

quarry, others breaking it up. There were piles of thin black slate to be chipped into shards for the vast mosaic floor of the temple hall in the *Gaze Electric*. Soon it would all be taken up to the ship and put into place, and Marda would be allowed to visit and paint the walls with waves of brikal-shell blue.

It was difficult to see the shape of the ship in these piles of stone and sweating people, while the ship itself hung in orbit. Sometimes the sun shone just right and glinted off the hull, and from planetside it looked like a star, like every other ship. But it was not like any other ship at all.

“Littles,” Marda said, leading them to a quartet of alloy buttresses leaning against the rise of a hill. “Do you know what we are making?”

“The *Gaze Electric*,” Jezra’lin answered, bouncing on their toes.

“That is its name. But do you know what it is?” Marda lowered herself to sit with her legs crossed and beckoned the Littles to array themselves around her.

“A ship.”

“A temple!”

“A sanctuary!”

The replies layered together into enthusiastic chaos, and Marda smiled. Their attention bolstered her, helping her settle the trembling in her hands left over from that encounter with Kevmo Zink. “That’s correct,” she said. “All of those things. The Mother had a vision of this grand ship, a beautiful, vast place large enough for every member of the Path, and many more. We can grow our family out amongst the stars, take ourselves anywhere we like, wherever the Force needs us to share our clarity with other beings.”

“Clarity,” Vemian said very quietly, staring at Marda with awe-filled aquamarine eyes. Marda thought suddenly that she herself looked like this when she spoke with the Mother, as if the Mother could do no wrong and every word from her lips was the word of the Force itself. Realizing Vemian saw Marda that way made her feel taller, stronger, but a little bit frightened, too.

“Clarity,” Marda said. “And freedom, and harmony with the Force. That is the Path of the Open Hand. The Force is everywhere, in everything, blazing through the particles of the universe, and it is not

our place to touch it. We are not above other creatures or things. We are not above the Force. We *are* it, if we are lucky.”

Ferali, the older Klatooinian sibling, frowned, his large forehead bulbs shading his eyes. “That is why that Jedi shouldn’t have moved the flowers.”

Marda nodded solemnly. “He took from the Force. Stole. Abused. Even that alone is wrong, you understand? We do not take. We only hold out our open hands.”

The Littles slowly turned their hands over, palms to the sky.

“When you are open, gifts freely given will come to you, as long as you are alive. As long as the Force flows through you.”

Simi put his little white hand in Marda’s gray one. She squeezed. The honey glider pushed off his neck and landed on Hallisara’s knee. The Rodian grinned. “Thank you,” she said. “For the gift of your friendship.”

“I’ll be your friend, too,” said Eff, Ferali’s little sibling, coaxing the cute blue glider.

“Me also,” Tromak said, all three eyes blinking fast.

Marda smiled softly. She led them through the rest of their catechisms while members of the Path worked noisily, the future sanctuary of the *Gaze Electric* surrounding them in a comfortable nest. Yet Marda could not help thinking of the Jedi boy holding out his open hands to her, and how badly she had longed to open her hands to him in return.



SIX

“**H**ey, that’s a nice ship.”

Kor gestured to the skiff a few meters away, and Yana nodded. They were leaving later than scheduled, Treze having to disentangle himself from a very lovely human before they could depart, and Yana’s temper was short because of the delay. But even in her ill temper she had to agree with Kor. It was the only other ship in the docking yard besides the *Harmony*, and truthfully every ship looked nice compared with the beat-up Path shuttle with its sloppy blue markings. The Path wasn’t as poor as it used to be, but they still tried to keep down appearances.

“We should get something like that when we buy ours,” Kor said, lowering her voice and nuzzling nearer so Treze wouldn’t hear. Yana stroked one of Kor’s head tentacles and nodded.

“I have to learn how to fly first,” she said, and Kor laughed.

“If Treze can do it, you definitely can.”

Yana boarded the *Harmony* with Treze and Kor in tow. They all wore the robes of the Path, but underneath were their work clothes, Treze wearing his knives and Yana her slicer set. They would have to work quickly once they got to Port Haileap. The new Jedi outpost there was a problem, and there wouldn’t be time to properly change.

The smell of the ship hit Yana as soon as her foot left the boarding ramp and she entered the interior: lompop incense. They burned it constantly so it was the predominant thing any witnesses would remember about the Path’s shuttle.

As they crowded into the tight cockpit, Kor cupped Yana's cheek affectionately before she turned her large liquid eyes on Cincey. "How long will it take to get to Port Haileap?"

"The Mother gave me an unmapped route, so only a few hours," they said, excited. "Strap in and relax. We'll be back in time for the naming."

"Is the Mother having visions of hyperspace paths now?" Treze sneered, the Mikkian's short head tendrils undulating.

"She may have traded them," Kor said, waving away Treze's sarcasm. "I was with my mother in the caves and saw the Mother greeting a human who looked like one of those prospectors."

Yana didn't say anything, but she agreed with Treze that however the Mother had acquired the paths was fishy. What else was she trading for, or buying, without telling anybody? But then again, Yana never stopped worrying, because if she did, bad things happened. She sat in one of the chairs arrayed nearest the cockpit so she could watch Cincey pilot the ship.

"Did you check out the Jedi in the outpost?" Yana asked Cincey once they'd made the jump to hyperspace. She wasn't superstitious, but she never liked to talk about the details of the job until they were on their way, and at some point Kor and Treze had begun to follow her lead.

"Yep, it seems like they've left on some mission, although no one is quite sure what it might be, so you're in the clear. You'll only be dealing with the usual security forces, which should be easy for you," Cincey said. The compliment warmed Yana, even if she wouldn't show it.

Yana let her mind drift as the blue of hyperspace swirled by outside the grimy viewports, and when they exited a few hours later with a bump, she was the first on her feet. Kor stood, as well, and began to move through her cantos, the series of exercises she used to keep her body limber. Kor was unnaturally acrobatic, a gift from the Force, and on more than one occasion her gift had saved all their necks.

Treze's purpose was a little less elegant, and he also began to prepare, juggling his throwing knives and eyeing their sharpness.

Yana somewhat hoped he would slip up and slice open something important, but he never did. The heated looks he kept giving Kor as she stretched and moved made Yana wish she had the Force powers of the Jedi. She'd love to be able to pluck a throwing knife out of midair and send it hurtling toward Treze's eyes.

They landed not long after leaving hyperspace, and Yana's excitement to be off the ship grew exponentially as they flew past towering swirled-bark trees. *Marblewood*, Yana thought, and adjusted her robes. As Cincey opened the door and extended the boarding ramp, Kor produced a bowl of brikal-shell paint and carefully drew the wavy lines across Yana's forehead before doing her own lines and handing the bowl to a slightly aggrieved Treze. Yana smiled at the boy, showing her teeth. It would do him well to know his place.

"You have no more than two hours if you want to be back in time for the naming," Cincey said. "So be quick about it."

The Children nodded before turning toward the boarding ramp and disembarking.

Port Haileap didn't smell like Dalna, but the sharp scent of the marblewood trees and the fecund smell of the nearby forest were a welcome change from the heavy incense of the *Harmony*. It was the middle of the day, but there was little traffic heading into the main hub. Yana resettled her robes as she took in her surroundings.

The trees towered over them, but there were a variety of small flowers nestled in and among the roots. Kor immediately went to gather them, picking huge bunches that they would use as their "gifts freely given," a core part of the Path's recruiting methods. Give away flowers or interesting shiny rocks and get random passersby to listen to the gospel of a truly free Force. Yana thought it was silly—who wanted a handful of flowers?—but she had to admit that it was also stunningly effective. It drew people in, well enough that the Children used it as a distraction for these missions.

Once Kor had a good bunch of flowers, they began making their way into the main terminal in Port Haileap. The storefronts weren't much to look at; the outpost was little more than a place to land one's ship and take a short walk. Port Haileap boasted a single lodging

house, a single dockside tavern with a gleaming new server droid, and a government office that oversaw the place.

“Why would they bring anything valuable here?” Treze asked, and Yana shrugged.

“Good question,” she said. “Maybe the information was wrong?”

“Cincey has never been wrong before. Besides, the Mother would have known this wasn’t worth the trip and advised against it. The Force flows through her. She would have seen something,” Kor insisted, and Yana laughed.

“Maybe the Force thought it was irrelevant that it was sending us to a place with a grand total of five people.” Their ruse wasn’t going to work, because there was no way to draw a crowd.

Treze scowled and grabbed the flowers from Kor. “We can still do this. Follow my lead.”

Yana and Kor exchanged looks before shrugging and following Treze to the dockmaster’s office, the only official-looking building in the entire port. It irked Yana that Treze was trying to lead *her* team, but she also wanted to see what the Mikkian had up his sleeve. His short head tendrils knotted and unknotted like they usually did when he was planning something particularly nasty. Just what did the boy have in mind?

The door to the dockmaster’s office opened with a quiet whoosh, and the human male at the desk looked up as they entered, a scowl twisting his pale features. “Can I help you?”

“No,” Treze said, his step so light he basically floated into the office. His voice was like the softest jaran fur, and he smiled gently. “But we can help you, my friend.”

The dockmaster stood, his hands on his hips. He was a stout man with brown hair that had thinned to bare skin on the top of his head. He glanced at Kor and Treze with annoyance, but when his gaze slid over Yana, he could barely suppress his flinch. “Look, I don’t have time for this nonsense. What do you need?”

“We were wondering if we could set up a giving station in your main thoroughfare,” Treze said, looping his arm through the dockmaster’s and steering him through the door. “Can I show you the

spot we're thinking? We know we need to get your permission first. Unless there is someone else we should speak with?"

"I'm the only one who works here," the man said, and Yana felt sorry for the poor bantha herder. Especially when Treze's expression lit up.

"Well then, let me show you where we were thinking."

The door slid open and closed, and Yana and Kor remained where they were. The dockmaster's office was tucked into an out-of-the-way corner. A mistake, to be sure.

"Let's get this over with before Treze returns to gloat," Yana said. She had no desire to hear the Mikkian brag about how easily humans died.

Yana pulled out the small rig she liked to use to slice locks, a board salvaged from one of the newer lines of astromechs after a particularly nasty job on Klynan. There was only one interior door in the office, and she opened it quickly. As the lock released, Treze returned, wiping red blood from his hands onto the hem of his robe.

"Did you kill him?" Kor hissed, her eyes narrowing in agitation as Treze befouled his robes.

The Mikkian shrugged. "That blood was shed for the Path. I don't think the Mother will mind."

"That's murder, Treze," Kor said darkly. "It isn't what we're here for. That is not living in harmony with the Force."

Yana tried to ignore them and ignore her own dislike of Treze taking such drastic measures. It wasn't the killing itself that bothered her but that Treze was such a wild card. "Can you two save it? I'm concentrating."

Kor put a solid hand on her shoulder, and Treze leaned casually against the wall. "How goes the slicing?"

"Done," Yana said, standing back from the door so Treze could lead the way, throwing knives in hand. Kor followed him, and Yana took up the rear, sealing the door behind them so there would be no unwanted surprises. Beyond the door was a small anteroom, and beyond that was a larger warehouse area that looked to hold cages of confiscated cargo. The bins were marked with numbers rather than descriptions of what each one held, and Kor sighed.

“Not as straightforward as I’d hoped,” she said, squinting at the labels. The shelves were high, at least ten meters, and there wasn’t a ladder or cargo droid in sight.

“There should be a master file here with the contents and dates confiscated,” Yana said as she stripped off her robes then used the material to wipe away the face paint. Treze did the same. Kor looked aggrieved for a moment before following their lead, then piling the robes into a bundle they would grab on their way out.

Yana went to the room’s lone data terminal and booted it up. She was about to attach her slicer rig to the machine when Treze produced a strange trinket.

“The dockmaster had this around his neck. Do you think it unlocks the terminal?”

Yana took the small metallic object and inserted it into the front of the data terminal. It fit perfectly, unlocking the system. Rows of options appeared, each of them containing an item and date.

“This is odd,” Kor said, her liquid black eyes filled with worry. “Why would the Republic keep such precious cargo here without a guard?”

“Maybe they trust the Force to defend itself,” Treze said with a smirk, back to juggling his knives.

“More likely they have no idea what it is. Either way, I think I found it,” Yana said as she scrolled through the records. “Bin five-eight-four-three. It’s marked ‘rare weapon,’ and the place of origin is ‘ruins of Moraband.’ Where is that?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Treze said as he walked over to the shelves. “Kor, I think that’s it, all the way up there. Can you reach it?”

Kor said nothing, just glanced at the shelves before running and leaping toward the wall opposite. She ricocheted off of the wall, leaping toward the shelves. She hit the shelf a few meters below her goal and scampered up the side, a feat that both Yana and Treze would have found impossible. It was an impressive move, and as Kor lifted herself onto the shelf to perch next to a cargo container, Yana’s stomach lurched. If Kor fell from that height, she would be grievously injured. Yana hated thinking about such things, but it was times like this that she found it difficult to work with her girlfriend on such dangerous jobs. Nothing bad had ever happened, but Yana was

Evereni. Even within the safety of the Path of the Open Hand, she had heard so many tales of the awful things that could happen when things were finally going well. It was hard to forget that, especially when she was watching the girl she loved scale a tower of shelving.

“Got it,” Kor said, holding up a box that was much smaller than Yana had expected. The container was made of dark gray plastoid, and there was a curious locking mechanism on the front.

“Why is there an energy sink on the box?” Yana asked, recognizing the dial next to the locking mechanism. Such a device was usually reserved for items that emitted a low level of energy, like batteries and other electrical components. Not a Force artifact.

“No clue, but it isn’t heavy. Yana, can you catch it?” Kor asked.

“I got it,” Treze said, stowing his knives quickly. At Kor’s questioning look, Yana gave a short nod. Let the boy feel useful.

Kor dropped the box, and Treze grabbed it while Kor leapt down, dangling from the top shelf for a moment before arcing her body and flipping backward to land in a soft crouch. Once she was safely back at ground level, Yana deleted anything related to her search, logged out of the work terminal, and shut everything down. She kept the digital key, though. It was Republic property, but that just meant it could be useful. Who knew what kind of lock codes she could pull from the device?

They gathered up their robes and made their way from the dockmaster’s office back to the *Harmony*. Yana was a jangle of anxious nerves the entire way, but there was no trouble. No one paid them much mind, and if they looked odd with their small cargo container and armful of robes, no one remarked on it.

Once they were back in the *Harmony*, Cincey wasted no time taking them into orbit. No one spoke until they hit hyperspace, and once they did, Cincey left the cockpit to join them in the seating area.

“Well?” they asked.

Treze had left the box in the middle of the floor, and they all shrugged. “That’s it,” he said.

Cincey sighed audibly. “Did you open it?”

“No,” Yana said.

“Then how do you know it’s the thing we’re looking for?”

“It was the only thing logged as being from ruins, and a weapon,” Yana said. “Do you want me to open it?”

“No,” Cincey said. “We should allow the Mother the honor.”

Kor sat on Yana’s lap, settling her tentacled head on the Evereni’s shoulder. “There’s something weird about that box. I just...” Kor’s voice trailed off, but Yana could feel the tension in her body. “I don’t like that thing. Whatever it is.”

Yana was used to this. Kor had a bit of Force sensitivity, and if she hadn’t been a member of the Path, she might have become a Jedi. But her father hadn’t been willing to send her away from the Path to Ferdan when she was younger, as was usually done when children of the Path were found to have some sensitivity to the Force. The artifacts they liberated often gave Kor a sense of unease, but the expression on her face was pained. That was new.

“Are you okay?” Yana asked, and Kor responded by wrapping her arms around Yana and burying her face in the hollow where her neck met her shoulder.

“I cannot wait to travel the galaxy with you,” Kor said, her words muffled by the fact that her lips were pressed against Yana’s throat.

“Me too,” Yana said, wrapping her arms around Kor. They stayed that way for a very long time, and Yana told herself that the sense of unease in her middle was just the usual Evereni existential dread and had nothing at all to do with the box nearby.



SEVEN

Kevmo found Master Zallah easily, as she was still speaking with the proprietor of the lodging house when he entered. Her blue-white skin was a stark contrast to the fuchsia skin of the Theelin woman she spoke with, and she turned when Kevmo entered, bags of provisions in either hand.

“Jara, this is my apprentice, Kevmo Zink. He will be in the adjoining room.”

The Theelin woman had silver streaked liberally through her hair, and as she moved Kevmo got the impression of age. He grinned widely. “Well met, Lady Jara.”

“Hmph. A charmer,” the old woman said, her scowl deepening at Kevmo’s enthusiastic greeting. “I run a respectable establishment,” she added, and Kevmo stood a bit straighter.

“Of course,” Kevmo said, looking to Master Zallah for help. He was usually able to make allies easily, but this old woman didn’t seem to care for him all that much. Did she fear Jedi, as well?

“We should rest,” Master Zallah said, saving Kevmo from figuring out what else he was supposed to say. “Thank you, Lady Jara, for all of your assistance. I will be meeting with the town elders tomorrow.” She gave the old woman a bow of respect, and Kevmo felt like smacking his forehead. Why hadn’t he thought of that?

Jara’s face split into a delighted grin. “No worries. No worries at all. And if you’d like me to accompany you, I am happy to. Now, the

evening meal will be served promptly at sundown, so do not be late. No one likes late guests.”

“Of course,” Zallah said before turning toward the lift at the back of the room. Kevmo tried to give the old woman a bow as he scooted past, but her scowl returned, deeper than before. So he ducked his head and hurried after his master.

Zallah did not say anything until she had pointed them to their rooms. “I got us an adjoining set,” she said, and the door slid open. Kevmo walked into a small sitting area and placed his parcels on the table. “Your room is on the right, although I was assured that all of the rooms were virtually the same.”

The place was simply appointed but clean, without a hint of vermin or even dust. It was a rarity to have such nice accommodations on the frontier, and Kevmo’s spirits picked up a bit. Perhaps Dalna wasn’t all dark-eyed girls who thought Jedi abused the Force.

Zallah frowned at Kevmo. “Something happen in the market?”

“Ah,” Kevmo said, realizing he’d let his emotions get the better of him. “Yes. I tried to make friends like you said, but it went horribly wrong.”

Zallah sighed. “Tell me.”

Kevmo quickly related the details of his interaction with the Path of the Open Hand: their ideas about the Force, how Marda had believed that using the Force on Dalna meant that it was somehow being damaged in another part of the galaxy.

“That’s not true, right?” Kevmo asked, suddenly doubting himself. “The Order would know if the Force could be, I don’t know, injured from overuse?”

Zallah gave Kevmo a look that was icy even for her. “Of course that isn’t how it works. The Jedi have served and communed with the Force for millennia. If that was the case, there would be guidance to mitigate the damage.”

Kevmo nodded. He knew that, and yet Marda had been so convinced that he’d begun to doubt the things he’d known for years. “I think I hurt her feelings,” he said, shame washing over him anew at the memory.

“That girl and her people are a bunch of zealots,” Zallah said, going to the bags Kevmo had brought in and beginning to unpack them. “Lady Jara told me their cult lives outside of town on their own compound.”

“Really? Their ideas seemed pretty good. It was just the part about not using the Force that was odd,” Kevmo said, thinking about Marda and her night-sky eyes.

“I suppose the ideas of the Sith also seem good in the abstract,” Zallah said, her tone bland. “Jara was quite adamant that there was something off about the Path of the Open Hand, though nothing so specific as to suspect them of stealing Force items.”

Kevmo collapsed into a nearby chair. “I feel bad for scaring them, though. It was such a simple trick, and I thought the children would like it.”

“Using the Force to play games with children, Kev?” Zallah released a soft breath, a dramatic sigh from her. “Being a Jedi is not all fun and games.”

“It seemed reasonable at the time, to get to know them,” he said, defending himself despite how it had gone.

“You cannot reason with zealots,” Zallah said. “They follow a cult leader of some kind, a prophet supposedly, Lady Jara said. We should be wary of any who claim such a thing—especially as they’re possibly involved in stealing from Hynestia.” She finished unpacking the bags. “Were there no durga berries in the marketplace? Jara said that Dalna has a particularly delicious strain that grows here. Smaller and easily enjoyed.”

“Oh, I didn’t see them. I suppose I can go back to the market tomorrow and see if there are any.”

“Either way,” Zallah said, turning her full attention to Kevmo, “there is something to be gained from learning how the Path thinks. It’s good for you to converse with those who see the Force in a different way. As a Jedi you will find that there are many who hold ideas about us that run contrary to our truth, and vice versa. This could be a valuable learning experience if you let it.”

“Wait, so should I go find Marda and apologize?” Kevmo asked. He wasn’t happy with how they’d left things, but he also very much

did not want to overstep.

Zallah gave Kevmo a cool smile before taking a small roll from the pile and a small pot of sweet cheese. "I think the Force will provide you with the answer should you meditate on it."

Kevmo groaned. He liked meditation; he simply found it difficult to be still for long stretches of time. But Zallah was right. The Force always had the answers; it was just a matter of whether or not the answer would be something Kevmo understood.

"Make sure you freshen up for dinner. I get the feeling Lady Jara does not tolerate bad hygiene. And since she seems to be rather knowledgeable about the happenings here, I would like to keep her as an ally," Zallah said. "Oh, and she mentioned that someone from the Republic is staying here, too. An investigator of some kind. We need to tread lightly until we know who they are, and why they're on Dalna." With that, she took her snack to her sleeping quarters.

Kevmo sighed and picked up one of the sun apples from the pile of produce, levitating it over his hand before grasping it and taking a bite. As much as using the Force brought him joy, it now also brought the memory of Marda's horror.

Who would've thought it could be so hard to make friends with another person who knew the Force?



EIGHT

The moment both suns began to sink beyond the horizon, they began the naming ceremony. A quirk of Dalna's atmosphere caused the last rays to flare dark pink and spread in fiery filaments over the entire bowl of the sky. The sun opal deposits peppered throughout their river valley reacted, shimmering in the same vivid colors.

The ritual grounds of the Path of the Open Hand had been chosen for the prevalence of sun opal, and members of the Path from generations past had collected the opal and placed it in waving Force lines at the west of the grounds, where it best caught the sunset.

Marda and her community were ready when the waves lit up. The Path faced the sunset, hands open, and welcomed the gift of beauty.

"The spirit of Dalna joins us," the Mother said in her lovely voice as she raised her open hands to the sky.

"With Dalna's spirit we live with the Force," the adherents said together, "in clarity, harmony, and freedom."

The Mother said, "Clarity, harmony, and freedom."

They breathed three breaths slowly, simultaneously, as a community.

Then the second sun fully set and the brilliant pink faded from the sky.

It took longer for the hard puddles of sun opal to fade, as if they clung to the light.

The Mother turned. She smiled at everyone. It was brilliant having her there, Marda thought, drinking in every possible moment. The Mother spent so much of her time on the *Gaze Electric* these days, despite the ship being not much more than a barren skeleton. From space she communed with the Force in her great empty chamber, without the distractions of gravity or sunlight or cold. When she received a vision, she could easily communicate it to the planet.

But that night, she was there to preside over the naming of Ferize's five children.

The Mother nodded, and six Elders of the Path lit torches. They wore pristine gray robes, loose and flowing, with deep blue edging. Orange fire lit the thick blue paint covering the upper halves of the Elder's faces: they were so near to the Force, mere waves would hardly do.

The rest of the Path waited in concentric circles, from Elders on the outside to the smallest Littles on the inside. Marda stood with the Littles, though she was painted in her brikal-blue waves and wore her dark gray tunic and robe because she was fully initiated.

Ferize and her partners, Er Dal and Fel Ix, came forward with their five babies shared among them. They approached sunwise around the circles of adherents, all three in the loose white and green of new parents.

Just then, Marda turned to a commotion near the entrance to the ceremonial grounds: it was Yana and Kor, stopping quickly and hushing each other. They'd made it. Marda smiled at her cousin and waved. Yana nodded back before leaning into her girlfriend.

Marda thought of Kevmo Zink, of how she'd wanted to touch his tattoos, and abruptly turned away from her cousin. She hoped whatever the Children had brought back with them would be safe and that the Jedi would remain away. But she needed to tell someone she'd spoken with a Jedi, there on Dalna.

The naming ceremony was simple: Ferize, Er Dal, and Fel Ix placed each child in the Mother's hands and told her their names, and the Mother put a small curl of blue on the child's face as she declared the name for the Path. The names were the second of the gifts freely given by their parents. The first being life itself, of course.

Marda listened, repeated the names with the congregation, had to whisper quiet chiding to Jerid and Simi only twice, and basked in the company of her family. Someday, Marda would either be out among the stars spreading the word of the Path or there with the Littles, and all five new Kessarine would be her students. Their family grew. Harmony with the Force grew.

By the end, Marda felt warm again, at peace with her place.

The Mother completed the ritual by performing a common song from the Path's history. She sang without accompaniment, and her voice lifted in a soft swell. Marda closed her eyes and listened to the lyrics describing the arrival of Sachar Rold on Dalna, where he founded the Path of the Open Hand on a planet untouched by war or pain—led away from his former priesthood by a vision of vivid blue light. It was a soothing story to Marda, because she knew two things about her people, the Evereni: they were reviled throughout the galaxy for unknown reasons, and they no longer had a home of their own. Sachar Rold had come from an order known as the Guardians of the Whills but left them when his belief conflicted with their ways. He was outcast from them and sought sanctuary with the Force. Those things led him to Dalna, where Marda and her cousin had also ended up.

As had the Mother—come from the Core Worlds enough years before that Marda hardly recalled it. The Mother had arrived as a refugee, like the rest of the Path, accepted the gift of their welcome, and slowly learned their ways. Until she had a vision—just like Sachar Rold—of a blue light. But the Mother saw the light in the shape of a messenger, a being created of pure Force who taught the Mother how to share life and listen and be one with the Force, so much so that the Mother's small garden had bloomed overnight. Her harmony with the Force was so pure, it bled out of her and into anyone blessed enough to be in her presence. Because of this and other visions, she was able to lead and guide the Path, despite not qualifying as an Elder. Everyone listened when she spoke, from the youngest Little to the driest and most wrinkled Elder.

The song the Mother sang ended with a hopeful trill, and everyone present said, bright and loud: "The Force will be free!"

Then applause and laughter scattered, and the Mother helped Ferize and her partners take the newborns back to the central garden for a simple evening meal. Marda gathered her Littles, and they trailed after, arriving before most of the congregation to serve with Old Waiden at the communal pots.

Firelight and glowing green-blue vines gave the garden an eerie, peaceful air as the stars broke out overhead, and Marda smiled to serve food to her large family. She took a tray with bowls to the nest where Ferize's family had settled with the Mother, Vemian and Utalir helping with drinks. They bowed their heads politely before giving the Mother and the new parents the sweet water and soup. Then Ferize asked Marda to remain with them.

Delighted, she did, sending the Littles back to Old Waiden.

She curled her legs beneath her and quietly sipped from her bowl of soup, eager to listen to the conversation between the Mother and Ferize. They discussed the things Ferize's babies required and how the Path could help. The Mother spoke of requesting some special protein supplements from their generous sponsor Regnar Pulip, and Ferize smiled, saying, "What gifts the Force provides we shall accept."

At a break in their conversation, Marda leaned toward Fel Ix and the two babies curled against his folded legs. Their eyes were wide open, and they moved the frills along their cheeks in jerky little motions, as if learning the proper ways. Marda said, "Is it unusual for an entire clutch to be all boys?"

Fel Ix shook his head. He touched a scaly finger to the forehead of one of his sons. "Two of these five will likely mature into egg bearers—girls. That is the usual percentage."

"Oh!" Marda smiled and set down her soup. "I did not realize."

"The Galactic Basic is clumsy for Kessarine, but we do not think of ourselves as girls or boys."

"Can you tell which of the two are most likely?"

Fel Ix said no, and Ferize leaned toward Marda to say, "It is determined by a combination of the will of the Force and the child's will."

“That’s wonderful,” Marda murmured. She wondered what the Jedi would think of it. Would they consider how using the Force might change the future of a little baby like this? How could anyone consciously act in a way that might take from others? It made Marda’s stomach hurt, and she was glad she’d set down her soup.

“Marda?” the Mother said.

She glanced up, lips parting in surprise to hear her name on the Mother’s tongue.

“Are you well?” The Mother stared at her with piercing brown eyes, her entire demeanor still and serious.

“Yes, Mother.” Marda hurried onto her knees and placed her open hands on them. “I have been thinking about your words, and my place here with the Littles. It is a serious task you have given me, entrusting me with the future of our Path. I only worry about the greater galaxy, and the influences it brings.”

“Outer influences, hmm.” The Mother smiled. “Perhaps your cousin can offer advice to you on such things, now that she is returned with the Children.”

Marda glanced at Yana, who was laughing with Kor, both of them sitting with a group of adherents of all ages. Eleven-year-old human Jerid stared at Yana with an obvious crush, and the Rodian Hallisara leaned against Kor’s leg, her little sucker fingers tapping on the Nautolan’s boot. They seemed to be behaving well enough. Kor’s father, the Herald, sat with them, his bare head free of the typical Nautolan tendrils. They’d been sheared off when he was young, and he was left with angry scars. But in his Elder blue paints and gray robes, he gave off an aura both stern and serene. He did not seem to like Marda, maybe for some reason to do with her people or perhaps merely because his daughter was intimate with Yana, but Marda hoped someday they could work together for harmony. The Herald spoke for the Elders and was the Mother’s trusted friend, the next member on the Path to best understand the will of the Force. She wondered where his wife, Opari, was—Kor’s mother was often ill, though lately, with the aid of the Mother’s visions and gifts of credit from friends like Regnar Pulip, Opari had been feeling better.

Turning the Mother's words over in her thoughts, Marda opened her mouth to confess about Kevmo the Jedi. But there, in that peaceful moment with the Kessarine, she did not want to bring up any tense subjects.

"I will speak with Yana," Marda said, standing and bowing her farewell to the Mother and the Kessarine. "The Force will be free."

"The Force will be free," they replied.

Then the Mother said, "And, Marda, please tell Yana I will meet her in my listening chamber shortly, to hear what the Children achieved on their crossing today."

Marda bowed again, with both hands open palms up as if to catch the stars.

She made her way through the crowded garden, eyes lowered but smiling at those who held their hands open to her. Marda brushed her fingers against their palms. When she was halfway to her cousin, Yana looked up and grinned at her, displaying jagged sharp teeth. Yana extracted herself from her grouping with a kiss on the corner of Kor's mouth, to Jerid's obvious disappointment.

"He likes you," Marda said softly when Yana arrived, and they put their palms together.

Yana glanced back and winked at the Little but then bumped her shoulder against Marda's. "Not my type."

"Too hairy?" Marda teased softly.

Her cousin laughed and dragged her away into the shadows. "Here," she said, offering a small flask.

"Is this from offworld?" Marda asked as she unscrewed the top and sniffed. Floral, a little sharp. She sipped it.

"It is! But it doesn't do much for me, so probably not you, either." Yana shook her head in a mockery of grief.

Marda returned the flask, enjoying the tingle of the wine on her tongue. Together they leaned against one of the buildings and watched the flickering light cast over their community. Marda lifted her eyes along with the sparks until they blended into the stars. She didn't realize she had sighed until Yana said, "You really want to get up there, huh?"

“Yes.”

“I don’t think you’d like being one of the Children, Marda,” Yana said, something low in her tone that made Marda look away from the sky and into her cousin’s big black eyes. Yana took one of her hands. “It’s not an adventure. It’s dangerous.”

“I’m Evereni, too,” Marda insisted.

Yana snorted. “I haven’t forgotten.”

“I can do it.”

“People will disappoint you.”

“What the Children do—what you do—is important.” Marda squeezed Yana’s fingers. “Liberating the Force. Spreading the Path. People out there, they don’t just misunderstand the Path and the Force. They actively abuse it.”

“That’s what I mean. People won’t do what you want, even if you get out there. We go up against a lot of bad people. And totally fine people who want to just be left alone.”

“But they’re bringing their misunderstandings here, too. Their ways.” Marda frowned. The tingle of wine vanished from her tongue, and she ran it against her sharp teeth. “And they can be convincing and—and charming.”

“Charming? Who’s charming?”

Marda looked away, out at the gathering. The Mother remained near the Kessarine nest, surrounded by others: Elders with half-blue faces and a few other dedicants and children. The Mother glowed under the firelight and attention as she spoke, her hands moving slowly and gracefully as she invoked details of whatever story she told. “Yana, the Mother wants to meet you at her listening room to hear about your successes today.”

“Yes, fine, but Marda”—Yana took her chin and turned her face back—“who is charming?”

Glad there was no outward symptom to express the churning in her stomach, Marda said, “I met a Jedi today.”

“A what? On Dalna?” Yana’s spine straightened. Her hand dropped.

“In Ferdan. I took the Littles to give flowers and he was—he was there, and I didn’t know he was a Jedi at first.” Marda clenched her fists. “I just...”

“Liked him,” Yana murmured. “You’ve never liked anybody before.”

“I like you! I like everyone in the—”

“Uh-huh, yes, sure.”

Marda huffed a little. “He is a Jedi. He used the Force right in front of me. It was awful and—” She cut herself off.

“And?”

The memory of colorful flowers swirling in the air, the thrill on the Littles’ faces, and Kevmo Zink’s grin twisted all together, and Marda said, “Beautiful.”

Yana smirked.

“But it doesn’t matter—no, that makes it worse,” Marda insisted.

“How?”

“Because it was beautiful.... That made it tempting. I hate that he used the Force in such a simple way, to... He was flirting with me. What an easy way to abuse the Force, to take its freedom away.” Marda’s heart pounded. She blinked several times to mitigate the startling dryness in her eyes.

“Listen, Marda.” Yana stepped around to face her. “Do you know what they’re doing here?”

Marda shook her head. She was glad Yana was taking this seriously, not just teasing her about crushes.

“The Jedi don’t go anywhere without a reason. There must be one.” Yana frowned. She opened her mouth to speak but stopped, glancing over Marda’s shoulder toward where Kor sat. “It could be a routine patrol of some kind, like those Pathfinder groups. But if not... well, we need to know.”

“Why? We shouldn’t have anything to do with them. We need to keep away from them, especially if they’re here for some of your... acquisitions. They will not agree with us that it’s best to collect Force artifacts for safekeeping.”

Yana grimaced. “We took something pretty high-profile recently. But I don’t know how they could have tracked us here. We didn’t

leave any trace, and we're just an innocent Force religion."

"We need to keep our distance. But the Mother will know if they're a danger."

"I'll tell her."

"The Force probably has," Marda said, suddenly relieved. Of course the Mother already knew, because of her communion with the Force. The Mother already knew about Kevmo Zink. The Force would have warned her. If she didn't say anything, maybe there was nothing to worry about.

But Yana shook her head. "From what I know, the Jedi go where they think the Force wants them."

Marda's churning stomach seemed to freeze. "You think the Force brought them here. To us?"

"Doesn't the will of the Force influence everything?"

Slowly, Marda nodded. "I thought, when I first saw him..." Marda grimaced a little but made herself say to her cousin's boots, "I thought I was meeting him for a reason. That it was the will of the Force, and why the Mother wouldn't let me join the Children. So that I would be here to meet him. It was foolish," she whispered. "To think the Force..."

"Not foolish," Yana said fiercely.

Silence fell between them, diffused by the chatter and laughing of the members of the Path in the nighttime garden. Marda thought about Kevmo's smile, how he'd come directly to her as if they'd known each other already. She wanted Yana to be right.

Yana said, "He liked you, too, didn't he? He was flirting, you said? You should invite him here."

Marda jerked her gaze up. "What?"

"Show the Jedi the Path of the Open Hand."

The hard earnestness in her cousin's expression convinced Marda to take a deep breath and think. Show the Jedi the Path—introduce them to the commune and their way of life. Yes. Convincing a Jedi would be an incredible feat. Imagine the ramifications for the Path, and who else they could bring into their fold! Excitement began to replace anxiety as Marda imagined it.

Yana caught on and nodded encouragingly. “I’m going to go grab Kor and meet up with the Mother. But you should invite him. Them? They probably want to know more about the Path anyway, so better for us to be the ones to reach out. What better way to convince them we’re harmless? That we haven’t taken anything or hurt anyone? They’ll never find the Mother’s collection.”

Marda smiled. “I will.”

“Great. And, Marda.” Yana caught her hand again. “It’s all right to like him. But not to trust him. Be careful.”

“I know that. You’ll tell the Mother about them? And my invitation?”

“Yes, and the Herald, too.”

Marda nodded, and her cousin left.

For a moment, Marda stood rooted to the ground. It was dark, well into the evening, but she felt warm and ready. If she waited, she might not go at all.

Marda hurried toward the commune’s gates before she could change her mind. It was good to be eager; that would smooth the way for this offering she could make the Jedi.

The night was clear and the road into town dark except for the starlight and the rich creamy shine of the rising moon. Marda didn’t take her time looking for fallen leaves and feathers but moved with purpose toward the glow of Ferdan. If she brought a Jedi into the Path, the Mother would have to recognize her contributions as a proper messenger, as someone best suited to go out into the galaxy for a crossing of her own. Even if she wasn’t allowed to help with the *liberations*, maybe she’d earn a place on the *Gaze Electric* when it was finally ready. And though Marda did not want to dwell on it, she knew the idea of Kevmo Zink specifically joining the Path appealed to her. Not because he was a Jedi who needed to change his relationship to the Force for the good of the galaxy but because she imagined how fantastic he would be in the Path, putting that smile to better use.

And she wanted to see him again.

As she reached the edge of town, Marda pressed wisps of hair behind her ears and smoothed her gray robes—they were slightly nicer than what she’d worn to town earlier, in honor of the naming

ceremony, but hardly pretty. It didn't matter. Only the will of the Force and her harmony with it mattered.

Town was bright and awake still, despite the nighttime. Half the market remained open for people who couldn't make it until evening, the booths livelier and somehow even more welcoming with pastel lights, some playing tinny music. There were only two places in Ferdan with rooms to let, and Marda went first to the one nearest the spaceport. She had to pass through only the market and the main square, bright as day. The boarding house was run by an old Theelin woman the Path tended to avoid and vice versa. Marda reached the two-story building, windows glowing soft blue, and touched the panel to alert the residents.

For a moment no reply came, and Marda resisted triggering the alert again.

Suddenly, the door slid open with barely a creak, and Jara, the Theelin woman, glared at Marda. Her silver-streaked hair was pulled back from the horns on the sides of her face, and the smell of rich gravy drifted out from the warm inside. Jara put her fists on her hips. "What does the Path want with me?"

Marda opened her hands, palms up, and bowed. "I would like to speak with Kevmo Zink of the Jedi."

Jara snorted. "I knew it. He's at the evening meal." The old woman said it like Marda was interrupting a vital diplomatic event.

She lowered her eyes and said softly, "It will only take a moment, please."

"Fine. Come in."

Marda followed the Theelin through a sitting room and to the threshold of a dining room with a long table and polished benches. A hovering chandelier bobbed and whirled with happy bright light.

"Marda!" Kevmo said, standing from the bench fast enough that he knocked his thighs into the table, rattling everything.

The tall woman beside him seemed to be made of ice, but she wore similar robes and gave him a quick look before turning her calm gaze to Marda. There were two other guests in the room: a broad-shouldered human with pasty skin and goggles pushed up on his hair

and a nondescript brown-skinned human Marda could tell nothing else about in her quick glance.

Before anyone could keep talking, Marda held up her palms again and kept her gaze on the tabletop. They were eating a bar-fish gelatin that gleamed with thin white gravy. She said, "I am here from the Path of the Open Hand to invite the Jedi Kevmo Zink to visit our compound while he is here on Dalna."

Silence stretched for a moment, and Marda wished to glance up but couldn't bring herself to risk it.

"Marda," Kevmo said tentatively before he was interrupted by a new voice.

"We accept."

Marda did look up then. The icy Soikan Jedi smiled at her. It was nothing like Kevmo's smile but soothing and peaceful, and Marda was no longer intimidated by the older Jedi.

"Good," she breathed, and then fled without looking at Kevmo.



NINE

Yana worked to keep the alarm thrumming through her body off of her face. Jedi. On Dalna. Yana was Evereni. She didn't believe in coincidences.

The Jedi were a problem.

Yana smiled and gave half bows to the other members of the Path she passed as she went to find Kor. Treze hadn't even pretended to care about the naming; instead he'd snuck off with his flask of gnostra berry wine and one of the new initiates from Eiram, a pale-skinned human girl who seemed to find everything Treze did giggle-worthy. Good. Yana preferred him occupied. His attention toward Kor had become far too obvious, and that was a bad thing. He was good on a job and resourceful. She didn't want to have to kill the Mikkian for trying to take what was hers.

But she would.

Kor saw Yana's approach and laughingly separated herself from the younger kids, bidding them good night as she looped her arm through Yana's. She smiled at those they passed, but her fingers dug into Yana's wrist, an attempt to soothe.

"What's wrong?" Kor asked, voice low.

"Marda told me there are Jedi on Dalna," Yana said.

"Not good," Kor said.

"No," Yana agreed. "We need to tell the Mother about the Jedi, now."

“She went with my mother and father into her listening room. There’s new medicine for Mom.”

“Good.” It was Yana’s turn to soothe Kor, and she reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “We can tell them together. We’re a team, right? They all need to get used to that.”

“I know,” Kor said, her words quick. “I want my parents to like you. To like us. They’ll have to, if they trust us to leave together someday.”

“You still want to?” Yana tried not to let longing enter her voice.

Kor pulled them to a stop. In the dark, the Nautolan loomed a bit, but it was a comforting strength. Yana didn’t like to let herself feel comfortable with anybody except Kor. Kor leaned in and kissed her softly. “I’ll miss this place. I hated missing the birth, and we could’ve missed the naming ceremony if things hadn’t gone so smoothly today. The Force must be free, and I want to be free, too. We’ll go where we like, and still be part of the Path. Cross the galaxy with the Force.”

Yana didn’t say anything further as they continued walking, but Kor’s words had unsettled something deep in her middle. When they left Dalna, like they’d talked about doing for months, they would be gone for good. At least that was how Yana saw it. No more Path. No more Force. How would Kor accept that?

Yana didn’t bring up the question, because they had arrived at the Mother’s abode. It had once been a small cottage, her home when she first came to the Path, built by a Weequay who had died from a wasting illness some time before. But after her vision, a tunnel had been built from the house into the cave system that lay under the lands of the Path, and now the small cottage was nothing but a glorified entryway.

Two of the Herald’s retainers, a powerfully built human named Qwerb and an equally powerful Wookiee named Jukkyuk, stood at the door. They gave half bows to Yana and Kor before opening the door to the cottage and what had once been the main living area, the staircase to the Mother’s listening room at the far end of the room.

Yana and Kor descended in silence, the air warming as they went. Voices echoed up to them from far below, unintelligible as they bounced off the narrow stone hallway. By the time they reached the hallway the voices were identifiable but the words still garbled. Yana

touched Kor on the arm, and at the Nautolan's raised brow of inquiry, Yana gestured to a small nook near the entrance to the listening room, one they knew well.

They'd discovered the nook when they'd snuck off to be alone. Privacy was not so easily found within the Path of the Open Hand, as everything was done communally. Yana pressed Kor into the alcove, reached up with both hands for the Nautolan's jaw, and kissed her hard. It felt so good to taste and touch like this. She let one hand slide up and curled her fingers around the base of one of Kor's head tendrils. Kor shivered.

There was the unmistakable sound of a throat clearing nearby, and Yana startled. The Herald looked down at her and Kor, a bemused expression on his face.

"And here I thought you were adults," he said, his voice low, "not children who took every opportunity to sneak away."

Yana gave the elder Nautolan a toothy smile while Kor ducked her head at the recrimination. The Herald just tucked his hands into the folds of his robe, and Kor and Yana followed him as he walked the rest of the way to the Mother's listening room.

The room was one of the best caverns. Dry and warm, it smelled of soil and dried lompop, fragrant wildflowers from the planet's surface. The stalactites and stalagmites were deeply embedded with natural deposits of sun opal and so held and reflected the light in a sparking of blue. Thick carpets and soft floor pillows in shades of gray and blue made the space feel like a soothing, welcoming place. The Mother sat on one of the pillows with Kor's mother, Opari, reclined with her head on the Mother's knee. The Mother was smoothing one hand along the light green skin of Opari's forehead, the Nautolan woman's tresses gathered over one shoulder. She seemed to be sleeping, and her face was relaxed. Her chest rose and fell smoothly.

Even though Opari wasn't Yana's mother, it still felt good to see her doing better. She could be out of the briny water of her therapy tank only for short periods of time. And even when she was outside of the tank she was rarely there, her mind damaged by the wasting disease that had struck her down suddenly a few years earlier. Watching Opari get sick was why Kor had originally talked about

leaving. She thought it was possible that there might be a cure for her mother's disease, one that the Path hadn't pursued because they thought the Force would intervene. On Dalna all that had been available to Opari were teas and meditation. Until, the previous year, the Mother had a vision from the Force about a particular treatment—one that she convinced their best benefactor, Ragnar Pulip, to pay for. She said the Force wanted Opari to heal.

The suspicious side of Yana had worried the Mother—maybe even the Force itself—only sought to secure the Herald's support. But regardless, Opari was much better, so maybe in the end it didn't really matter.

"Mother," the Herald intoned with a bow. The Mother smiled prettily. That was when Yana noticed the Mother's other hand, the one not on Opari's brow, rested on a strange round jewel of some kind. Round, shimmering an odd purple.

Kor watched the jewel with the ghost of a frown. But she obviously wrenched her gaze away and knelt beside her mother. "Mama," she said, and took Opari's hand.

"Thank you for your work, Yana Ro and Kor," the Mother said. "The dagger you liberated is safely stowed with the other artifacts."

"Did you open it?" Yana asked.

"Briefly. And then we recharged the energy sink to keep it as contained as possible."

Yana nodded. "Good, because I have some bad news."

All eyes turned to her. The Mother's dark eyes widened, but her expression remained open. She caressed the big round jewel casually. "Speak, my child."

Yana cleared her throat. "There are Jedi on Dalna."

Kor nodded, and the Herald crossed his arms, the news fraying his composure. "How many?"

"A young one and his teacher, from what Marda told me."

The Mother closed her eyes. "I saw a ship arrive, the day after the Kessarine eggs hatched. But it was one of many visions, and until the Force reveals its will to me, there is little for me to share."

“The other skiff in the dockyard must be theirs. The nice one,” Kor said. “So they arrived on Dalna before we secured the artifact from Port Haileap.”

“They may not be here for us,” the Mother said, her gaze drifting to the glowing violet orb beside her knee. “But we should keep our attention on them.”

The Herald said, “The Force will show you what we need to know.”

Yana said, “Marda said the boy was doing tricks in the marketplace.”

“Ah,” the Mother said. “Then the Force will be unbalanced.”

From her place on the pillows, Opari turned slowly. She drew a deep breath, with no drag audible in her lungs.

Kor smiled and squeezed her mother’s hand.

“We should send someone to Ferdan to shadow the Jedi,” the Herald said. His hands had tightened into fists, and a fierce expression twisted his face. But he crouched behind his wife and helped her sit.

The Mother released Opari and lifted the strange orb into her lap. It seemed heavy, and the Mother placed it very carefully.

“I told Marda to invite them here,” Yana said, noticing that Kor’s eyes were drawn to the orb again, as well.

The Herald hissed in surprise. “Why would you do such a foolish thing as to invite them into our home?”

“Because how better to find out their true purpose here and to show them we have nothing to hide?” Yana said. “If we can show them we are nothing more than peaceful followers of the Force, they’ll leave us be.”

“Yana is right,” the Mother said, finally looking away from the orb. “When we show them we are peaceful custodians of the Force, they will go back to whatever it is that brought them to Dalna in the first place. We have nothing to hide.”

The Herald gave a curt nod of agreement, and Opari said, “Werth.” The Herald’s expression softened, and Yana decided it was

a good time to take her leave. She gave a half bow and turned to go, Kor a half step behind.

“Did you feel that?” Kor murmured, her hand gripping Yana’s arm once they were in the passage outside of the listening room.

“Feel what?” Yana asked. Kor’s entire posture was tense. “Are you okay?”

“No, the jewel, the one the Mother has,” Kor said with a shudder. She reached back and gathered her head tresses tight, as though she was wary of having them touch anything or anyone. “There is something off about it, Yana. It feels...wrong.”

Yana and Kor had never openly talked about Kor’s ability to sense things. Like her innate acrobatic ability, it was just a thing Yana had accepted as true. Kor was always the one who could sense where an artifact might be hiding, like with the Rod of Seasons from Hynestia. There had been a whole treasury full of artifacts, but it had been Kor who knew the one they wanted, the one connected to the Force the most strongly.

Yana had never considered that perhaps her girlfriend was more closely connected to the Force than she let on, but now, with worry writ large on her broad face, Yana knew it had to be true. “Is it different from the dagger box? You didn’t like that, either.”

“Yes. It’s—I can’t explain it...” Kor’s voice trailed off, and she grabbed Yana’s arm, pulling her toward the exit. She said nothing, but her frequent glances over her shoulder made it clear that whatever she was going to say, she didn’t want the Mother or the Herald to hear.

It was only once they had exited the cavern and left behind the Herald’s retainers that she finally spoke. “There is something about that jewel that is...hungry. Yana, I don’t like it. It doesn’t belong here. I don’t want Mom near it.”

Yana said nothing, but she nodded to Kor before reaching out to stroke the sensitive spot on the back of the Nautolan’s neck where her head tresses met her head. “I’m sure it will be fine.” Kor leaned into the touch with a low sound of relief. “Why don’t you stay with me tonight, just until you settle?”

“Okay,” she said. “Thank you.”

Yana said nothing as they made their way back to her sleeping quarters. She didn't like the jewel, either.

But the Mother—their Force prophet—was clearly enamored with it. Yana wondered just how bad things were about to get.



TEN

Sunshine sipped fermented grain water and pretended to be drunk. It wasn't a difficult act. He was one of two humans in the tavern, so there was only one person to see through the lie. Still, when Sunshine played a role, he gave himself to it utterly, so he moved slowly as he sloppily tossed a pair of ten-sided dice onto the rykestra gaming mat before him.

"Blassssst," Sunshine said as the credits on the betting map were swept up by the croupier along with the dice.

"Bad luck," a squat Talpini said, his overly large mouth downturned despite the glee in his voice. He stood on an empty crate to see the gaming area and had to wave to have someone pass the dice to him, his arms too short to reach across the table. He scratched at the white beard on his leathery face before clutching the dice and letting them roll around in his hand. "It's nearly impossible to roll sunrise in the brother's house."

"S'not that bad," Sunshine said, pretending to slur his words. "Could have been moonrise. Where's that server bot?"

"I think you have had enough, my friend," said the only other human in the room, a man wearing the uniform of a Republic administrator, with a unique patch on his shoulder, a hexagon bisected by a zigzagging line. *Pathfinder*, Sunshine thought, studying the patch. He'd been waiting for the man, a low-level government official known as Alonso San Tekka. There were stories that the San Tekkas were the best Pathfinders the Republic had, but that wasn't

why Sunshine had been waiting. The man was also part of a team that was rumored to have just plotted a very lucrative route to a planet on the edge of Wild Space, a place that the whispernet on Hon-Tallos was saying was an absolute paradise.

There were people who would pay well for a map to paradise. Sunshine knew most of them. And owed the rest of them money. But more than that, he wanted to make sure the route was not to *his* paradise, the one he'd plotted out himself.

"I'm good," Sunshine said, closing one eye to look at the man, still playing at being inebriated. "Obrect, is that you?"

"How about I buy you a fizzy pop and tuck you into bed, old timer," the San Tekka said. Sunshine didn't have many dealings with the San Tekkas, but the man definitely had the family look about him: tan skin, dark hair, and a scowl that said he didn't like making time for inconveniences. San Tekkas were a hardscrabble lot, just as likely to be government officials as independent contractors, but Sunshine still far preferred them to their rivals, the Grafes. Those flim-flamsters were just as likely to slide a blade between your ribs as sell you a navigable route.

"I like fizzy pop," Sunshine said, leaning heavily on Alonso, forcing the smaller man to steady himself.

"Good. Let's get you out of here," Alonso said, escorting Sunshine out of the tavern. They walked up a carved staircase into the cool night air. The capital of Hon-Tallos was little more than dockside shops and taverns, but a tent city had sprouted up on the outskirts of the town. Refugees from Eiram and E'ronoh and the war between the two planets had been flooding into all the worlds that side of the Outer Rim, Hon-Tallos more than any other. Every single open space had been taken up by their makeshift dwellings, and aid workers from the Republic handed out ration packs to passersby. No one noticed as the Republic official and his inebriated charge left the smoky entrance to the tavern.

Once they were a short way away, Alonso pressed a datacard into Sunshine's palm. "Clever."

"Plausible deniability," Sunshine said. "You're worried about people tracing the leak back to you, but no one would ever suspect a

drunkard of being an information broker.”

A group of rough-looking folks approached them, begging in a mix of languages. Alonso deftly steered them away from the group, down a side alley and back toward the docks. Beggars had become a common sight, and from the expression on Alonso’s face, he had no intention of parting with a single credit, much less entertaining their tales of woe.

“I thought you were a prospector,” Alonso said after the alley had spit them out onto the docks right next to an aging pleasure yacht, the very one Sunshine had flown to Hon-Tallos. The *Scupper* had a humble name and, like Sunshine, was easily underestimated. No one expected a pale, rotund, scruffy human male wearing a cheap pair of coveralls to be anything more than a lowly mechanic. And no one expected the ancient ship to be as well appointed as it was.

“I wear a number of hats,” Sunshine said, stumbling as he climbed aboard the ship. “What of the rest of the find?”

“The jewels?” Alonso released Sunshine and crossed his arms. “They were all lost in transit.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” Sunshine sighed, pulling the blaster from where it was tucked at the small of his back. Alonso raised his hands in surrender at the sight of the weapon.

“Wait, we can discuss this,” he began, but it was too late. Sunshine pulled the trigger, shooting Alonso right in the middle of his chest. The blaster left a deep scorch mark in the material of the San Tekka’s shirt as he fell to the ground.

“Deezee, I need a cleanup.”

The droid trundled out from the galley as Sunshine opened up the data terminal tucked into one wall, hidden behind tasteless artwork of a half-naked Twi’lek woman draped across a speeder bike. Sunshine checked the datacard, heart pounding as he surveyed the route he’d memorized. The way through the Veil was tricky, and these coordinates were not it. This was a straightforward route to an Outer Rim world, not the switchbacks and turnarounds Sunshine had expected.

His path was still the only one. He smiled and stowed the datacard in one of his safes. There were still credits to be made off of

such information. Maybe even from the Grafs, curse their treacherous hearts.

DZ-23 dragged Alonso's body to the cargo hold. Sunshine would open the loading doors once they were clear of Hon-Tallos airspace, leaving Alonso's body to the stars. Wasn't that something the San Tekkas were known for? Their clan loved the stars more than anything, and Sunshine wasn't a monster. He'd even gone along with Alonso's need for secrecy, pretending to be drunk and losing credits at the rykestra table so the man wouldn't fall under suspicion of selling undocumented hyperspace routes. If anything, Sunshine was positively philanthropic. He'd given the man an easy death without any suspicions or fears. There were far worse ways to go.

Once DZ-23 had cleared the body, Sunshine went to the cockpit and fired up the engines before sending a quick message to the Mother. "Took care of my business. Going to catch up with an old friend about your lost cousin on Jedha. See you soon."

Sunshine closed the channel and took a deep breath. Elecia would be so excited when he figured out just where on Jedha the Rod of Daybreak was being kept. Sunshine took a moment to imagine handing her the rod, the way her face would light up when he told her how he had secured the artifact. Maybe then she would see how important he could be to her.

She just had to give him a chance.



ELEVEN

Kevmo popped awake much too early for anything but meditation. So he sat up in the darkness of his room, legs crossed and thin pillow hugged to his stomach, and let go of the barriers holding back his awareness of the Force. It was unusual, he knew: most Jedi reached for the Force, but Kevmo had to do the opposite and close off from it when he didn't need its immediacy.

The Force drifted through him, bright and powerful, and Kevmo focused on regulating the flow. His connection to the Force was strong but uneven, prone to bursts and fits if he wasn't careful. Breathing slowly and deeply, he practiced noting his feelings and stretching them out into thinner streams to blend with the Force. The spiky thrills that had woken him, he drew out into anticipation, which gradually flattened into readiness. The warmth of the Force moved with his pulse, and he used breathing to slow both until his entire body felt alight and a little tingly. Kevmo sank deeper, his own awareness of self stretching after his emotions until he barely remembered his name, only holding on to enough consciousness to react when the door to his room slid open with a whisper.

He opened his eyes slowly, not sensing danger.

Master Zallah stood there in only one layer of robes, lightsaber loose in hand. She did not need to say anything, and Kevmo grinned, leaping to his feet. She raised one of her eyebrows, and he took a breath to hold on to the balance he'd achieved. His smile softened, and he went to grab his tunic and boots and lightsaber.

Still tingling warmly with the Force, he followed his master out into the back garden of Lady Jara's guest house. Early morning sky illuminated rows of vegetables growing in low boxes, and pots of spilling flowers placed haphazardly in the shade. A small droid with six spindly legs wandered along the rows, sprinkling water onto the leaves. There was a small lawn, just enough space to spar if they were careful. Kevmo stretched alongside Zallah, allowing his awareness to spread to the teal grass and brightening sky. It would be a beautiful day, and they were going to visit the Path of the Open Hand, and he would see Marda again, maybe not frighten her, and perhaps even coax a smile onto those pretty lips.

The hiss of Master Zallah's lightsaber was Kevmo's only warning: he jerked to the side, rolled, and came to his feet with his own lightsaber up. It cast a bright yellow line across his vision, a ray of sunlight. His pulse raced, but he laughed as he blocked Zallah's strike. Her blue lightsaber sparked against his, and she leveled him with a cool look. She'd just been waiting for him to distract himself to attack. Kevmo shrugged ruefully and pulled himself back together just in time for Zallah's next move.

They battled in tight motions across the tiny yard, and Kevmo couldn't focus on anything else. Zallah was so fast and controlled, he could barely keep up, much better at power moves himself, relying on enthusiasm and awareness of space. Sparring was one of the only things that cut Kevmo down until he was less a sun and more a single pure flame. If his body didn't need things like rest and fuel, maybe he could have battled like this forever.

Zallah drove him hard, used the Force to set him off balance, trip him, little tricks that seemed beneath her but he'd learned she considered to be just as important a tool as the saber itself.

Finally, she called a halt. The suns peeked up over the garden wall, and she thumbed off her lightsaber. Kevmo immediately followed suit and bowed to her. He panted, sweaty and loose.

"Go wash—if you do it slow enough, maybe we can leave after," she said, expression cold but voice just soft enough to be wry.

Kevmo dashed off to get ready.

He did not do it slowly enough, and even after eating a hearty breakfast of local pink-yolked eggs over a dark grain porridge while gently hitting a flirtation wall with Lady Jara, Kevmo still had to cool his heels leaning against the front door until the morning was late enough to be appropriate for answering their invitation. Master Zallah tightened the skin around her icy lavender eyes in another eye roll when she found him playing with a mail droid. It had trundled past with a delivery for Lady Jara, and Kevmo cajoled it into a game of keepsake, which he loved playing with droids because almost none of them had any sense of humor.

At Master Zallah's expression, Kevmo released the droid with thanks and said, "It's good training," before slipping inside to deliver the datapack the mail droid had brought Lady Jara.

Then they were off, heading through town toward the land that belonged to the Path of the Open Hand.

"Tell me why you're excited," Master Zallah said after several minutes of companionable quiet.

"I have a good feeling," he said immediately.

"Not about the Path of the Open Hand."

Kevmo grimaced, but only because he knew he was too easy to catch out. "About Marda."

Zallah hummed skeptically.

Ferdan was busy again that day, but the Jedi passed through the market without pause and came out of town to the south. The paved road turned to dirt as they followed it around toward the river valley. The sun blazed off the purple-tinged trees, and there was a funny buzz that Kevmo guessed was some sort of grass cricket. He wondered if he'd be on Dalna long enough to learn the names of the wildlife.

"Kev."

He glanced at Master Zallah, who walked gracefully, hands folded behind her back. "Master?"

"Why are we here?"

"The Hynestian Rod of Seasons."

"And why are we here?"

Her emphasis helped Kevmo realize she meant the Jedi in general, what they were doing in the Outer Rim.

“Exploring and making connections. Introducing ourselves to people so they know what we are, what we stand for, and that they can call on us for aid.”

Zallah hummed again, this time in mild approval.

He kept talking. “It’s good to get to know another group of Force—well, not Force users, but people who respect the Force, who organize around it. Whether they’re thieves or not.”

“That sounds like a reason to consider the entire community. To try and comprehend their purpose and unity. Find out how they work as a whole,” Zallah mused.

“Not focus on an individual,” Kevmo said, understanding what she wanted him to understand.

Master Zallah briefly touched his shoulder. He didn’t lean into it like he wished to.

“Your emotions are strong, as is your connection to the Force,” Zallah said. “It is good to use your feelings, to allow them to guide you through and alongside the Force. But you must not allow your feelings to use you.”

“I know,” he said. He did. He thought he was getting better.

“Today, Kev, keep your senses open. Use your feelings and your gifts, however you see fit, but let us not actively use the Force unless we must. They may have people sensitive to it,” she said. “Lady Jara seems to think they do. However, it is not only possible but likely that someone in the Path of the Open Hand knows where the Rod of Seasons is. I would like to know not only where it is, but why it is here, if so.”

“Right. If they stole it, why did they? And are they the ones behind the rumors about a buyer of Force-related artifacts here?”

“Have they taken anything else? What are they planning?” Zallah added.

Kevmo nodded. It was good he’d meditated that morning and was already feeling balanced with himself and the Force. That would make it easier to be unobtrusive. Unless anything disrupted him.

Of course, the moment he saw Marda waiting for them outside the boundary of the Path compound, Kevmo realized it was going to be more difficult than usual to remain balanced. She stood still, a slender column of gray and blue against the vibrant pink, purple, green of the Dalnan meadows that rolled away from the gate of the compound. Though half her black hair was pulled away from her serene face, the ends drifted in the breeze, tipped in the same blue that waved in three lines across her forehead. Kevmo thought she was beautiful and wanted to slide his fingers along the sleek strands of her hair, or hold her hand.

He was in trouble.

Swallowing the burst of emotion, he breathed carefully through his nose, reminding himself he was a Jedi, he was there to get to know everyone on the Path and retrieve a stolen Force artifact. He could care without growing attached. It should be simple.

“Marda,” he said, unable to keep the warmth out of his voice. He stopped when Master Zallah stopped, and they bowed together.

Marda returned the gesture, her hands turned palms up. “The Force will be free,” she murmured. Then with her starry black eyes on Zallah, she said, “Welcome to the Path of the Open Hand.”

“Thank you, Marda Ro,” Master Zallah said. “We are glad and honored to be welcomed by fellow children of the Force.”

Marda seemed to relax slightly at Zallah’s words and finally looked to Kevmo. She didn’t smile, but Kevmo did. He said, “This is Jedi Knight Zallah Macri, my master.”

“Your...oh, you’re an apprentice still?” Marda blinked.

Kevmo huffed a little, and even though Zallah did not so much as twitch, he knew she was amused. “I am,” he said. “I wouldn’t mind if I always got to work with Master Zallah,” he added boldly.

For a moment, Marda’s lips parted, but she didn’t say anything until turning abruptly to gesture at the open gate. “Please, this way. I’ll show you the compound and introduce you to a few of our Elders.”

Master Zallah gestured for Kevmo to precede her through the gate—which put him level with Marda. He skipped ahead to walk at her side. Marda glanced at him from the corner of her eye, a little longer than he expected, and Kevmo smiled.

“We’ve been here—the Path has been here—for over a hundred years,” she said to them both. “We began with a single person, grew into a family, and eventually a community. We’re self-sustaining, though sometimes trade with Ferdan, and accept gifts.”

“Gifts freely given,” Kevmo said.

“That’s right.” Marda walked them along the perimeter. The compound’s boundary was marked by occasional metal beacons set into small pinkish boulders. Nothing to keep anybody out, just delineating their territory. Kevmo found it hard to believe they meant any harm or were responsible for stealing valuable items like the Rod of Seasons from powerful people, only to not have any security. But maybe that was what they wanted strangers to think.

As Marda led them past fields of ruffled greens and what looked like hybrid binkberries, she explained that they farmed little, only what they couldn’t gather, and relied on their own hands and the will of the Force. It was true: while several people in gray robes tended the rows of vegetation, there wasn’t an irrigation droid in sight, or any technology more sophisticated than a hoe.

“Why not use better tools, like droids or maybe fertilizer?” Kevmo asked.

Marda smiled a little. “We do have some fertilizer—natural and gathered from our moss ghoats. But droids and such technology interfere with our harmony with the Force.”

“How so?”

“Any technology disconnected from life is disconnected from the Force. When necessary, of course, we don’t reject it—ships for transportation, purifiers, machines that can do things we cannot—but when it isn’t necessary, when farming for example, there is no reason to use it.”

“Even if it makes your life better?”

“Better, or easier?” Marda challenged.

Kevmo blinked. “Easier, I suppose,” he said, and glanced back at Master Zallah, who nodded to indicate she did not mind his concession.

Marda’s smile grew. She continued on, taking them around toward the river and the honeycomb of cells that housed members of the

Path. They were small, but that didn't surprise Kevmo. She explained how they'd been built, how they were shared, as well as the various levels of membership people enjoyed in the community, from the Littles to the Elder Council and its leader, the Herald. She explained that there were more chambers underground but didn't invite them to see the subterranean levels. Those were for Path members, especially the newborn and eldest, who could benefit from the temperature regulation. When Marda mentioned that the Mother spoke of the caverns beneath the ground as gifts from the Force and Dalna to the Path, Master Zallah spoke for the first time.

"The Mother?" Zallah inquired coolly.

Marda's expression shifted into something slightly reverent. "The Mother came to us a handful of years ago, a simple refugee, until it was revealed that her relationship to the Force is so harmonious, so clear, she sees visions of its will, and her garden..." Marda paused to take a breath as if she could hardly believe it. "Her garden bloomed overnight, filled with fruit and flowers enough to feed everyone in the Path a meal."

"A prophet," Zallah said.

"Yes. Her vision has revitalized the Path in recent years, and the direction..." Marda paused again, this time seeming to catch herself as if she wasn't certain she should continue.

Kevmo and Master Zallah waited, and Kev reached out to gently touch his knuckles to the back of her hand. Just to encourage her. Marda looked at his hand, then up at him. "We are more active than we used to be, with the Mother's guidance."

"How so?"

"Outreach." Marda continued walking. "The Mother sends her Children to different worlds, across the Rim, to share the Path of the Open Hand and invite people to join us. They have had success in bringing us benefactors. I'll show you."

Marda led them away from the cluster of buildings to the outskirts of the compound. As they walked, Kevmo carefully opened his senses. He'd been attuned to the Force during the entire tour but tamped down when closer to others, like the farmers and a few Path members they'd passed near the living cells. He kept in mind Zallah's

caution that the Path might have Force-sensitive members. Which it sounded like this Mother had to be. Kevmo didn't feel anything strange—this was just a large farm, and Marda was absolutely sincere as far as Kevmo could tell. Sincere, and passionate about her home. It made Kevmo even more eager to keep talking with her, and he longed to share his own passion about the Force, even though he knew she vehemently disagreed with his methods. He wanted to know why. Exactly what made her—the Path—believe manipulating the Force caused harm?

They arrived at what seemed to be a small quarry, with tubs of plastoid powder and the molds for something large, like a temple. Marda turned to face them with a proud smile. “This will be part of the *Gaze Electric*, the Mother's great ship that will be the home of the Path among the stars when it's complete. Which should be soon.”

None of this looked much like parts of a ship to Kevmo, but he smiled. “It looks like it will be unique.”

“A sanctuary for the Force, moving through space,” Marda said.

“A sanctuary,” Zallah said, moving toward one of the arched pillars. “For the Force. Do you mean for Force users? Artifacts?”

Kevmo darted a look at his master. She was studying Marda, who said, “For the Path. We have some artifacts, I suppose they can be called. In the subterranean levels, where they can do no harm. And there will be a vault on the ship. Items with a strong connection to the Force are tempting for people to use, and disrupt the harmony and clarity of the Force—not to mention the freedom. And the Force must be free.”

“This ship was the Mother's idea?” Master Zallah asked.

“It is the will of the Force. But the Mother explained it to us, and all the Elders think it's wonderful. And the benefactors have been generous. The Children will be able to expand their outreach so far.”

“Are you going to join them?” Kevmo asked, hoping to distract Marda from Zallah's pointed questions.

Her lips parted, and he could just see the sharp tips of her teeth. She glanced down and rather shyly said, “I'd like to, but I'm not sure. My work is on Dalna, with the Littles.”

Kevmo studied her, unable to look away. “They seemed to adore you, yesterday.” It was a risk, reminding her about the day before and their very abrupt parting. But he kept his voice gentle, feeling rather warm about the whole thing, and stood close.

But Master Zallah said, “I would very much like to meet your Mother.”

Marda stepped away from Kevmo. “The Mother is communing with the Force in her private cavern today. But waiting for us in the communal garden with povo punch are the Herald and several of our Elders you’re welcome to speak with.”

“Very well,” Zallah said. “Please lead the way.”



TWELVE

Marda avoided looking too often at Kevmo Zink as she showed him and his master around the Path. His attention remained intent on her, and she felt both excited and awkward about it.

After bringing them to the communal garden, where the Herald waited with Old Waiden and Aris Ade, a straight-backed but ancient human woman with tan skin and snow-white hair, the Jedi Knight bowed to the blue-faced Elders and suggested perhaps the youths might continue their walk and allow the adults their seats in the shade.

Marda didn't think Jedi Zallah Macri needed a seat in the shade—she couldn't be much older than the Mother and was a warrior—but Kevmo had grinned enthusiastically, and Elder Aris ushered them away.

“What else would you like to see?” she asked.

Kevmo hummed thoughtfully, then slid her a smile. “What's your favorite place?”

Immediately she thought of the nesting cell. He would like the baby Kessarine, but she couldn't take him there. Her second favorite place, though—there she could take him. “This way,” she said, and led him toward the river.

The sun warmed her as they walked, and once or twice the back of her hand brushed his. The first time a lompop flower snapped as they passed, Kevmo startled, then laughed and leaned over to inspect the little pink petals. She watched his obvious curiosity and

explained that the noise had to do with gathering moisture from the air. He smiled up at her, yellow eyes bright. Marda wanted to touch the tattoos on his cheek. "Come," she said, not quite short about it, and continued along the narrow path. She mustn't allow herself to relax around someone so prone to abusing the Force.

Kevmo scrambled after her. She tried not to feel bad. After a moment, he said, "How long have you been here?"

She considered putting him off by answering about the Path itself and Sachar Rold, but she'd told him that already, and besides, there was no reason other than her nerves to be mean. "Since I was very little. I don't remember anything before Dalna and the Path. My cousin Yana does, some, and she says something awful happened to our family. But we weren't abandoned here. It was the will of the Force."

"I'm sorry it was awful, though," Kevmo said. "Even if you don't remember."

"It's typical for Evereni," she said, just to get that out of the way, too.

"Evereni." He said it slowly. Without any sort of inflection. "Is that your people?"

Marda nodded, eyes lifted beyond the purple-red willows at the riverside, toward the trio of volcanoes in the distance.

"There are so many people out here on the Outer Rim," Kevmo said. "I don't know anything about a lot of them. But I want to."

"You haven't heard of Evereni?"

He shrugged. Several black braids slid around his shoulder to fall down his back. "I wish I had, if you're all so pretty."

Marda gasped at the blatant flirtation, and Kevmo winced a little, laughing at himself. "Sorry," he said.

Tentatively, Marda smiled back. But not widely enough to display her teeth. She needed to remember he was dangerous, no matter how he flirted and how much she liked him, or how easy he was to be around. He was Jedi, and he hurt the Force. Marda felt her smile fall away.

Kevmo's did, too, and he said, "I lost my birth family before I could form strong memories of them, too. It was an accident of some kind, and I was alone for a little while; I only remember it being cold, and the light was wavering like through water. But then the will of the Force brought me to the Jedi."

Marda knew what he was doing. Making their story the same—he was saved by the Jedi, she by the Path. Even though she could see through it, she didn't mind. It was comforting. After a moment of silence in which they watched each other and Marda wondered if they were thinking the exact same thing, she turned away.

Near the river, she stepped off the path into knee-high blue wheat, its bearded seeds whispering against her robes. Kevmo barged after her, and some of the seeds clung to the brown-and-gold hem of his robes. She led him around an outcropping of granite boulders to the sunrise tree. Its slender white trunk arced up, and its branches wept in a circle, long and luxurious with tiny crimson flowers. The ground surrounding it was blanketed in red petals, blown into swirling patterns by the breeze.

"Wow," Kevmo said. "So many flowers."

"They all fall by midday and rebud into the evening. By dawn, an entire new set of flowers will bloom on the limbs. Every day, throughout the spring and summer." Marda stepped into the swath of red. She bent and picked up a few flowers, some whole, others only single petals. They fluttered out of her hands, falling between her fingers. "The tree gives of itself so much, every day. So much of its energy is spent on nothing else. If the flowers aren't collected or eaten, they rot quickly. That's the sweet smell. The flowers are meant to be taken, used, eaten...enjoyed."

"This is your favorite place," Kevmo murmured, crouching beside her. "I get it. You're just as generous, you know."

Marda laughed softly. "I am not."

"You give and give—I've seen it. Gifts freely given."

"It's the Path."

"I think it's you," he answered. The crimson branches swayed around him, and the dappled sunlight cast bright red light between them.

Marda couldn't help it: she reached out and put two fingers against the lines of gold tattooed on his right cheek. His skin was warm.

Kevmo stilled. His bright eyes bored into her, and Marda felt so much on display. She'd given herself away when she touched him.

Carefully, she pulled her hand back. Kevmo reached for it, though, took it. "I can feel the Force here," he said. "It's strong. This planet is strong with it. Maybe because of the Path, maybe it's natural. I...I wonder if you think the Force gives itself to me, and maybe wants me to use it."

Marda did not pull her hand from his, but she lowered her gaze to the fallen petals. "I—I can't imagine it. Even if you use it for the best reasons, it's still got to have consequences. Save someone here, and who knows what harm occurs elsewhere."

His fingers tightened on hers. "The Force isn't a zero-sum game. It's so much more than that."

"Yes, it is," Marda whispered.

"I'm glad we can agree on something," Kevmo said, the teasing returned to his voice.

But Marda felt sad and frustrated. "If you could step away from your need to manipulate the Force, if you could remove yourself from the selfish idea that it wants to be used, then you might truly be able to understand how much more the Force can be."

Kevmo let go of her and stood, as if he needed to move in order to talk. "The Force isn't merely something that exists, though. It isn't meant to be ignored. The sun is warm, right, the sunlight? It feels like it's everywhere, in the very air, and it gives life—here on Dalna, the planet needs its suns. All life does. Not just to bask in the warmth, but to use it, to transform energy and make it life. The plants use the sunlight, but the sunlight isn't harmed."

"Flowers don't reach out and take energy from the sunlight and therefore deprive other flowers of that sun," Marda said, knowing the metaphor was getting out of hand, but it hadn't been a good one in the first place. She rose to her feet and faced him.

Kevmo grimaced and tugged on the small braid just under his ear. "You can't deprive someone of the Force, not like that. Me pulling on

it doesn't remove it elsewhere. The only way to be cut off from the Force is to do it to yourself."

"There are certainly Force voids. If there are places like Dalna that are vivid with the Force, there must be places without it. If the Force can be imbued into something, the opposite must be true."

Though he wanted to disagree, very clearly, Marda saw that he couldn't. She was glad he wouldn't lie to her even if that might help his argument. She reached out again, smoothing her expression.

Kevmo let her take his hand back. He said, "I think the Force is active though. It's not a state of being, but it affects us and all life in the universe, whether we're sensitive or not. It gives, it does, in myriad ways."

"Yes."

"And the Path stresses living in harmony with the Force." His thumb slipped against her knuckles, and Marda fought back a shiver. They stood so close.

"Yes."

"How do you live in harmony with something, if you aren't in a relationship with it? Isn't harmony a balance? Give and take?"

"No taking. Only giving," she said immediately. "Give and give: you give me a smile, I return it. We haven't taken anything from one another, but we're in harmony."

"You'd do well arguing in the Jedi Temple," he said grumpily. It was cute.

Marda demurred. "I don't think so. I don't enjoy arguing."

"You're awfully good at it for not liking it."

"Maybe I don't mind...when it's you," she finished breathlessly, impressed at her boldness.

Kevmo's fingers tightened around hers. This time when he smiled it was slow and gentle. Marda felt no hesitation in returning it. She was getting through to him; she knew it.

"I should take you back," she said quietly, though she did not wish to break the bright red bubble they'd created under the sunrise tree.

"You must be ready for lunch."

“I could eat,” he agreed, merriment flooding back into his expression.

Together they wandered back toward the road to the compound. As they approached the first buildings, Kevmo said, “You mentioned before that you—that the Path—has Force artifacts. Do you know if the Children seek them out, on their trips offworld?”

Marda frowned to try to cover her surprise at the direct question. She did not wish to lie; that was its own kind of taking. Carefully, she said, “Why would they? We could only accept an artifact that was freely given—and if such a thing was meant to be with us, if the Force willed it, then it would find its way here.” Marda knew the Children *were* taking the artifacts, and she had never been comfortable with the idea, but it was the will of the Force. The Mother had seen it. They weren’t taking from the Force itself, after all. Only from people who would use it.

“Find its way...” Kevmo made a face Marda couldn’t read. “And if you did acquire one, you’d never give it to anyone else.”

“Not if it was part of the Force. We would want to keep it safe, stop it from being used—and causing harm.” Marda stopped. Time to go on the offensive. She pulled her hand free of his. “Is that the real reason you’re here? You think we have something, and you want it.”

Kevmo grimaced. “It’s part of the reason—not the only real reason, Marda.” He said her name a little desperately. She wanted to bare her teeth at him, unsheathe her sharp nails. “We’re looking for something that was stolen from—”

“Stolen!” Marda cried. She backed away. “We did not steal anything. We do not take, Kevmo.” She turned away, sick to her stomach.

“I know.” He held out his hands, almost parodying the Path’s open-palm gesture.

Marda did curl her lips back slightly and felt the cool air on her teeth.

“Marda. Wait. I’m sorry. I’m here because I wanted to learn about the Path, I promise. And I wanted to see you. The rest is...my work. I serve the Force, through the Jedi. You understand that, don’t you?”

Swallowing her surge of anger—and guilt—Marda stared at his pleading face. She nodded once. Of course she'd let herself believe winning him over could be as easy as a walk and an argument.

“If you don't have the artifact we're looking for—”

“We do not,” she said with so much false bite her teeth ached.

Kevmo nodded. “Then we'll keep looking for it. We'll...we won't be on Dalna for long.”

Sudden pain at the thought made her reach for his hand again. They wove their fingers together. Marda's pulse raced. In her palm, where it touched his, she almost sensed warmth, a real weight, like the sunlight he'd been talking about. She did not want to let go of him. Ever. This feeling was so overwhelming, it couldn't be anything other than the Force, surely.

There was nothing she could say, though, so Marda tugged him along with her. He remained uncharacteristically quiet, too.

At the communal garden, the Elders and the Jedi Knight remained in the shade of the storage barn, sipping povo punch. Marda served herself and Kevmo some, and Kevmo told his master about the sunrise tree while the Elders nodded in approval. Then the Herald stood, needing to be elsewhere, and the Jedi took their leave.

Marda and Elder Aris Ade walked them out.

“Thank you for the hospitality,” Zallah Macri said, bowing shallowly to Aris. “We are grateful to have learned more about the Path of the Open Hand.”

“And likewise we are glad to know our fellow friends of the Force,” Aris Ade said in her creaky but strong voice.

Softly, Kevmo said, “Marda.” He bowed. She opened her hands, palms up, and returned the bow, not letting his gaze go. Her lips parted, but she did not know what to say.

Reluctantly, Kevmo turned away with his master. They shared a glance but did not speak until they were too far away for Marda to hear.

Instead of moving, Aris Ade said, “You're doing well, Marda-chi,” adding a diminutive from her homeworld. “Growing strong and capable.”

“I would like to be as confident as the Mother with others one day,” Marda said. She needed to shake off this guilt. She owed Kevmo nothing and the Mother, the Path, everything. What the Children did was right; it was practically holy. The Force must be free.

Aris hummed, and something of displeasure in her tone made Marda glance sharply over. Aris said, “You should strive for more.”

“More?” Marda frowned. “The Mother—”

The Elder put her arm around Marda’s shoulders. “You are good, Marda Ro. Keep sight of that.”

It seemed like the Elder had suggested the Mother was not good. What could the Jedi Knight have possibly said to seed such doubts? Fire seemed to flare in Marda’s belly. She stared down the long road to Ferdan, furious that she wanted them to return, that she could still feel the ghost of Kevmo’s touch on her skin. “The Jedi,” she began hotly.

“Are interesting, aren’t they?” Elder Aris mused, unconcerned with Marda’s emotional journey.

“I...yes,” Marda said. Her nails itched to claw into something thick. She held on to the urge, taking a deep breath.

“We are made better by dealing with them. Our belief stronger when we listen to and challenge other believers.”

Marda nodded. Yana and the Mother had both encouraged it. She would always have to keep the Path’s secrets, after all, whether there or out in the galaxy with the Children. “They do not make me feel harmonious,” she confessed. Even if Aris Ade was having doubts, she remained an Elder of the Path.

Aris laughed and squeezed Marda. “A song can be jagged and still have harmony. Sometimes clarity is sharp.”

“A song?”

“I like to think of the Force that way—free, clear, and harmonious like a song. And there are many, many ways to make a harmony, and none inherently better than others—except made so by circumstance.”

Clouds had gathered in the northwest, and Marda stared at their darkness, feeling cooled and more relaxed as she did so. Rain

overnight would help the blinkberries and layer lettuce grow. She said, "We live in harmony with the Force by living as we do." It was not an argument, more of a question.

"Yes," Aris Ade said firmly. "But be open to what harmony can mean, Marda-chi. Your relationship to the Force can be a duet."

A smile for a smile, Marda thought. *A note for a note*. Slowly, she nodded and whispered, "Freely given."

"The Force gives the Mother vision," the Elder said softly. Before Marda could respond, she continued, "I wonder what the Mother gives the Force?"

Marda's mouth fell open.

Aris Ade faced her and took her cheeks between her palms. The older human's skin was dry, labor-rough. "What do you give to the Force, Marda Ro?"

Marda could not speak. She could barely breathe. She did not know. She taught the Littles of gifts freely given, but she did not know what she gave to the Force itself. The ground might drop from beneath her feet, and she would not be able to move under the heady weight of the realization. She managed to say, "I don't know."

And the Elder smiled. "Find out for yourself, then you can stand at the Mother's side. Or perhaps even before her."



THIRTEEN

Yana woke early and made her way under gathering storm clouds to an audience with the Mother even before she broke her fast. After the previous day's visit by the Jedi, Treze murdering the dockmaster, and Kor's feelings about that strange jewel orb, Yana had realized it was finally time to begin to plan her escape in earnest. She had no doubt that bad days were coming. It wasn't just her natural Evereni inclinations, either.

Yana had watched the Jedi arrive and leave from her favorite hiding place high up in a torinda tree, the black bark and frilled leaves of teal hiding her well. It was her favorite place to escape to, and it had been so long since she'd first dug her nails into the soft bark and pulled herself into a crook of a branch high above all. When she was little she used to hide in the tree to avoid chores. Now she visited the tree whenever she needed some time alone to think, something that could be hard to come by in the Path of the Open Hand.

But it had also been a way to keep track of the Jedi during their visit. The tree was high enough that Yana could see every corner of the Path's lands, so she knew that Marda had taken the Jedi boy to the sunrise tree, a fact she didn't quite know what to do with. Yana had always thought her cousin was smarter than to give her heart to a Jedi, but it seemed like that had been a false hope. Either way, Yana couldn't help thinking maybe a little heartbreak would be good for Marda. She was so soft, an easy target for the many dangers that existed across the galaxy. She was Evereni; she would need to learn how to be strong. Better late than never.

But after the Jedi left, the younger one looking back over his shoulder far too many times, Yana had realized that the end for the Path could come at any moment. The Mother had a number of “reclaimed” artifacts within the antechambers to her listening room, and all it would take was a Jedi to get close enough to be able to sense them. At least, that was what Yana assumed. She didn’t really understand how the Force worked, and she didn’t care. There was one power in the galaxy everyone respected: credits. And she would claim her share and get off Dalna while that was still an option. And take Kor with her.

A pattering echoed all around her, and the sky broke, dumping water on Yana as she walked. But there was nothing to be done for it. This time of year the rains were likely to last days, if not weeks. This deluge was heavier than she had seen before, but she only took a moment to solidify her resolve before quickening her steps, intent on her task.

Yana could have waited for her audience with the Mother, but she wanted a chance to talk to the woman without anyone else present. Kor would be at the morning meditation in the deepest of the caves, sweating and stretching in an anteroom heated by a hot spring. The Elders swore such undertakings helped one cleanse the body of impurities and connect more deeply with the Force, but Yana did not like the heat or sweating, and her connection to the Force was just fine, so it was the most opportune moment to seek out the Mother.

The rains were so turbulent, wind whipping the trees and sending droplets sideways, that the Herald’s retainers were inside the anteroom to the Mother’s underground abode. When Yana walked in sopping wet, they pointed her to a small side room with additional robes. Yana quickly switched her wet robes with dry ones. A thing that was nice about the Path was that it was never a problem to find something to wear. Everyone wore nearly the same thing.

Yana squeezed out her hair before changing, dropping her soaked robes in a pile with others. She wondered who else had come to see the Mother at this early hour. They were the usual robes of the Path, so not an Elder. For a moment Yana worried that perhaps Kor had had the same thought she had, to declare their next job the last one they would do and announce a date when they would leave the Path.

Kor and Yana had spoken about leaving for the past five years, since fifteen was the age of choosing in the Path. Yana had known even then that she wanted off Dalna and to be out among the stars, but it had taken her longer to convince Kor.

Yana was nearly to the Mother's listening chamber when she heard voices, both familiar. Yana quickened her steps and was shocked to find Marda deep in conversation with the Mother.

"Yana!" the Mother said with a kind smile. She sat among a pile of pillows again, a moon hen in a nest, and the weird heavy-looking jewel was cradled in her lap. For a moment the thing seemed to pulse with a serene violet light, but when Yana blinked, the orb looked unchanged. "I'm glad you made it despite the deluge. Marda was just telling me of the Jedi's visit yesterday. It seems her kindness may have changed the younger one's mind."

Marda sat across from the Mother on a similar pile of pillows, although they were not quite as nice as the Mother's. Her gray cheeks were darker than usual, and she ducked her head at the Mother's compliment. "Not changed his mind, Mother, but opened his eyes. He seems open to learning more about our teachings and seems to understand how much we agree about the importance of the Force."

"You really think you're going to change a Jedi's mind about the Force?" Yana asked, the whole situation making her feel prickly. Why was the Mother encouraging this? Did she really think Marda could convince a Jedi that the Path had a better opinion on things? Marda might be that naive, but surely the Mother wasn't. Did being a Force prophet make one delusional?

"I think if anyone can, your cousin can," the Mother said with another kind smile at Marda. "And it is not just about changing the Jedi's mind but also about Marda learning about the many paths of the Force, even if our Path is the correct one. Plus this is excellent practice for Marda, since she wants to join the Children. Don't you think so, Yana?"

Marda's expression of embarrassment became hope at the Mother's words, and she turned the full force of that yearning on

Yana. "Maybe you could give me some tips," she said. "Since you and Kor go out to spread the message of the Path so often."

Yana's mouth was suddenly dry, and she shrugged. If she was going to leave and Marda remain, Marda might as well get better at proselytizing. Yana sat down on another pile of pillows to buy herself a moment before turning to her cousin. "Persistence is what matters," she finally said. A smile ticked up the corner of her mouth because she sounded like a prophet herself. But it was the truth. It did take persistence to be one of the Children, to have their hundred-percent success rate at liberating Force artifacts. And making plenty of credits on the side.

"Persistence..." Marda nodded. "Perhaps I should visit the Jedi at their lodgings immediately."

"It's pouring out," Yana said.

"Making the trip in the rain will illustrate Marda's dedication," the Mother said. "That's a lovely idea. I believe there may even be some recently bloomed whispering ferns you could take with you. They are great to help focus with meditation."

"A gift freely given," Marda murmured with a slight nod and a half smile. "Yes, I will do that. Thank you, Mother. Yana."

Yana said nothing as Marda took her leave, but once her cousin's footsteps had echoed away, she rounded on the Mother. "Why would you do that to her?"

"Do what?" the Mother asked, idly stroking the jewel in her lap.

"Tell her to seek out the Jedi? Hint that she might one day become one of the Children?" Yana huffed. "You know she has no aptitude for what we do."

"Once the *Gaze Electric* is completed, we will all take to the stars," the Mother said, voice like velvet. "So I did not lie to her in that regard. And I was telling the truth. No one loves the Path and its many gifts more than Marda. If anyone can change the mind of that Padawan, it's her."

Yana frowned. "Padawan?"

"A Jedi's apprentice," the Mother said with a sigh. "Enough of the Jedi. You did not come here to warn me about them again, did you? As you can see, the matter is well in hand."

Yana was not certain she agreed, but she did not get the chance to respond before they were interrupted.

“Ah, have you broken your fast?” the Mother said, changing the subject as one of the Elders entered with a tray of evergrass tea and freshly baked sweet rolls.

“I’m fine,” Yana said, even as her stomach burred. She found herself resisting taking extra kindnesses from the Mother. She couldn’t say exactly why—it wasn’t as if the Mother acted suspiciously, aside from such trust in the Force. She’d definitely made the Path stronger and more meaningful. Marda would be fine when Yana left. The Mother would take care of her. She took care of them all.

The Mother poured them both tea while keeping up a stream of excited chatter about the progress of the construction on the *Gaze Electric*. Yana had to admit the ship sounded like it would be incredible. The Mother’s tone and obvious thrill lulled Yana into thinking, briefly, that maybe it would be enough to stay and wait to travel the galaxy on the *Gaze Electric*. But no—Yana took an overlarge sip of tea. This could never be home to her. She said, “Mother, surely you know that I did not come to see you to make small talk.”

The Mother raised her eyebrows at Yana. “Of course. I was merely giving you the time to muster your resolve.”

Yana ignored the Mother’s teasing tone and gnashed her teeth before taking a deep breath and releasing it. “I told you before that I would only help the Path until I was ready to leave.”

“And you believe that time has come.”

“Yes,” Yana hissed. “The Jedi must know that we have been taking Force-related artifacts.”

“Oh, the Jedi again.”

“They’re here for us, Mother. Why else would they be on Dalna?” And how many Evereni spicers were there in the galaxy? Yana was smart enough to know that of her, Treze, and Kor, she was the most likely to be remembered. No one ever forgot the Evereni, once they’d seen them.

If the Jedi were sniffing around about Force artifacts, Dalna was no longer safe for her.

“Zallah Macri, the Jedi who came to call upon us, said that the Jedi are thinking of building an outpost on Dalna,” the Mother said, taking a delicate sip of her tea. “You think that a lie?”

“Yes,” Yana said. “It’s at best a half-truth. Their presence here is entirely too coincidental. Especially since there are far larger planets without an outpost. Dalna seems like it should be last on their list.”

“Perhaps.” The Mother set her teacup to the side before she lifted the orb from her lap and placed it on a pillow nearby, one larger and more ornate than anything else in the listening room. It was disconcerting the way she doted on the thing, like it was a favored pet and not just an ostentatious jewel. “But, Yana, the Force will provide. It will protect us. If the Jedi become a threat, I will know.”

There was a light in the Mother’s eyes, a fervor of confidence Yana couldn’t argue with. She leaned closer, wanting to believe in it, too. But at the end of the day, she never would. She almost wished she had Marda’s capacity for faith. Yana bowed her head, acknowledging the Mother’s words.

“Yana,” the Mother said. She reached out and touched the tips of her fingers to Yana’s cheek. “I will consider your warning. I appreciate your concern for your family.” The way she said it included all the Path in the word *family*. “I wish you would reconsider leaving. And speak again with Kor. It is not a good time for her to leave Opari, the poor dear.”

“The Force will be free,” Yana said, “and so will I.”

The Mother regarded her for a long moment. Her brown skin shone prettily in the glow of the weird orb she couldn’t stop petting. It gave her a glow, too, like she was also a strange and unusual thing. Perhaps that was why she doted on it so. She and the orb were kindred spirits.

Yana clenched her jaw and held on to her resolve. “Let me go.”

“One more job,” the Mother said lightly. The beginning of a negotiation. “Soon. But first you should make your way to the morning meditation before it ends. Reconnect to the Force, and listen to its will.”

Yana opened her mouth and shut it before inclining her head and accepting that she had been dismissed. She swallowed her spike of emotions—anger, confusion, indignation—and left. But once outside of the listening chamber, she paused. There, far off in the distance, was a curious noise.

Her anger forgotten, she followed the sound, not sure what it was at first. Singing of some sort? Perhaps a low-voiced conversation? As she passed from the areas of the caves that had been claimed by the Mother into less traveled routes, her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. There was far too little light for a human like the Mother to see, but Yana could make out the rock and crystal and pockets of sun opal, buried in the dark and therefore unremarkable, that lined the passage. But there on the floor was something completely unexpected.

Water, ever so slowly pushing up from some deeper passage into the caverns.

The Path lands were flooding.



FOURTEEN

Kevmo cleared the dejarik board and sighed. Outside, the rains pounded the landscape ceaselessly, and the deluge had forced him and Zallah to halt their investigation for the moment. The public officials in Ferdan who had been so eager to meet with the Jedi and discuss the possibility of an outpost had canceled in light of the rain. It was apparently a planetary phenomenon that occurred only once every few months: three days of relentless rain followed by a blooming season when everything would suddenly ripen and need to be quickly harvested. Kevmo found it fascinating that a planet could keep such a finicky, unpredictable rhythm, but Zallah had waved away his fascination.

“There is a way to predict the rains. The people of this planet just don’t have the data yet. One day, they will know to the minute when the rains will fall and stop, and then they will become very lucrative farmers. Nothing in the galaxy is left to chance, Padawan,” she’d said while sipping her morning tea. “The Force balances and guides all.”

Kevmo wasn’t so sure, but instead of arguing he’d just ducked his head.

Kevmo didn’t think everything in the galaxy was so predictable. Weren’t the Jedi always talking about the mysteries of the Force? There were still surprises, delights delivered by the Force for the living to enjoy, and Kevmo disliked when Zallah spoke as if she had seen everything. It just wasn’t true. The Force provided endless amusements, some expected but most not, if one just paid attention.

Gifts freely given, he thought, and then silently laughed at himself. Was he really beginning to consider that the teachings of the Path might have merit?

Absolutely not. He was a Jedi, and he knew the Force. But there was something nice about giving of oneself without the expectation of something in return. It was, at its heart, the hallmark of the Jedi.

“Another round?” Kevmo asked, and Zallah nodded. Lady Jara had retired to her bed, the chill damp making her old bones ache. The Jedi were quite self-sufficient, and since they were the only ones left in the rooming house, it made sense for the woman to have a day to herself. Zallah had thought a day of quiet contemplation in the common area was a good idea, at least until they figured out what their next move was.

There was a knocking at the door to the rooming house, and Kevmo stood from the table where he sat and went to answer it. He was delighted and surprised to find Marda waiting on the threshold, her robes soaked, water running in rivulets from her dark hair and over the blue-gray of her skin.

The Force truly did like to surprise and delight.

“Marda!” Kevmo said, standing back from the door to let the girl in. She ducked her head as she entered.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think the rains would remain so heavy,” she gasped as she entered.

“Is there a problem?” Kevmo asked, since he could easily sense Marda’s unease.

She shook her head. “No, I was speaking with the Mother this morning, and she urged me to continue to learn from you. And I brought you these,” Marda said, thrusting out a handful of tightly curled red-and-blue ferns. “As they dry they will whisper, and it can be useful in meditation.”

“Kevmo, find the girl some dry clothes to change into,” Zallah said with a frown.

“Oh, sure, right,” he said, taking the ferns Marda held and dashing off to find some towels. He returned with a pile of towels and a robe.

“Thank you,” Marda said, accepting the towels but refusing the robe. “I wouldn’t want to drip on your furniture, but the water is a gift.

Even if too much of one at the moment.”

Kevmo grinned but tempered the expression when Zallah gave him a sidelong glance. “What did you want to discuss?” he said. “The Jedi are always happy to have conversations about the many interpretations of the Force.”

Marda looked at her hands and laughed. “Now that I am here, I realize how silly it must look for me to dash out into the rain for such a conversation,” she said, shaking her head. “I should have waited until the rains ceased.”

“Sometimes our passions can get the better of us,” Zallah said, her tone mild even though her words held a faint censure.

“But the Force can also direct us through our passions,” Kevmo said, feeling the need to defend Marda. Zallah’s lavender gaze settled on him, the Soikan waiting for Kevmo to finish his thought before she responded, and Kevmo hurried to finish the statement in a way that would not sound contradictory but complimentary to the Jedi beliefs Zallah referenced. “By understanding our strongest emotions and the way they drive us forward, we can analyze our moves and discover the best course of action rather than behaving impulsively. So it’s not about eschewing emotions, but about understanding where they come from and addressing the underlying issue before acting.”

Zallah nodded in approval, but when Kevmo glanced over at Marda, the hurt etched into her features gave him pause. “Marda?”

“Yes, I can see how being impulsive could be considered a bad thing. But sometimes there are opportunities that evaporate if we don’t seize them when we can.”

Kevmo opened his mouth to argue, to say he didn’t see her as impulsive even though walking into town in the rain was impulsive, but another knock on the door interrupted him before he could speak.

Zallah gave Kevmo a look, and he yanked the door open. There was a very soaked pale-skinned human woman on the other side of the door, her umbrella struggling to keep the water off of her.

“You a Jedi?” she said, straightforward in the way so many of the settlers were. There was nothing remarkable about the boots, trousers, and overcoat she wore, but there was something about the

set of her spine that made Kevmo think this blond woman was used to people listening to her.

“Yes, I’m Padawan Kevmo Zink. Come in and you can speak with my master, Jedi Knight Zallah Macri,” he said, stepping back from the door once more to let someone in. But the human woman was dressed for the weather, unlike Marda. When she closed her umbrella, she put her hand on her hip and looked to Zallah.

“Your ship will have to be moved,” she said.

“And who are you?” Zallah asked, voice smooth.

“Jinx Pickwick. I’m what passes for an authority in this place. You can call me sheriff or safety officer or whatever, but I was elected to keep everyone here in the basin safe. The docking yards are in the lowest part of the basin, and in about a quarter of an hour your ship is going to be underwater.”

Marda shot to her feet, her face twisted with concern. “The basin is flooding?”

Jinx gave a short nod. “It seems that this storm is larger than usual, already stretching all the way to the Maawat Juncture. Something happened upriver at the base of the Ashrow volcano, and at this rate Ferdan is going to be a meter underwater. We’re trying to redirect the rains, but the ground is already so soaked it’s pretty much a lost cause.”

“Perhaps we can be of help,” Zallah said, standing.

“I wouldn’t say no, Jedi,” Jinx said with a smile. “Right now we’re trying to use a few ground movers to shore up the riverbanks.”

“I have to go,” Marda said, hurrying toward the door, so clearly distraught that her worry slammed into Kevmo like a wave.

“Wait, it’s not safe,” he said.

“If the basin is flooding, the caves back at the compound will surely be taking on water. The Littles and Elders stay down there, as well as the new parents. They’re going to need help evacuating.”

“Kevmo,” Zallah said, “go with Marda and assist the Path in making sure their members get to safety. I will assist here in town.”

“But what about the ship?” Kevmo asked. There wouldn’t be time to power up and move the ship and also run back to the Path

compound. Kevmo had been in a flood before and knew how quickly waters could rise.

“People over things, always,” Zallah said.

She pushed past Kevmo and Marda and followed Jinx out into the downpour while Kevmo squared his shoulders and turned back to Marda.

“We should run.”

Marda nodded, still not meeting his gaze, but Kevmo wasn't worried. This was not the time for such things. They had people to save.

And then they were out in the rain, running toward the Path compound. Kevmo only hoped that the Force would not call anyone home before he could save them.



FIFTEEN

Rain slashed at Marda's face, cold and hard, and she pushed into it, wiping brikal-shell blue out of her eyes as the rain melted it down her brow. She focused on speed, though mud made her boots slip. Kevmo caught her elbow and didn't let go. That was fine; she couldn't be anything but grateful for his help, even if he was right: she was impulsive. She shouldn't have rushed off to Ferdan and abandoned her family to this rain. What if someone drowned and she could have saved them if she'd been there? She shouldn't have left!

But Kevmo's hand on her elbow steadied her. She leaned in to him, and together they broke through the rain. They jogged in the middle of the road where the water was lowest, splashing pink-brown mud. It wasn't long before Marda was wetter than she'd ever been, even in a bath. She could hardly catch her breath. They'd lived in the caves for over a hundred years, and the basin had never flooded like this! Or they'd have known at least to be ready, to not keep babies down there!

Why didn't the Force reveal this to the Mother so she could prepare them? Did the Force want them to die? Was everything Marda believed wrong? Was this simply living in harmony with the Force? The Force was life, and it should want its believers alive. A mere few days earlier, she wouldn't even be questioning this, but somehow her arguments with the Jedi were even getting to her. Or perhaps it was merely the building panic.

The previous year there'd been a rockslide at the foot of the Ashrow volcano, and the ground had trembled with steam and

stinking gases. Could that have changed something about the river itself or the way water flowed through the basin? Would this happen every summer now? Would they have to abandon the caves? Leave Dalna entirely? Marda knew the *Gaze Electric* was supposed to be their sanctuary in the stars, but Dalna would remain their home. What if it could no longer be so? What would they do? Would they lose this home, just like her people had lost their homeworld? Maybe it was Marda's fault, her Evereni fate ruining the future of the Path because she was part of it!

"Marda!" Kevmo practically had to yell for her attention. His breath was warm on her ear as he tugged her to a standstill. She looked at him, blinking frantically against the rain. "Stop panicking. We're nearly there. Your people had some warning!"

Marda tried to suck in a deep breath, but it shook.

Kevmo released her elbow, and she nearly cried out, but he found her hand with his and enclosed her fingers with warmth. He leaned in. "I've got you," he said, staring directly into her eyes. Even through the whipping gray wind she could see the flecks of gold around his pupils. Like the promise of sunlight. It would be all right.

Gritting her teeth, Marda nodded. "Let's go!" she yelled back. Then she turned, and they ran again.

By the time they skidded through the gate, she could see figures moving from all areas of the compound, burdened by goods and possessions, heading toward the storage barn just off the communal garden.

Marda spied Efrik, the middle-aged human from the outer circle of acolytes. His dark hair was plastered to his skull even under a water-soaked cowl. "Efrik!" she cried, dragging Kevmo toward him.

The human turned, shielding his eyes. Blue smeared down his nose, and in his other hand he held a huge bundle of seed half under his robes. "Marda! Good! We're gathering in the barn."

"Are the Littles all there?"

"I saw a group of them. You should come count—you know them best!" Efrik barely glanced up at the Jedi before leading the way toward the storage barn.

Marda and Kevmo followed closely. Just as they arrived, Efrik tugged at the heavy wooden sliding door and the wind slammed at him. His body hit the door, shoving it farther open. Wind and rain shot into the barn, and cries of distress filled Marda's ears as she darted in. Kevmo released her to help Efrik close the door again.

Scanning the huddled community, Marda looked for her Littles. She saw dozens of familiar faces, all soaked, people moving to create walls of supplies and dry each other off with threadbare towels. Aris Ade and the Herald were organizing a handful of adults to venture back out to place sandbags around doorways and make sure all the doors and windows were secure. Someone else called her name and added her to the head count.

The Littles were huddled with Old Waiden and Mabel Wiss in the rear corner. Marda hurried through the chaos to them and counted them off in her head. Vemian shot to her feet, eyes huge when she saw Marda. Beside her the Klatooinian siblings, Ferali and Eff, hugged each other, and Simi was crying on Hallisara's lap. She saw Utalir and Jerid tending to three toddlers who weren't in Marda's class yet. Jezra'lin blinked their huge Mon Calamari eyes at Marda, vibrating in place.

Marda froze.

She stared at her Littles, then turned and looked throughout the barn. There—over against the wall, Fel Ix was huddled with two of his frilled babies. But Marda couldn't see Ferize, Er Dal, or the other three newborns.

"Stay here," Marda commanded Jezra'lin and the others, then picked her way quickly to Fel Ix. The Kessarine glanced up at her, his dark face drawn, his cheek frills tightly curled with tension. "Fel Ix," she said, "where are your partners and the others?"

"They were behind me," he murmured, barely moving his mouth as he bounced his babies in both arms. His eyes seemed wider than usual, the pupils dilated nearly to the edges, and Marda's stomach twisted.

"They were behind you in the caves?"

Fel Ix nodded tightly. "They pushed me out and were gathering the rest. I...could hardly see. But they were right behind me. We are

good swimmers.”

Marda whirled, nearly slamming into Kevmo. “Come on,” she said, trying not to sound afraid while surrounded by all these people, and especially Fel ix. Kevmo nodded, allowing her to lead him back to the door.

“Where are we going?”

“I have to find Ferize and the rest of her family. They live in the caves.”

Kevmo nodded.

Efrik tried to stop them, but Marda said, “It is the will of the Force,” so firmly he jerked the door open.

They dove back into the wild rain.

Even in just a few minutes Marda had forgotten how cold and hard the rain was, plastering her robes to her body. She knew this compound like her own hand and knew how to take Kevmo to the entrance to the caves. Two people rushed past them, and Marda pointed back toward the barn. They touched her as they passed, and Marda did her best to look confident. Then they reached the underground door. Kevmo positioned himself as a windbreak while Marda keyed in her access code, and the door whooshed open.

The roar of water greeted them, along with a buzzing, flickering gray light. Marda took a deep breath, and her hand found Kevmo’s just as he reached for her. Their eyes met, and Marda said, “We’ll help whomever we find, but I’m looking for two Kessarine and their three newborns. We’ll head for the nesting chamber, this way.” Squeezing his hand, Marda pulled him into the flickering darkness.

Enough of the lights drilled into the cavern’s corridors worked that they didn’t need any personal searchlights as they headed down. First it was a slope, then stairs. Marda cut left at the first juncture, putting her hand on the rough granite just under the guide marks. “These guide marks tell you which way you’re going,” she said quickly. “Orange is exit, for the first sun. Pink is the opal route. That’s for meditation, so you wouldn’t normally need that, but the nesting chamber is part of the opal route.” Marda pulled Kevmo on as she talked. “Blue is the Mother’s rooms, for the Force. This is a network of channels down here, so there are many possible routes to take, and

the guide marks will tell you the quickest from one point to the another.”

They passed through a meditation room, and when they stepped down into the next level, they stepped into centimeters of water. Marda’s skin pebbled in fear. The nesting chamber was lower than this.

She let go of Kevmo to dart forward. “Follow me!”

“I am,” he said, except he’d paused, staring down a narrow corridor as if he could see something that wasn’t there. “What are the black guide marks?”

“Secret ways, but I don’t know how to open them, not yet. That’s for more advanced acolytes and people who work directly with the Mother,” Marda said quickly, uncaring. She knew she was spilling secrets, but all that mattered was getting to Ferize. Besides, she could trust Kevmo. He was there, helping her. Nobody else was at her side.

They burst into the nesting chamber to the sound of hissing and gasps in the Kessarine language, and thigh-high water. It gushed, and Marda fell over. She inhaled water, struggling to her feet as she coughed it up. “Ferize!” she tried to yell, but it came out ragged and wet.

“Marda!”

Her name in two voices: Kevmo’s and Ferize’s.

“I’m here,” she cried, managing to get to her feet despite the pressing, swirling water. It seemed to have risen even in the past moment. It would quickly be to her waist.

No glow of sun opal lit the nesting chamber. There was only the flicker from the corridor, and shadows. “I can’t see anything!” Marda yelled. “Where are you?”

“Near the water basins!” Ferize cried back. “I need help, Marda! Er Dal is trapped behind a rock that fell, and he has Fe Isle and Fe Remine and Fe Tale with him. I can’t get to them!”

Marda moved toward the sound of Ferize’s panicked voice, trying to stay calm. Water shoved at her, and she fought to keep going—though she couldn’t see, she knew the way to the basin. She’d washed birthing fluid off these babies herself only days before.

Suddenly, Marda heard a hum, and vivid golden light engulfed the nesting chamber. She gasped and looked at the line of vibrant light Kevmo held in his hand. She could feel it, a bright pressure. It filled the chamber, glinting off granite and glittering on the sun opal. It made the floodwaters gleam like it was a rising sun. Marda felt better and smiled for the first time since the flooding had begun.

Turning toward the basins, she saw Ferize bent over a tumble of granite, reaching into the still darkened corner. Her fingers nearly reached the baby held aloft.

Marda hurried through the rising waters and clambered up onto the fallen rocks. Ferize caught her wrist, and they steadied each other. All Ferize's furls were flared with panic, her eyes blown wide. Marda dug the hard nails of her free hand into the stone to secure herself. "What happened?" She held on to Ferize's wrist, the two of them anchored together, so Ferize could reach for the baby with more leverage. Ferize caught the baby's arm and cried out her partner's name. Er Dal released the baby, and Ferize pulled him back against her chest, cooing and sobbing.

In the golden light, Marda looked past to see the pain on Er Dal's face and the strain as he held the last two babies up over the water. "Er Dal?" she called.

"I'm trapped. Stuck," he said. His arms trembled with effort to keep the babies over the water. It was higher behind the rocks, up to his chest. The babies huddled against his face, mouthing at his cheek frills. One of them wailed; the other was too quiet but definitely fidgeting.

"We'll get you," Marda promised.

Behind her, Kevmo said to Ferize, "Go with that child. Marda and I will rescue your mate and babies, I swear it."

"Go, Ferize," Marda said. "Get both of you safe. We will do this."

Ferize grimaced, but the child in her hands whimpered. She stared past Marda at Er Dal, then said something in Kessarine. Er Dal nodded once. Then Ferize turned and began wading through the waters.

Marda and Kevmo surveyed their immediate problem. "What's caught you?" she asked Er Dal.

The Kessarine, still shaking, said, “My hip and foot were caught by the break in the chamber wall. Water pushed us and the rocks here, and the water pressure is too much. I am trapped, but you can come here, both of you, and take the babies. It’s all right.”

“No,” Marda said. “We’ll get you free, too.” She bit her lip. “I can swim down and try to free—”

“I’ve got this, Marda,” Kevmo said. He moved closer. “I can move all the rocks, but you have to be ready to catch the babies, all right?”

Marda frowned. “You can...”

Kevmo nodded. “The Force.”

Her breath caught. She couldn’t make herself begin again as she stared at him, fear and hope a spiky twist in her throat.

“Be ready,” he said. “I should be able to keep the lightsaber on, but if not, it will get dark.”

“Hurry,” gasped Er Dal.

Marda nodded, but Kevmo had already moved; she had no idea if he’d seen her permission.

He closed his eyes and reached his free hand for the air. Kevmo cupped his hand and slowly turned it palm up—*gifts freely given*—and furrowed his brow. Then—

The rocks shifted. Water splashed.

Er Dal grunted. He bared his teeth.

“Right...now,” Kevmo said with a grunt, and the rocks spilled away, vanishing under the suddenly tumultuous floodwaters.

Er Dal cried out, one of the babies falling. Er Dal clutched at him, and Marda dove forward to grasp him.

She fell half into the water, spluttering. She touched a baby and tucked him into her arm as she reached for the other, but found only rushing water and Er Dal’s arm. She grasped it. “Come on!” she yelled over the roaring water. The golden light suddenly vanished. They were alone in darkness.

Water slammed into them.

Marda fell, let herself go under but held the baby up in both hands, desperate to keep him in the air. She choked but got her feet back under her, and when she stood again, she pressed the baby to

her face, wiping her eyes on her forearm. The golden light was back, but Kevmo had thrown himself into the corner because Er Dal was screaming, hands empty—the last baby was gone.

“Come on,” Marda said, clawing at him. “Here, take this baby. Go. We’ll get the last one. You’re injured. You can’t help us, and they need you!”

Her voice was raw, she was near blind with water, and the floodwater had reached her breasts, dragging at her robes, making them so heavy.

“Fe Isle!” Er Dal bellowed.

Marda dug her nails in, puncturing his thick skin. “Er Dal, take Fe Remine and go, now!”

The Kessarine winced but took the baby, tucking him against his neck. He hesitated.

They were plunged into darkness again, both of them frozen. Then the lightsaber hissed to life, and steam surrounded it from vaporized water. Marda wiped water from her eyes and saw Kevmo had Fe Isle in his arm! She exhaled harshly in relief, holding out both arms.

Then another rumble was their only warning before more water rushed in from the back exit. Kevmo’s eyes widened, and he lowered his lightsaber, flinging his hand toward the water.

Darkness fell, but the water never hit them.

“Marda—Marda,” Kevmo said, voice strained. “I’ve got...the water held back. But I can’t...You have to come here and get the baby, in the dark. Just...listen, I’m right here.”

“I’m coming,” she said, staring at the darkness where he’d been. She knew water must be stuck, against a wall of rock being held in place by the Force, just waiting to kill them all. But she couldn’t see it; she could only imagine it.

“I’m here,” Kevmo said. “I’m not going anywhere.” He laughed. “Obviously. I just have to keep talking so you can find me and this adorable little baby. It’s breathing. It seems to be gasping, but I think it’s fine, just waterlogged. Its name is Fe Isle? That’s pretty.”

Marda made her way toward his voice, letting it surround her like sunlight. Warm and promising unlike this cold, demanding water. She closed her eyes. It was less disorienting, and she needed to focus, not fall, not picture the wall of floodwater just waiting, so eager for his concentration to drop so it could take them. She found rocks with her boots and stepped up, but just then Kevmo said, “Blast, there’s too—Marda! I have to let it go. I’m sending the baby to you. Just hold out your arms!”

She did it without thinking, even as panic choked her. The water roared, and she felt a whoosh of air before the baby was in her hands, and then the golden lightsaber flared to life again and she could see. Kevmo stared urgently. “Go—go! I can’t hold it.” The wave of water curved over them, stuck in place by the Force, by Kevmo’s control. His body shook, and Marda didn’t want to leave him.

“Go! Use my light!” he yelled, and she spun, taking it, the gift of light, to push back through the water toward the entrance, where Er Dal waited several steps up. The Kessarine watched eagerly, one arm out for her.

Marda got there and put the baby in his arm just as the waters surged, and she spun back around in time to see Kevmo lose the wave and vanish under it.

The lightsaber hissed and disappeared, and Marda screamed his name.

She dove into the water toward him, pushing with all her might. She was small but strong. Determined. Evereni never gave up until they had what was theirs. And Kevmo Zink was hers.

Tearing with her fingers, kicking her legs, she pushed through the flooded chamber toward where he’d been. Once, she grasped up for air and barely found it, sucking in a huge breath. Then Marda dropped back into the furious water.

There—he clung to the rocks, pressed by the water against them. Marda burst up and took another breath in the darkness. She grasped at his arm, turning, and pulled it over her shoulders. Marda dragged him up, standing on her tiptoes to keep his lolling head above water. His weight pressed onto her back, but she kept going, struggling forward. She was aware of nothing but drowning, the push

and pull of water, and Kevmo's warm weight against her back and shoulder, pulling her hair.

Finally, she reached the exit, and more hands reached for them. Pale hand lights shone in her eyes, and she saw two—no, three people there, waiting on the stairs. They took Kevmo first, then helped her up, wrapping her in their arms and pushing them both along the steps. Lights danced in her vision, and her teeth chattered. She tasted her own blood.

“Did—did all the Kessarine get out?” she asked through her racking shivers. It was Ferize and Mykge pulling her along. Ferize said, “Yes, we're safe thanks to you. We have both of you. Come on.”

Marda reached forward and caught Kevmo's hand. It was cold, but he squeezed hers back, even as he held on to the Wookiee Jukkyuk, who carried him easily, bent over only to fit through the narrow underground corridors.

With Kevmo's hand in hers and Ferize's assurances, Marda let herself think of nothing but putting one foot in front of the other until they were outside, through the harsh rain, and back in the safety of the storage barn. She listened to the noise of her big family, reveled in the light and warmth as she was stripped and bundled in mostly dry robes, given hot tea to warm her from the inside, and pushed down into a nest with some of her Littles and Kevmo. He seemed dazed, too, eyes wide but snuggled against the wall under an onslaught of children. Marda collapsed next to him and immediately put her head on his shoulder.

“Marda,” he whispered into her hair. It was still wet. So was his, the thick braids wrapped in a quick-drying towel and pulled over his other shoulder.

“Thank you,” she whispered back.

“I...I'm sorry.”

Marda pushed back and glared at him. “What for? You saved them.”

“With the Force.”

Her mouth fell open. She remembered the power. He'd used the Force to move stones, then hold back the strength of the flood. If he hadn't, at least one baby and probably Er Dal would have drowned.

Marda wanted to tell him she was glad. She couldn't, though. Her family was alive, but what might be the consequences? Even if Marda couldn't regret his choices—or her own—how could she condone them without throwing over her entire life of beliefs? But her family was alive. Only because he'd used the Force. Taken it, refused its freedom.

Under her shocked stare, Kevmo lowered his eyes. Marda reached out and touched his chin. Lifted it until he looked at her.

When he finally met her gaze, Marda nodded once, slowly. An acknowledgment more than anything. Yes, she knew what he'd done. Yes, she did not blame him. Yes, yes, yes.

Then Marda leaned back in and put her head on his shoulder. "The will of the Force," she murmured.

Kevmo shifted until he could wrap his arm around her and drew her closer.



SIXTEEN

“So, are you ready?”

Yana looked up from where she sat in a patch of grass, programming a new string of lights for the caves, since most of them had been washed away in the flood. It had taken nearly three days for the water to recede. Three days of everyone piled on top of one another in the storage barn, babies crying, Littles arguing, and the Elders tsk-tsking everything they disliked. It was too much. Yana was willing to do anything to get a measure of normalcy back, and that meant repairing the caves so they were once more livable.

She couldn't move boulders like the Jedi, but she could program lights. So that was what she was doing when Kor walked up, her face paint freshly applied and her head tresses tied back with a thick band of blue cloth.

Yana blinked and removed the goggles she wore. “Ready for what?”

“The thanking feast! You said you'd sit with me and my family.”

Yana lowered her goggles over her eyes once more and went back to work. “I can't. These lights have to be installed before everyone can return to their chambers in the cave. And I refuse to spend another night listening to Old Waiden snore. I want my sleeping cell to myself again.”

“No one else is going to be working, though, Yana,” Kor said, frowning. Yana tried to avoid her girlfriend's dark-eyed gaze, but even so, she could sense Kor's distress.

“Kor, I don’t want to go,” Yana finally said, tearing off the goggles. “It’s silly to celebrate, what, not drowning?”

Kor frowned, and Yana regretted the words as soon as they came out. Kor said sadly, “You promised.”

“Kor,” Yana began, trying to find a way to extricate herself from the promise she’d unwittingly made to attend the feast with Kor’s family. But she couldn’t find any way around it. She swallowed a bone-weary sigh. “Let me clean myself up and change my robes,” she finally said.

“No more than half an hour,” Kor said, her expression firm. “I mean it, Yana.”

Yana nodded in resignation before giving Kor a peck on the cheek. She wasn’t sure why this mattered so much. Perhaps Kor was responding to a bit of gossip about Yana’s continued absences? Yana didn’t care what the rest of the Path thought of her, but she definitely cared about making Kor happy. She needed Kor to go with her after the next liberation trip. So Yana gathered up the work mat and the tools and took them back to Cincey’s work hut, Kor watching with crossed arms.

“No more than half an hour!” Kor repeated. “My father is saving us a space.”

Yana waved off Kor’s demand and made her way to Cincey’s hut, where the lights would be stored until they were ready to be installed. After a quick knock and a yell, Yana opened the door to find Cincey and Treze laughing over something, the Mikkian perched on the edge of a worktable, looking over Cincey’s shoulder.

“What’s going on?” Yana asked, placing the work mat and lights on the other worktable for later.

“Oh, we were just looking at photos of the Graf family compound on Thelj. Have you ever seen anything so ridiculous?” Cincey said, pulling up the image so it was displayed on the larger holoscreen for Yana to see.

The property was massive, with a set of ornate gates and warmers placed every few intervals. Even though Thelj was an icy mess most of the year, the compound itself was lush and blooming, a garden in the middle of a snowdrift.

“How do they keep it warm enough to grow runner vines?” Yana asked in amazement.

“With enough credits you can do anything.” Treze laughed, giving Yana a sly look. “Say, where’s Kor? She should see this, too.”

“Why?” Yana asked, waving away the image of the lush gardens and stunning architecture. “She doesn’t care about rich people.”

“Because this is the place the Force showed the Mother during the flood,” Cincey said, pointing to the image of the compound. “She was meditating deeply and saw this chunk of ice and an artifact known as Jedi Tears, a necklace made with a rare stone that reacts to the Force. That’s our next liberation.”

Yana paused. “She wants us to hit the compound of the Grafts? Is she insane?”

Treze laughed, nearly falling off his perch. “Yana, we broke into the Hynestian Royal Treasury. This is going to be like a walk to Ferdan.”

“In a flood with high winds, maybe,” Yana said. She shook her head. “This assignment is too big for us.”

“The Force revealed it to her,” Cincey said in a singsong, like they wanted to believe but couldn’t quite.

Treze shrugged and leapt off the worktable. “If the Mother thinks we’re ready for this kind of a job, it’s because we are. I have to get out of here. I’m meeting my girl in town. Tell Kor I said hey,” he said as he made his way out of the communications hut.

Cincey turned their hoverchair toward Yana. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Yana said with a frown. “Cince, have you ever tried seeing what data is out there on the Mother?”

Cincey’s eyes widened slightly before narrowing. “That seems like a strange ask.”

“Maybe,” Yana said, sensing that she’d overstepped. “But we don’t know where she came from. She’s seemed...distracted lately.” It was true, though Yana thought it was just that weird jewel. Which—where did she even get it?

Cincey watched Yana with a hard expression, but it melted into one that was a bit more thoughtful. “I don’t think that instinct is

wrong,” Cincey finally said, their voice low. “But no, I haven’t looked too closely. Honestly, I don’t think I’ll like what I find.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Yana said. She didn’t push any further. She knew when to leave things alone. But now that she’d dropped the idea in Cincey’s brain, it was worth hoping that their tech expert would let it drive a bit of investigation. There might be something vital there, some piece of information that would help Yana fully place all the puzzle pieces of her suspicions into something clear and concise.

Yana took her leave, washed quickly, and changed into her spare set of robes, hurriedly smearing brikal-shell paint across her brow as she ran out the door. By the time she made her way to the grassy plain where the Path held all their celebrations, a few of the Littles were singing a thanking song they’d made up, their voices loud and off-key. Marda stood with Old Waiden and watched them with something like pride writ large across her face, and Yana was glad to see her cousin’s Jedi was not in attendance. She was beginning to regret encouraging Marda to go after the boy. It turned out the Jedi made her more nervous than she’d expected. They saw far too much, even if they hid it behind kind smiles and placid expressions.

Yana found Kor and her family easily. The Herald stood nearby, a knot of Elders crowded around him as he nodded gravely. They were probably complaining about not being able to return to their rooms yet. Yana wasn’t the only one vexed by the current sleeping arrangements, and she thought it was silly to have a feast day when they hadn’t even finished the basic repairs that needed to be done. But she swallowed her annoyance and put a bright smile on her face when Kor leapt to her feet to pull her over to their family’s blanket.

“Sit, Yana,” Kor said, leading Yana over to the older Nautolan woman wrapped in a damp blanket. Opari smiled tiredly. But it was the most relaxed expression Yana had seen on her, maybe ever, and as she bowed to Opari, she wondered if this was why Kor was hesitant to leave.

“Yana, thank you for all your hard work,” Opari said, her voice raspy from disuse.

“Of course. I do it for the Path. I hope you are well.”

“Better than I’ve been in a long time, thank you. The Mother’s treatments have been greatly improving how I feel,” Opari said. “I am glad to be able to come and join everyone for the feast day.”

Kor hugged the older Nautolan woman before pulling Yana to sit down on the other side of her.

“The Elders are going to show us one of the early harvest dances,” Kor said, her expression exultant. “We don’t want to miss it.”

Yana said nothing as a number of the older members of the Path took the stage, which was really just an area someone had outlined with bouquets of the lompop flowers that grew wild in the meadows that time of year. By the time the Elders were on the third iteration of a dragging-stomping-turning dance, Yana had had enough.

“Kor,” Yana began, but was interrupted by the Herald’s approach.

“Yana,” he said, the dislike in his voice unmistakable. “I thought you were finishing up the lights for the caverns.”

“She was,” Kor said, interrupting. “I convinced her to come join the festivities.”

“The Herald is right,” Yana said, sensing a possible exit. “I should get back to the lights. If I finish them today, everyone can return to their dwellings tomorrow after they’re installed.”

Kor’s lips thinned, but the Herald gave a nod of agreement. Yana squeezed Kor’s hand before she climbed to her feet. “I’ll find you after I’ve completed my task,” she said. Kor said nothing, just crossed her arms.

“I will walk with you,” the Herald said. “I have to return to my duties, as well.”

“Werth. Must you?” Opari asked. Her disappointed expression was a match for Kor’s.

“Yes, my darling. But I will be back shortly.” He bent down and placed his cheek next to hers in the way of Nautolans before straightening and gesturing for Yana to walk.

“I get the feeling your duties have something to do with me,” Yana said once they were out of hearing of Kor and Opari.

“I think the time for coyness between us is past, Yana. Wouldn’t you agree?” the Herald said. “The Mother told me you plan on

leaving. I won't allow it."

"I'm glad you've decided to speak plainly. But your feelings are irrelevant to this. I'm leaving as soon as we liberate one final artifact and I get my cut."

"There is no 'cut,' as you so eloquently put it. The only thing derived from liberating the treasures of the Force is freeing the Force from future manipulation."

Yana snorted. "Come on, *Werth*. You and I both know that isn't true. We don't just take the artifacts. We take enough for the Mother to sell. To whom or why, I don't care. It's making the Path stronger for my cousin. But I'm booking passage on the next freighter off of Dalna."

"And what about Kor? Will you rip her away from her family?" the Herald said.

Yana didn't look back to where she knew Kor still sat with her mother. A lump formed in her throat, but she swallowed it, along with the maelstrom of loss and hurt attempting to take hold in her middle. "If she wants to go with me, that's her choice," she said as coldly as she could.

"She is needed here. *She* is true to the Path. Her mother needs her."

It hurt to agree with him, so Yana put a sarcastic frown on her face. "Herald, if you're so sure there's no 'cut,' then I do wonder how the Mother secured the cost of the treatment for Opari's condition."

The Herald cleared his throat. "The Force provides."

Yana stopped and turned toward the Herald. "Think of me what you like, but it *will be* Kor's choice."

"That is why you should stay here," the Herald said. "I may not like you, but you treat my daughter well and make her happy. Besides, your place is here. Marda has realized that. Why haven't you?"

Yana laughed hollowly. "I am not my cousin."

"I see that. She apparently has all of the sense. Dalna is the best place for you. Your kind aren't welcome out there in the galaxy. You forget I knew your elders. I welcomed them when they came to the Path because they had nowhere else to go. Every place they settled

they were reviled and hunted because of old grudges. Do you think you'll get a better chance out there?"

Yana shrugged. "The path of the Evereni is never smooth, but that doesn't mean there aren't places that will have us. My people are survivors. And when we die it's because our time is at an end. We don't mourn our dead. We're glad their suffering is finished." Yana stifled a yawn. The only reason she was entertaining this conversation was because the Herald was Kor's father. Otherwise, she would've turned on her heel and let him make his arguments to her back.

"If you tried to live in harmony with the Force, perhaps you would not find the galaxy so unkind."

"Oh, Werth," Yana said with a hollow chuckle, ignoring the feeling that the walls were closing in around her. "I don't care a whit about the Force."

Without a word, Yana turned toward Cincey's hut and the refuge of her work.

Programming lights was much easier than navigating the emotional currents of the Path.



SEVENTEEN

Sunshine hurried through the caves toward the Mother's listening room, dread weighing heavily in his middle. He'd hoped to return to Dalna with the Rod of Ages, a tribute to the Mother and her altruistic mission to liberate the Force. Instead he was returning with rumor and conjecture, and neither was going to inspire much celebration.

The guards at the entrance waved him through with half a thought, used to his comings and goings by then. Sunshine let the moment warm him. Elecia trusted him. He wasn't used to that.

It was a short trip down the stairs and into the caverns, the far-off sound of dripping water echoing in the space. The ground still bore traces of the flood that had come through the caverns, but the watermark was no higher than Sunshine's knees. That part of the caves hadn't been devastated like so much of the rest of the compound. Which was likely why Elecia still wanted to meet there.

When Sunshine entered the large cavern that was the Mother's listening room, the ground dry while the rest of the complex had been very damp, a warmth suffused him. He'd never thought of anywhere in the galaxy as home. He'd been a rambler since he was old enough to flee his drunken father and simpering mother back on Eriadu. But this space, where Elecia was, felt like home. Like a place where he could put down roots and be the kind of person he'd always wanted to be: faithful, honest, trustworthy. And it wasn't that he wanted anything romantic with the Mother. No, she was too good for him; he knew that. But to be at her beck and call?

What could be better than that?

Elecia sat cross-legged on her meditation cushions, eyes closed, the jewel he'd given her cradled in her lap. He waited in the entryway, breath held as he watched her meditate. There was such a look of peace on her face that it was hard not to envy her. The jewel seemed to glow in the dim light of the cave, almost as though it was responding to Elecia and her connection to the Force.

How must it feel to be so close to the Force? Sunshine hadn't much believed in the Force until he'd had the misfortune of meeting Jedi. But Elecia's connection was totally different. After all, the Force must be free, and she was the only one who could do that. He was lucky to know her.

Sunshine stumbled a bit at the thought and frowned. Where had that come from? He didn't care about the Force one way or the other. A rush of annoyance surged through him.

The Mother's eyes opened, and she gave Sunshine a warm smile. "You've returned. Welcome."

The vexing feeling evaporated, and Sunshine returned the smile. "I have returned, but I am afraid it isn't with the artifact."

The Mother frowned, and for Sunshine it was like a star going supernova. Despair flooded him. "But I have information about the Rod of Daybreak."

"Isn't that the one located on Jedha? What information could you provide?"

"It is, but the artifact used to be located in a museum open to pilgrims. It seems it was locked up after the Rod of Seasons was taken from the Hynestian royal family. I have the new location."

"Oh, that is excellent." The Mother smiled at Sunshine, and he felt that same floating, falling sensation that always seemed to strike him when he was with Elecia too long. "How do we liberate it?"

"I'm still gathering information on that. I wanted to tell you what I found before I did any more digging." It was only half a truth. The reality was that he didn't like being away from the Mother for too long. Whenever he was, he began to feel bad, a sick-sad emotion that felt strangely like guilt. Why being away from her made him feel guilty, he

couldn't quite say, but as long as he could be in her company, he was better.

"Well, personally, I am glad you are here." She placed the jewel on a nearby pillow before climbing to her feet and walking over to Sunshine. She cradled his face in her hands and turned another of those soothing smiles on him. "I have a favor to ask of you."

"I—of course. Anything you need."

"My Children are doing another pilgrimage, this time to Thelj. Will you take them for me?"

Sunshine recoiled. "Is the Evereni going?" Sunshine was nervous every time he saw the girl, even though he'd never interacted with her directly. He'd heard the tales of their people, whisperings about the gray-skinned species that most considered little more than conjecture. But Sunshine had once seen an Evereni woman tear into a Pantoran man when she thought she'd been slighted, and the viciousness of the attack had lingered with him through the years.

"Yes, but don't worry. She won't be a problem. Do you think you could do that, Sunshine? Do you think you could help me?"

Sunshine found himself powerless to resist. He nodded, and as Elecia pulled him into an affectionate hug, his breath caught.

"You have been such a tremendous help. What would I do without you?"

Sunshine didn't know, and more than anything, he hoped she would never have to find out.



EIGHTEEN

Kevmo was exhausted. It had been three days since the flood, and the waters had receded enough for the Path to emerge from their barn only the day before. Instead of returning to Ferdan immediately, Kevmo had checked in with Zallah once the comlinks were working again and asked to remain with the Path to help with the initial cleanup—they'd needed every pair of strong arms they could get, even if he didn't use the Force. He'd felt it was the best use of his time and energy. But now they were preparing for a big communal meal of thanks, partly out of relief and partly, Kevmo suspected, to use up all the food that might go bad because of the broken tech. Marda had gently offered for him to stay and eat his share, but he'd said he needed to return to Master Zallah.

That was true, but he also felt like he needed some space away from the Path and how intensely Marda affected him. Besides, he had to tell Zallah about the caves—and what he'd felt down there. It had felt distinctly like the dark side of the Force. He didn't have a lot of overt experience with that, but it was undeniable. The Path could definitely be hiding all manner of things in that maze—not just the Rod of Seasons, but more and worse artifacts.

And Kevmo knew how to navigate down there. Thanks to Marda's trust. He grimaced and kicked at a furrow of mud lining the road into Ferdan.

It had been good, for a couple of days, once everyone was safe. Kevmo had dozed in a pile of children, with Marda at his side, then woken up to help corral them, telling all his best stories about the

galaxy. He avoided stories involving the use of the Force but talked about his childhood in the Jedi Temple and told stories from Hosnian Prime, memories he had of when he was just as young as little Simi, of great gatherings of his clan when they'd packed in even more closely than everybody stuck in that barn! The children were curious about his gold marks that didn't wash off in the storm like their blue ones, so he explained what he knew about the tattoos and what he knew of the process of making the golden ink. He wrote out the characters on the floor to show them how the figures mirrored their meanings, and teased them about what their own tattoos might look like.

But Marda had been most enamored of his stories about Jedha.

She'd leaned in—black of her eyes sparkling with stars—and breathily asked for more. She wanted to know if he'd spoken with others from the Guardians of the Whills—where the founder of the Path of the Open Hand had begun his Force training. Kevmo did his best to describe what he remembered of the great temple on Jedha and explained that some Jedi scholars believed it had originated as a Jedi temple but long since became home to many different followers of the Force. And now the cold desert moon was the seat of the Convocation and included Guardians, Jedi, Sorcerers of Tund, and the Church of the Force. Marda had been impressed and wondered if there was room for a member of the Path to sit on the council. If conversations were happening among Force philosophies regarding the Force's role in the galaxy, then certainly they needed a voice whose primary concern was the freedom of the Force itself. Kevmo hadn't been able to disagree and told her she'd make a wonderful council member—a passionate debater, as he'd noted before.

"I'm not sure I can ever leave Dalna," Marda had demurred. But Kevmo had seen the idea take root and smiled. Marda smiled back. Then he'd distracted her and the Littles with a dramatic retelling of diverting the grass sharks and saving the settlement back on Tiikae.

That had been the day before, and Kevmo knew there was a chance he wouldn't see her again. Depending on the effects of the flooding on their ship and what Master Zallah thought of his information regarding the cave system, they might have to infiltrate the Path and rescue the Rod of Seasons—and confiscate any dark

side artifacts—as soon as that night. Then they'd be offworld, and Kevmo might end up anywhere. Possibly never in this system again.

The thought made him ache more than it should. He just liked Marda so much. The way she was kind and challenged him, so pretty and thoughtful, then turned around and did something that seemed impulsive—like she was following the will of the Force. When he was with her, Kevmo wondered if Marda and the Path did have a special insight into living in harmony and clarity with the Force. The central tenet of gifts freely given resonated with Kevmo. It aligned with his mission as a Jedi.

But these were just idle thoughts, a challenge to his beliefs in the form of a beautiful person. He'd continue working through his feelings until he understood them well enough to let them rest. Maybe chat with Master Zallah about it, if he sensed she was in a charitable mood and not likely to tease him. Using his feelings, processing them as part of the way the Force spoke to him, was a key skill he needed to improve before he'd ever be a Knight.

Still. He was going to miss Marda Ro. If he never returned to Dalna, he'd at least send her a farewell message and encourage her to keep thinking about Jedha.

Ferdan teemed with activity as locals and merchants worked to assess and fix the damage from the great flood—it had been something of a two-hundred-year flood, with nothing like it in the memory of even the oldest residents. Kevmo overheard talk about sending a team to the volcanoes to survey the damage and try to discover what had shifted the river and caused the catastrophe. He also heard that six people had drowned. Most of them had been trapped upstream with no warning when the waters came.

At the boarding house, Lady Jara commanded three burly workers—a Gamorrean and two Gigorans—to lift a banged-up trading transport out of the mud, but it was stuck. Kevmo immediately centered himself and reached for the Force. It felt excellent to easily slip into the warmth of it as he nudged the transport, separating it from the mud with a squelch, just enough for the workers to get a hold.

“Ah,” Lady Jara said sourly, “about time you showed up.”

Kevmo bowed to her, surprised. “Master Zallah hasn’t been helping you?”

“She’s at the port with Jinx fixing up the communication array so we can talk offworld again.”

Torn between rushing immediately to Zallah’s side and remaining to offer Jara more assistance, Kevmo hesitated.

Lady Jara rolled her eyes. Her mouth pinched, but Kevmo thought it was a smile. “Run on. Go report to your master. This mess’ll still be here.”

“Thank you!” he said, and dashed away.

He stopped twice more to do some heavy lifting and once to use his lightsaber to quickly cut away some impossibly tangled wires where floodwaters had bashed the side of an irrigation droid that looked to have been dragged hundreds of meters from outside of town.

As Kevmo turned back toward the docks, grinning and bowing to the people he’d helped, insisting again no thanks were necessary, he noticed a familiar shock of pink tendrils. Pausing, he stepped to the left and peered down an alleyway. It was gloomy thanks to the lowering suns, but Kevmo had no more doubts: it was the Mikkian boy from the Path of the Open Hand. The one who’d spent the days in the barn flipping a knife until various Elders told him not to, then vanished as soon as the rain stopped even though the flooding remained. Kevmo had not been impressed, especially when he realized Marda didn’t like the Mikkian, either.

Treze, that was his name. Kevmo squashed his discomfort with spying—he preferred up-front methods—and slipped down the alleyway as the Mikkian pushed open a door with a shriek of hinges and vanished inside.

It was an alley between a row house and a line of for-rent buildings that were little more than shacks, and Treze had entered the row house. Several windows were open—broken, actually—and everything smelled like mud and a hint of trash from the piles of ruined goods pressed into the crevices of the alley—some washed there, some dumped from the upper stories.

“Rilly, come here,” Kevmo heard Treze say, answered by an eager coo. That was followed by the distinctive sound of heavy kissing, and Kevmo gagged a little, ready to go back the way he’d come. This was just a rendezvous, the Mikkian keen to see his lover after the flood. Nothing nefarious, even if whoever the lover was had terrible taste.

Kevmo turned quietly, but then he heard a gasp and Rilly said, “Calm down, baby, we have all night.”

“No, I have to get back,” Treze said. His voice was muffled, but Kevmo definitely understood the next sentence: “I have a job bright and early.”

“But the port is a wreck, I heard,” said Rilly. “The ships can’t even start, and there’s no comms.”

The port! Kevmo remembered Marda telling him about the Children leaving Dalna to preach, but no way was this Mikkian a loyal advocate of the Path.

“The Mother has her ways,” Treze said. “Come on. Let’s go.” Kevmo heard footsteps moving away from the window. “If you stop hassling me about it, I’ll bring you something pretty.”

“Oooo, what?”

“Some bauble or other shiny. We’re going someplace sure to be filled with stuff like that this time, and...”

The voices were too muffled for Kevmo to hear more.

He stood there for a moment in the gloomy, stinky alley and thought. The Children and the Mother were the only ones who left Dalna, so this had to be about them, but they weren’t going to proselytize if Treze knew what he was talking about.

There was no clear proof but a lot of circumstantial evidence that he and Master Zallah were right about the Path being behind the missing Rod of Seasons. If so, it had to be in those caverns somewhere, or up on that ship they were building, the *Gaze Electric*. Kevmo sighed. He hadn’t wanted to be right about this. Even if he trusted absolutely that Marda wasn’t involved, she’d be devastated when she found out. Both by the Mother’s betrayal and by Kevmo being the one to make her see it.

Shoulders slumped, Kevmo picked his way back out of the alley and headed down the final stretch of muddy street to the port.

The same three ships sat on the flattened field, but detritus was everywhere, and the shipping vessel's runners were covered in what looked like old vines. Similar plants tangled near the Jedi's skiff. One of the landing feet was bent, causing the entire skiff to lean precariously. It looked like a couple of the forward sensors had been stripped away, too. That was going to take time to fix. And maybe parts they didn't have. They could get somewhere else without a few sensors but not with broken landing gear.

Across the way, the relay and communications office was missing a good portion of its wall. Kevmo gaped for a moment. The inner guts of the building had half spilled out—chairs and datascreens and a surprising amount of bolts and rusty panels—but it looked like a lot of the tech was intact. He approached and found the blond human sheriff crunching across the floor in boots. She turned her head fast when she heard him, a scowl on her face. She wore an old headset and covered the speaker with her hand. "Your Zallah Macri is in the ship," she called to him, waving with her other hand.

Kevmo returned her salute and jogged for the skiff.

The ramp was extended and the doors gaping, and Kevmo walked carefully up into the uneven cabin. He entered, brushing invisible humidity out of his face. It was steamy, and he wondered if something had caught fire.

"Master Zallah?" he called.

"Back here, Kev!" she yelled, sounding like something was in her mouth.

He found her in the cockpit, on her back surrounded by wires as she stuck her arm up to her shoulder into the control panel directly under the yoke. Her eyes were cast up, but there was indeed a laser cutter clenched in her teeth.

"Hey, do you need help?" Kevmo hunkered down. "Was there a fire?"

Zallah grunted, then dragged herself out of the underbelly of the console. She spat the laser cutter into her hand. "Just a few sparks when I uncoupled the yoke. Water was up to my knees when I first managed to pry the doors open. It must've gotten in when the landing foot was broken, up at the bulkhead. When it dries, I expect a lot to

go back to normal, but we need a new compressor under here, and they don't have any on planet. I sent word to Port Haileap—and Batuu while I was at it, just in case—but I think we're stuck here for at least a week.”

Kevmo tried very, very hard to ignore the tiny explosion of joy at knowing he'd be able to see Marda again, after all. “Are you all right, otherwise?”

Zallah wiped sweat from her silvery forehead and sat up. She eyed him coolly for a moment, taking in his bedraggled, muddy state. “Are you?”

“Mmhmm,” he hummed through a reassuring smile. “We didn't lose anybody out at the Path compound, though it was close.”

“And?”

“I used the Force in front of several of their members, to save someone, and...” He took a deep breath. “I think it went all right. Then we fortified their storage barn and hunkered down until yesterday, but there was so much to do, I thought I should stay and help. Did you get my message? I thought I heard you reply, but the comlink was fuzzy.”

“The local beacons were down, so they were working on their own range, but yes. Jinx got it hooked back up with a relay up in orbit, so we at least have that.”

Kevmo nodded. “That's how you sent word to Port Haileap.”

“Yes. What's got you so worked up?”

With a little grimace and hoping she could tell only because she knew him so well and could feel ripples in the Force around him, Kevmo said, “I think I know where the Path could be hiding the rod—those caverns. We thought they'd be a good place, but now I've seen them, and it's extremely likely, if they're behind the theft, it's down there.”

“And?”

“Marda taught me how to navigate the tunnels.”

“Good,” Zallah said without inflection. Then she waited.

Under her cool lilac gaze Kevmo drew himself together even more. “I sensed something in the tunnels—I was using the Force, but

it was an emergency, so I didn't have time to investigate. But I felt something that I think might be a different Force-related artifact."

Zallah's gaze sharpened. "You know it's different because?"

"It was the dark side."

His master's jaw clenched like she was holding back a curse.

"And..."

"More?" she bit out.

"I also overheard one of the Children discussing a new job, tomorrow, and it's offworld. I don't know how they can get offworld when everything is a disaster like this—"

"Smugglers always have their ways."

Kevmo nodded.

"Did you meet their Mother?"

"No!" Kevmo shrugged in frustration. "It's strange—she wasn't around at all. Marda said she was likely holed up in her cottage, in harmony with the Force during the chaos of the storm. But...while all her people were in the barn, and afraid? The Herald and the rest of the Elders were present. I even met Marda's cousin. I don't think she likes me."

"Does she need to like you?" Zallah allowed a hint of humor to creep into her tone.

Kevmo laughed sadly at himself. "Maybe the Mother was on the *Gaze Electric*. They could be hiding a lot on that ship, too."

Zallah's face fell into a thoughtful frown. "I am going to try to discover the manifest for that ship, and where the money is coming from, while I help Jinx fix up the station office. And if the Children are leaving tomorrow, we should be able to see it, even if it's not taking off from this port. Since we're stuck here a few more days, we might as well be patient."

"Even if they take the rod off planet?"

"They may have already, but if we lose sight of it, we'll find it again."

Her confidence was easy to sink into. Kevmo felt his smile solidify.

Then Master Zallah said, "Tell me more about Marda, Kev. I can tell you have more to say."

He winced, but nodded. “I told her about Jedha, and I think she’s intrigued. She thinks the Path should have representation in the Convocation.”

“And you encouraged her.”

“I did—should I not have?”

Master Zallah shook her head slowly. “What matters is your motivation for doing so. Do you know?”

“It’s complicated—but true. I’m not sure what to do about how I feel about her, Master Zallah.”

The Soikan Jedi merely waited him out. Kevmo sank onto his haunches and let himself open his walls to the Force. The warmth seeped in, lighting him up as it always did. He breathed deeply. Poked at his feelings. “I think...I think I’m not in conflict,” he said. “I know what I’m supposed to be doing, and I want to listen to the Force and do my duty as a Jedi. I just also...like her a lot. Those things don’t have to be in conflict, do they?”

“You’re allowed to like people and things, Apprentice.”

Kevmo nodded eagerly. “I feel like knowing her matters. Maybe for this situation with the Rod of Seasons, or maybe something bigger with the Path we will be involved in. Or maybe it’s about Jedha—she lit up, really, when we were discussing it. I want...I want her to find her place in the Force.” Kevmo nodded again, mostly to himself, but caught his master’s eye.

Zallah held his gaze, her look penetrating, so Kevmo kept talking: “A lot of what she says, what she believes, makes sense to me. The gifts freely given, the desire to live in harmony with the Force...Oh.”

“Oh, indeed,” Zallah said.

“I’m looking for my place in the Force. My place here on the frontier, with the Jedi.”

Master Zallah’s lip curved at one end, her tiny smile of pride. Then she made her face expressionless and cool again. “It is good Marda Ro and this place are helping you understand yourself. Doing so is the only way to eventually learn to breathe with the Force, to live as one with it. But, Kevmo—remember that you do already know the Force. You know what it is and what it is to you.” She reached out and put her fist against his chest. “It’s that sun inside you, and it is the

Force that lights you up. The Force that lights her up, too. If your association allows both of you to grow brighter, that is all to the good. But do not confuse your shared brightness in the Force for something more powerful than the Force.”

“There’s nothing more powerful than the Force,” he said, feeling the truth of the statement as Master Zallah’s advice settled him.

Zallah huffed, then said, “All right, help me with this mess so that once we manage to complete our mission, we have a way to get off this rock.”



NINETEEN

Night had fallen, and Marda drew a deep breath, letting it out slowly in relief. She was finally clean, slightly chilly from a quick riverside bath, but eager to return to her own cell for the first time in days. The Littles were tucked in and sleeping, all of them, even the most rowdy Jerid and fearful Utalir. They'd exhausted her in the past few days, especially before they were released from the barn.

Kevmo had been such a blessing at her side. Cheerful, strong, good with the children, and so ready to help anyone in need. He'd saved the Kessarine baby's life. And Er Dal's, as well. With the Force. In that moment Marda had not cared at all. She had flung her beliefs away in the face of danger. But could the Force ever truly will for living beings to die in such a violent way, and so young?

Of course she'd absolved Kevmo of the stirrings of guilt he'd expressed. The sin had been her own. And still she couldn't regret it.

Perhaps it was the selfish Evereni in her.

She would have time to explore her doubts, through the hard work of putting the Path back in order. Without Kevmo, who had returned to his master, and—

Marda thought she might not see him again. At least not on Dalna.

Stars glittered overhead, and the smallest moon rose in its tentative pink glory. Marda walked slowly through the grasses back to the road, her thin boots sticking to the mud. When the suns finally dried out this plain, the grass crushed by the flood might end up as mud bricks. It was good the Path didn't use this area for farming.

Their fields had been destroyed, of course. Marda hadn't seen it herself, but she'd listened to Efrik's report that afternoon before the communal feast. They were going to be hungry—except, thanks to the Mother's message, a generous donation had been made by one of their benefactors, and it would see the Path through the end of the summer and winter. That announcement had turned their impromptu meal to use up the perishable foods into a true thanking feast.

Marda paused under the stars and closed her eyes, held her hands out, palms up, and murmured thanks to the Force for sending the Mother to them all those years before.

"Marda Ro."

Gasping in surprise, Marda opened her eyes to see the Herald standing at the edge of the narrow road leading back to the cells. The moonlight cast pink highlights on the ruined greenish stubs of his tendrils, and his eyes were as wide and black as the sky.

She bowed over her open hands. "Herald."

"Join me," he said.

Marda stomped as lightly as possible through the squashed wet grasses until she reached the road. "Is all well?"

The Herald tilted his head toward her and frowned.

Marda's blood ran cold. "Herald," she whispered. Was it his wife? She'd seemed so lively at the feast. Or the Mother—who hadn't attended. Maybe she wasn't meditating safely as promised, but injured or in the throes of a terrible Force vision.

He settled one large hand on her shoulder. His warmth melted through her robes. "Nothing is immediately wrong. All of our people are safe. But I cannot truly say that all is well."

How did he know? Marda wondered. What had she done to reveal her doubts? Marda clicked her teeth nervously and fell in beside the Herald as he walked. His hand remained on her shoulder, so perhaps there was room for her absolution. "Herald," she murmured.

"Marda," he replied with infinite gentleness.

It gave her courage. "How do we hold on to the Path, even when it is hard? In the face of something like this flood that nearly destroyed us?"

“The Force is not interested in easy ways or hard ways,” he said. “Its will arcs toward life, toward harmony, clarity, and freedom. But the galaxy does not. The Path of the Open Hand exists to create space for the Force to be free. Free of our desires, free of the desires and will of others. We live alongside the Force.”

“In harmony,” she said. “Aris Ade said that we must give back to the Force. That true harmony is active. We must be participants, not merely passive recipients of its gifts, or any gifts.”

“That is true. I give to you, you give to me. We do not take.”

We liberate, Marda thought. Making space for the Force to be free, they called it, but others, including the Jedi, would consider it a crime.

“The Jedi...” Marda began. She was unsure how to ask her question.

“Take. I am aware of what that young man did for us, but it was not the Path. I am glad he is gone.”

“But, Herald—it was a gift. For us. For me and the Kessarine. Kevmo took from the Force, I know, but it was to give to us. He saved their lives. How can I condemn that?” Tears thickened her voice.

“Have you considered that his gift to you might have cost someone else dearly?” the Herald asked coldly. “That is the way of the Force. Take here and deprive the galaxy elsewhere. A false will imposed here, a vacuum there. We do not know what the ripples will do, but we do know that they exist.”

Marda knew this. She did. It made her chest ache, and she clutched at her collar, let her nails snag her robe. “The Force allows the Jedi to use it. They are sensitive and can reach for it. Is that not something the Force must want?”

“Marda,” the Herald chided. “It is a challenge to resist using the Force if one is able, but a worthy challenge. A necessary one. You could take food from those smaller than you, weaker than you, but you do not. You could pluck fruit from a tree. It is right there, waiting, easily taken. But you do not. Does the tree want to be stripped of its fruit?”

Marda lowered her gaze.

“The babies, Er Dal, they live, but who will die in their place? Someone we know, perhaps. Perhaps someone far in the Core Worlds and we will never know. That is the cost of abusing the Force, even if the gain is lives. They may have been saved another way. We all might be wiped out by a similar flood one day. The Force must be free.”

“The Force will be free,” Marda murmured.

For a while, they walked in silence, each contemplating and enjoying the beauty of the night. As they left the grassland along the floodplain of the river, they entered the sparse forest and flowery meadows nearer the compound. Marda stopped. Something glowed against the ground.

The Herald paused with her. Through the low brush, the remains of lompop flowers, Marda spied little blobs of cool blue and violet. As they watched, the lights moved up the bent stems as if crawling. All around them, hundreds of the little lights crawled up from the mud and hung on the bobbing ends of ruined flowers.

Suddenly, one leapt into the sky. Another followed and then a swirl of them. They floated around, drifting with the delicate breeze.

They were like glow worms, but their light was constant. More like stars fallen to the planet, struggling to free themselves from gravity and return to the sky. Marda could hardly breathe from delight and awe.

The Herald reached out and caught one in two cupped hands. Marda leaned nearer, and the Herald lowered his hands, opening them carefully so they could peer into the cave of his palms. A little bug bobbed between his fingers, its entire body glowing purple.

“It looks like a flutterbug larva, but I’ve never seen one do this when it unfurled its wings.”

“Do flutterbugs hatch in the mud?”

The Herald gently tossed the glowing bug up, and it drifted away. “I suspect this is a variant that hibernates deep in the ground and only emerges when the ground is softened by a great flood.”

“Oh,” Marda breathed. The flood that destroyed so much, killed people in town, nearly killed some of the Path, was the only reason these little star bugs woke up and flew.

“Dalna may have preferred to sacrifice some of its people for the good of these creatures,” the Herald mused. “Who knows what greater role they play in the ecosystem, in the health of the entire world.”

“I understand,” Marda said.

“Do you?”

“The Force *must* be free.” Marda brought her hands together, open to the sky, then curled her fingers into fists. “That is worth defending, and fighting for. I want to do that.”

“It is important to make a home, to hold space, just as important as fighting,” the Herald said. “We must have both.”

So Marda had been told again and again. She did not speak. But she was thinking of Jedha, of the Convocation and the lack of representation from the Path of the Open Hand. The Jedi’s voice was surely loud, and so strong, and Marda doubted anyone challenged them openly, not like she would. Not like she had.

Kevmo would be pleased. They could both be working toward harmony with the Force and maybe even someday find ways for the Jedi and the Path to come to some understanding.

Marda’s heart seemed to glow, just like the bugs. The Mother refused to allow her to become one of the Children, had said her place was with the Path, creating a home, taking care of the Littles, but surely this idea would have merit. Everyone agreed that Marda’s faith was pure. And even her doubts, she knew now, led her toward a greater clarity. This, this was how she could give back to the Force, give of herself freely.

A smile began to spread on her mouth. She couldn’t wait to tell Kevmo—if she could see him again. Maybe she’d just surprise him one day, meet him on Jedha. But she could tell Yana, and Ferize, Er Dal, and Fel Ix.

The Herald said, “There is something I wish to discuss with you, Marda Ro.”

“Oh,” she said again, caught off guard. She’d thought...

Marda opened her palms again and bowed.

“What do you know of your cousin’s plans?”

“Yana?”

“Yes.”

Confusion dowsed Marda’s excitement. “She has no plans. Only to serve the Children, and...” Marda paused. This might have to do with Kor, not with the Path. She lowered her eyes politely. “She cares for your daughter, Herald. I am sure her plans are well intentioned.”

The Herald hummed a disgruntled note. “Yana Ro intends to leave.”

For a moment Marda gaped. The Herald’s expression was cold, even in the milky pink moonlight. His black eyes held nothing she could read. Marda blinked, and blinked again. Then she said, “Yana is one of the Children. She leaves all the time.”

“Permanently,” the Herald said more sharply.

“No, no.” Marda shook her head.

“She is. Not only Dalna, but the Path itself. And she is trying to take my daughter with her.”

“That’s...impossible.”

The Herald put his hand on Marda’s shoulder again. Harder. “Yana and the Mother have an arrangement. After this...mission... tomorrow, Yana intends to declare her obligations met and herself free of the Path, and she will leave.”

“Obligations?” Marda jerked away from the Herald’s touch. “We don’t owe the Mother anything! Nor does she owe us. We—our commitments are gifts freely given. If Yana wished to go, she could. There’s no need to make bargains. You are wrong.”

“I am not.”

The weight of his words, and his certainty, rooted Marda to the road. It felt like her skin was slowly sloughing off her body, drip-dripping like all that rain.

The starry sky glittered. The moon loaned pink light to Dalna. And the little bugs flitted away, drifting far, far from Marda, leaving her alone in the dark. “She would not leave me,” Marda whispered.

“Consider otherwise,” the Herald said.

Marda swallowed—and did so. Yana was her only family. They needed each other. Yana always said the galaxy hated Evereni and

they must stick together. What would have changed her mind? Not— not Kor, not love. Marda felt very strongly about Kevmo, could imagine...being with him. At his side, traveling and sharing the Force, not that it would be possible, but...even her feelings for him wouldn't make her leave Yana. Yana was as intrinsically a part of her as the Path itself. Family.

"You can convince her to stay," the Herald said more softly. "For you. For your family. For the Force. We all need each other, and we will even more so in the days to come."

"W-why?" Marda managed. "What is coming?"

The Herald shook his head. "The Mother is preparing, but for what, she will not say. She has been, for months. The *Gaze Electric* is part of it—our sanctuary, our way to spread our mission. Perhaps it is only that, the new expansion of the Path back into the stars. But we cannot lose any of the Children."

Slowly, Marda nodded. She breathed carefully, drawing her horror closer into herself. And she realized she was angry, too. At the idea Yana might leave, especially without even telling Marda. Deeply furious! It was a cold sliver of ice, and as she let herself feel it, clarity came. Maybe this was the relieving certainty of her people.

"I will remind her," Marda said. Her gaze sharpened, and she turned it up to the stars. This she knew: the Path was the only true will of the Force, and she was meant to walk it. With open hands, in harmony with a free Force. Maybe this burning clarity, this understanding of where the future would lead her was the meaning of the name the *Gaze Electric*.

She said to the Herald, "We are leaving Dalna, in the *Gaze Electric*, and taking the Path with us. But we will do it together."



TWENTY

Yana attached the final light and sighed as it powered up. Finally. Replacing and programming the lights for the caves was finished, and not a moment too soon. She had places to be.

Or just one, actually.

Yana packed up her tools and gave a wan smile to the Elders who walked past with their meager belongings in hand. Everyone was back where they were supposed to be, and Yana had even managed to install a few moisture sensors farther back in the caves in addition to the lights. Next time the caves flooded, everyone would have ample warning.

Yana considered it a parting gift for the people who had cared for her most of her life.

Once she was packed up, Yana headed back outside into the fresh air. She didn't take the route that went past the Mother's listening room. Since the flood, the Mother had relayed all messages through the Herald, and Yana got the impression that if she were to try to speak with the Mother directly, she would be turned away. But whether it was because Yana had lost favor or because the Mother was occupied with her own matters, Yana was unsure. The Path did not like deserters, and very soon news would travel that she was planning on leaving, and everyone would make it their business to try to convince her to stay. Yana had seen it in action only once, back when Treze's older sister had fled the Path for a life anywhere but Dalna. The Mikkian had sat in the middle of the gathering field for

days as every single Elder, parent, Little, and initiate tried to get her to see reason.

In the end, she still left. The Path was not the galaxy, and there were wonders far beyond majestic mountains, wild lompop, and the sunrise tree to behold. Dalna could not be enough for everyone, and it hadn't been for her.

And it wasn't for Yana, either. She wished she could make Marda understand, but nothing seemed less likely. She wanted to tie Marda up and take her somewhere safer. She wanted Marda to stay, be happy, grow into the kind of Elder of the Path that anyone could respect. Or not. She wanted Marda to be truly happy and not the false, hollow happy of want and scarcity that the Path peddled. She wanted them to have left years before. She wanted to have ended up on some other nothing world. She wanted to see Marda fierce and ready to fight for the things she loved, instead of so meek and subservient.

She wanted to leave immediately.

But it wasn't only Marda who made Yana want more than just an escape. She wanted Kor to go with her. She wanted Kor by her side to marvel at the wonders of the galaxy. She wanted Kor to love her enough to go.

But only one of Yana's wants was likely to come true. She was leaving.

Yana had no intention of letting the Mother or the Herald push her into a long goodbye. Rather, she would do what Evereni had done for centuries: simply disappear without a trace, fading into the noise of the galaxy. She just needed the credits the Mother owed her to make her escape. She wouldn't ask Kor or Marda to come with her. Kor knew she was leaving, and if she wanted to come with, she'd say so. Yana didn't know what she would do without Kor's steady presence. But she also loved her enough not to ask her to go. Or maybe she was just afraid of what the answer would be.

And Marda? Well, Yana just couldn't bear to see the sadness in her cousin's eyes when she decided to stay with the Path.

It was dark outside when Yana exited the main entrance to the caves. She blinked, waiting for her eyesight to adjust. Had she really

lost that much time? The work in the caves had consumed her, and her middle pinched from lack of food. She needed to find something to eat.

Yana dropped off the tools at Cincey's hut, the human nowhere to be found, most likely off on business of their own, and made her way to the kitchens to see if she could scrounge up a hunk of cheese or something before bed. The next day, she would travel to Thelj with Kor and Treze and Cincey. Just thinking about it made Yana click her teeth in agitation. They'd gotten all the information Cincey could drag from the holonet about the Graf compound on Thelj, and it hadn't been much. A few stills and vids from social engagements, a documentary about how much it had cost the Grafs to build the place—a lush garden in the middle of a frozen ocean waste beset by ice whales that sometimes tried to break through the surface too near the compound—and a wedding announcement of one Pamalonia Graf to a shipping heir from Coruscant. Other than that, there wasn't much.

It was going to be a bad scene.

“Yana!”

The Evereni turned, stifling a yawn. Her cousin stomped toward her, her face twisted with an unfamiliar expression: rage.

“You're leaving?” Marda said, nearly shouting. Yana blinked in surprise.

“What? Not until tomorrow,” Yana said. “I thought I told you that?”

“Not with the Children,” Marda said, her voice a near growl with the force of her anger. “The Herald told me you're leaving the Path!”

Yana swore in every single language she knew and then added in a few more curses she'd heard once or twice in dockside taverns. “Let's talk about this somewhere else,” she murmured, and then grabbed the edge of Marda's sleeve and dragged her along the road toward her chamber.

Yana's chamber was closer than Marda's, and once they were inside, Yana closed the door and leaned against it while Marda began to pace. Yana took a moment to gather her thoughts, but unfortunately Marda took that as a sign to launch into her argument before Yana could say anything.

“Yana. You can’t leave. I was talking to the Herald, and you just can’t. There’s nowhere else for us. Even the Herald said so.”

Yana smiled and stripped off her robes, leaving behind the fitted black pants and long-sleeved shirt she always wore beneath. “It’s a big galaxy. And I daresay that the Herald has only seen a small part of it.”

“Don’t be like that,” Marda said, a tremor entering her voice.

Yana sighed and collapsed onto her bed, patting the space next to her for Marda to join her. When they were little, this had been their shared sleeping quarters. The minder of the Littles at the time, an old Twi’lek woman named Hialeah, had refused to let them sleep with the other Littles, worried that as Evereni they would prey on the weaker children. It didn’t matter that Hialeah had known them most of their lives; her edict stood until they were old enough to claim their own chambers as initiates.

Yana wondered if Marda remembered that time in their lives the same way she did, or if her cousin’s memories had softened it into something more bearable.

Marda watched Yana for a long moment before climbing into the bed with her. They laid across the bed the same way they had as children: backs against the wall, feet dangling off the side. Yana wrapped her arms around her cousin and sat for a moment in silence, the only sound in the room their breathing: Yana’s even and steady, Marda’s ragged with her waning temper.

“You don’t remember when we came here,” Yana said. It wasn’t a question. They’d had this conversation before, and she knew the things Marda remembered were scattered and nonsensical. She didn’t remember their last night on Genetia and the way the townspeople had come for them, believing they were the reason the crops had failed. Marda didn’t remember how viciously her sire had fought so they could escape, and how their mothers had killed a family of Theelins so they could take their ship. She didn’t remember the days of hunger or the cold when the life-support systems began to fail. She definitely didn’t remember when their ship was towed by a Hutt trawler to Nar Shaddaa, and the way the slugs had tried to force them all into slavery before the Path stepped in and paid for their

release. All Marda knew was the safety of the Path, the security and sense of belonging—however conditional—the Path provided.

“But I do,” Yana continued. “And I know that this, like everything else, is a lie. Temporary and arbitrary, a gift given by the Force that can be easily snatched away. One day, the Path will be gone. The Mother will be dust. The Herald will be ash. But we will still be Evereni, Marda. And we will still be in search of a home.”

“Dalna is our home,” Marda began, but Yana took her hand and squeezed it.

“Dalna is your home,” Yana said, her voice soft, gentle as it must be to get through the wall of hurt and anger around Marda’s heart. “You love it here. But this isn’t my home. We are Evereni, and until our heart claims a new land, we have no home. You have claimed Dalna, and it has claimed you. But my home is lost to the ebb and flow of the Force. I belong out there, among the stars, free to find my own direction. To find a place to *be*. You have found yours, dear cousin. And now I must find mine.”

“What about Kor?” Marda asked. Her rage had drained away, just as Yana knew it would. Marda could never stay angry for long.

“I won’t ask her to come with me,” Yana said. “The same way I won’t ask you. I love both of you more than the breath in my lungs, but I know you and Kor belong here. She has her mother and father, even if he is a son of an ice gator.”

“Yana!” Marda said, scandalized. “You can’t talk about the Herald that way.”

“Well, he is,” Yana said, feeling less like Marda’s cousin and more like one of her Littles.

Marda sighed and leaned her head on Yana’s shoulder. “I don’t know what I will do without you. How can you leave the Path, and all we have here?”

Yana swallowed. This was a harder conversation to have. Evereni were always leaving. It was something their mothers had taught them at a very young age, the art of saying or avoiding a goodbye. Hadn’t their own mothers left them to the Path? But to talk about belief and faith, well...those were things the Evereni were less skilled at.

“You should be careful about the Path’s teachings. Just, think about them a little,” Yana finally said.

Marda lifted her head to peer at Yana. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...don’t you think it’s strange that when the fields have gone to rot, we suddenly have a benefactor who will support us through the rest of the summer and the winter?”

Marda blinked. “Well, the Force—”

“The Force doesn’t care about us, Marda!” Yana said, unable to hold her tongue. “Think about the galaxy, the size of it. Think of all the people out there, all the different kinds of animals and planets and everything else. Do you really think the Force cares for a handful of outcasts on a small planet on the edge of nowhere?”

“How can you talk like this when you are one of the Children?” Marda asked, her voice small.

Yana climbed to her feet. Exhaustion weighed her down, and the look on Marda’s face made Yana feel as though she had just eaten her cousin’s favorite pet. “Maybe one day you’ll find your way off of Dalna, as well, Marda. And it won’t be a sad thing. It’ll be what you were meant to do.”

Marda set her jaw stubbornly, some of that fire blazing up again in her eyes.

Yana sighed. This was going nowhere, but that was fine. Marda was grown. She would figure it out. Yana stifled a yawn. “I have to leave early in the morning, and I’ve had a long day. You should go.”

Marda nodded and climbed to her feet. She stood next to Yana for a long time, watching her.

“You won’t leave me. Us,” Marda said. “Not forever. And I will be waiting with open hands when you realize your mistake. The Force accepts you as you are, and I do, too.”

Yana nodded and managed not to flinch when Marda engulfed her in a too-tight hug. And then her cousin took her leave.

It was a long moment before Yana laid down on her mattress, appetite forgotten. She could think only of her cousin, living a beautiful dream of belonging and acceptance, of a deep connection to the Force and the people around her. Yana wished she could fall

into the fantasy so easily. How delicious would it be to just float through each day in a bubble of warmth and delusion?

More than that, she worried just what would happen when her cousin finally decided to wake up.



TWENTY-ONE

Kevmo had thought their extra time on Dalna a gift, but that was before he realized how much work there was to do after a flood. Everyone in Ferdan had a task that could benefit from Jedi assistance, and Kevmo found himself running from cleanup operation to building operation to preparation for the exportation of gnostra berry wine without a break. At the end of the long day, he would look to Zallah, wondering if this was part of what it meant to be a Jedi, and she would just smile.

“We have nowhere to go and no way to get there until the skiff is repaired. So it is our job to spread the light while we are here. Goodwill,” she murmured when they were alone, but that didn’t make Kevmo’s day any less fraught. It only reinforced that they had at some point lost their focus on their mission. The Rod of Seasons was in the grip of the Path of the Open Hand, and it was their job as Jedi of the Order to reclaim it. Kevmo couldn’t help feeling that he should be spending time with the Path, trying to discover the location of the rod, or at least to figure out if the Path sold the artifact.

Elevating a fern chick coop so it could be rebuilt did not necessarily help that goal.

But Zallah was calm and urged Kevmo to be patient. “The Path will balk if we press them too aggressively. We are better off biding our time and waiting for them to make a mistake. And they will, Padawan. We all make mistakes. The Path’s errors will be our opportunity.”

After dinner, frustrated and unwilling to raise the matter with his master once more, Kevmo excused himself to walk the streets of Ferdan. Kevmo had no real destination; rather, he let the Force pull him through the streets. Despite the late hour it was still light out, and the market was doing a waning business as vendors packed up their meager offerings and headed home. Things were beginning to return to normal after the flood, but the market was a clear indicator that they weren't quite there. Not yet.

"Kevmo? What are you still doing here?"

The Padawan turned to see Marda walking along in a daze, her blue paint smeared and her expression dejected. Kevmo immediately went to her, concerned.

"Our skiff is damaged, and we're waiting for parts. Hey. Is everything okay?" he asked, and before she could say anything, Marda dropped her basket and burst into tears, her despair a sucking vortex of emotion that Kevmo had to fight to maintain his sense of self. He'd never felt anything but the faintest of emotions from Marda. What had upset her so much? "Is it the Littles? Are they okay?"

"Yes, yes, they're fine," Marda gasped as Kevmo picked up her groceries and guided her to a more secluded corner of the market. In the shade, he put a hand under her elbow, offering support. Marda struggled to collect herself, hugging her stomach. Kevmo realized he wanted to do more than hold her elbow. He wanted to hug her, tease her until she smiled again. But he did neither of those things, simply waited for the storm of her emotions to subside.

She said, "It's Yana. My cousin. I just found out she's planning on leaving the Path, and I don't know what to do. I thought..." Her voice trailed off. "I don't know what I thought. That we would remain until we were Elders, I suppose."

"Do people leave the Path often?" Kevmo asked, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice. This didn't seem too great a tragedy to him, and the Force was giving him a chance to discover more about the Path without pushing. This had to be the sort of thing Zallah had meant. Kevmo felt a little guilty prying, but Marda seemed to want to talk, so he was more than happy to listen.

“No, not often,” she said, shaking her head so hard that the dark silky strands of her hair came loose from her braid. Before he could stop himself, Kevmo reached to tuck one behind her ear. Marda sucked in a soft breath and stared at him. “Why would they?”

Marda seemed about ready to spin herself into distress again, so Kevmo took her hand in both of his and squeezed it. The contact felt more intimate than he'd meant it to, and Marda paused as her eyes met his.

“Kevmo,” she murmured, and wow did he like how it sounded. She let her lips remain open when she finished his name. The tips of her sharp teeth gleamed.

“Why don't I treat you to a flavored ice?” Kevmo said a little hoarsely. He gestured to the nearby stall, breaking their intense eye contact. “And then we can sit and talk this through, okay?”

Marda nodded, not saying a word, and Kevmo wondered if he'd made a mistake. Overstepped. He liked Marda. He wouldn't want her to get in trouble for something the Force cult had done. She had a good heart and truly believed that the Force could be hurt, or that using the Force meant that people somewhere else in the galaxy got hurt. Kevmo didn't believe that, but he also didn't think Marda was a bad person. Even good people got confused sometimes, and he was willing to bet the Mother was the person the Jedi were looking for. It seemed strange he hadn't met her a single time in all their visits to the Path.

Carefully gathering Marda's basket, he took her to the dessert stall.

Kevmo got a bright-yellow sun apple ice, while Marda got a deep-purple durga berry ice. They made their way to a bench and sat down close enough their arms brushed. The suns were finally setting, and the night air was cooling rapidly. They ate their sweets in silence, and Kevmo was beginning to think perhaps he'd miscalculated, been too aggressive. He was a Jedi. Marda might think any interest he showed in her was a futile gesture at best. Which it...was. It had to be. He would leave and she would be left there, and that was just how it was. The thought shouldn't make him so unhappy.

“Thank you. And I’m sorry,” Marda finally said once they had finished their ices and returned the canisters to the vendor. “I’m not usually so emotional.”

“I know,” Kevmo said with a small smile. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know,” Marda said. “Yes, I do. But I don’t know how I feel about it. I mean, I’m sad, but I’m also...angry. And I don’t know what to do with that.”

“Angry at your cousin for wanting to leave?” Kevmo asked, and Marda shook her head.

“No, I’m angry at her because she has everything and it isn’t enough,” Marda said. “She has a home but won’t see it. She’s one of the Children, Kevmo! The Mother chose her for a very special task, and yet she’s just going to turn her back on it? On us?”

“The Children?” Kevmo asked. Marda had mentioned them before. “They’re the ones who go out into the galaxy to spread the message of the Path?”

“Yes, but they do more than that. They are the most trusted members of the Path. They commune regularly with the Mother and the Herald, doing the hard work of going out into the galaxy. How can Yana share the message of the Path if she’s not part of the Children?”

“Maybe she wants to do that in a different way,” Kevmo said. “Remember when I told you about the Convocation on Jedha? They discuss things there and talk about lots of different stuff and then take those conversations back to their respective groups, but they also sometimes recruit from among the pilgrims on Jedha. There are lots of different ways to commune with the Force,” Kevmo said, pausing when Marda’s expression lit up.

“That’s it! Yana and I...we could go to Jedha together,” she said, jumping to her feet. “Yana is already one of the Children, and maybe she’s tired of how futile their work is. They’ve gone to Hynestia and Hon-Tallos, and we haven’t had any new recruits from either place. It must be so hard for Yana to keep trying to convince people of the rightness of the Path without success.”

“I...I’m not sure that’s why Yana is leaving,” Kevmo began, reeling from the confirmation that the Children had definitely been to

Hynestia, but Marda was so enamored of her idea she didn't hear him.

"Do you think...when you leave..." Marda said, turning her lovely eyes on Kevmo. With Marda radiating passion, he felt like he was falling into the starry dark of those eyes, drowning in their depths. He knew he was just being fanciful, but he could definitely feel himself falling into the headiness of Marda's excitement. Especially when Marda held out her hands, turning them palms up in the way of the Path. "Kevmo, do you think Yana and I could go with you?"

Kevmo blinked up at her, surprised by the question. "Uh, well, we'll be returning to Port Haileap. But I'm sure Master Zallah won't mind you riding along?"

"Can we get to Jedha from Port Haileap?"

"Oh, sure..." Kevmo said, his voice trailing off when he finally realized the full scope of Marda's idea. He stood up to face her. "Wait, you're going to Jedha?"

"Yes! The Path should have a seat on the Convocation, right? And Yana is experienced at telling people about the Force. I think maybe she could teach me how to do what she does, and then I can take over for her. That way, she isn't abandoning the Force. Plus she still gets to leave Dalna like she wants." Marda threw her arms around Kevmo, and he froze, shocked at first by the physical contact.

"Kevmo," Marda breathed next to his ear, "the Force wills it. Can't you feel it? The flood, Yana's announcement right before leaving for Thelj tomorrow, all of this—it's right. It's exactly as the Force wills. Gifts freely given."

Kevmo blinked as Marda released him. "Marda," he began, but stopped. Marda was looking at him intensely, and a strange heat began to bloom in Kevmo's middle.

Then Marda kissed him. Just a light brush of her mouth on his, and Kevmo was vaguely surprised kissing was something Evereni did, considering those sharp teeth.

Then it was over, and he was reeling again and had stopped breathing.

He stared at her, and Marda's eyes were huge, too. She put her hands on his cheeks, thumbs gently stroking his family tattoos.

“Marda, that—” But Kevmo didn’t get to finish, because Marda yanked him forward, kissing him even more fully.

For a moment Kevmo lost himself, the taste and scent of Marda everything. She tasted cold, from the ice so recently on her tongue, like dark berries, and she was so careful even as she tilted her head to deepen the kiss.

Kevmo was on fire with it, his hands full of sunlight and Marda’s hips, but he had to gasp for air and pulled back.

Marda, smiling, let him. Her hands fell to her sides. She was looking at him like he was her favorite thing. Under that heady gaze it was difficult to regain his wits. He’d never—that had been—

And he wanted her to do it again.

That could not happen. He stepped back. “I, um, I should walk you back. One of the townspeople said the flood may have brought out the ice gators early, and from what I heard they’re pretty nasty.”

“Yes, you’re right,” she said. She laced her fingers through his and gave him a smile as she took up her basket again. Kevmo returned the smile, and they made their way back to the Path in silence that was, for Kevmo at least, extremely fraught. Her hand in his felt like the only real thing, and he was grateful for the contact or he probably would have brought that hand up to touch his mouth.

Marda hummed softly as they walked. Kevmo was grateful for that, too. Without conversation, he could focus on settling himself. He welcomed the warm Force with every step, its brightness so clear it obliterated his flushed emotions.

At the boundary gate Marda said, “The Children have left again, and we don’t expect them for several days. But when they return, if you and your Master Zallah allow it, I hope Yana and I can go with you. I’ll convince her, and I’ll secure the permissions I need.”

Kevmo could only nod, dazed. And Marda laughed joyfully. Just like he’d felt her despair earlier, her new hope punched at him. So he was not surprised when she hopped onto her tiptoes and kissed him again. Then she waved and left him there.

Once Kevmo got back to Ferdan, he went straight to his room in the lodging house. Only Zallah was sitting there waiting for him, a bemused expression on her face.

“Padawan,” she said, idly levitating her lightsaber above her hand, a thing she did when she had a difficult topic to tackle. “Lady Jara said she saw you in the market not too long ago.”

Kevmo’s stomach fell. “Oh.”

“Oh, indeed,” Master Zallah said with a sigh, snatching her lightsaber from where it hovered before her and clipping it back on her belt. “Sit. Let us discuss attachments.”



TWENTY-TWO

Marda prepared with extreme care for her audience with the Mother. She was cleaner than she'd ever been, her hair plaited elaborately beneath her plain gray cowl, and after she dipped her fingers into the brikal-shell blue paint, Marda closed her eyes and drew the three Force lines during one slowly released breath.

She was prepared.

The next day, Yana and the Children would return from their current mission. Before they did, Marda would secure permission from the Mother to take Yana and establish the Path on Jedha as part of the Convocation.

Her arguments were thought through and strong. Marda had spent every hour of the past three days working with the Littles and meditating on this future. She did not have sensitivity to the Force, but if she asked with open hands, the Force would always offer an answer. It had. This plan brought together all the skills Marda had cultivated over her life, and Yana's, too. It was an adventure on behalf of the Force; it was leaving Dalna without leaving their home or the Path. Marda and Yana would remain together, the way she knew their mothers would have liked, even if Yana couldn't admit it.

The certainty settled low in Marda's chest, like a new, shining organ come to life, because she'd discovered who she was meant to be.

As she walked to the Mother's cottage, Marda folded her hands over the feeling. She felt so warm, and had since she'd kissed

Kevmo. Maybe, she admitted to herself once again, the heat of the star inside her was a little bit of a gift from him. She'd accept it, and employ it with all the devotion she could muster.

Then if all went well, she could kiss him again.

A smile twitched her lips. She barely believed she'd done it in the first place—her only previous kiss had not been nearly as sweet and ended very badly. A human girl in the Ferdan market had offered it as a gift freely given in return for the flower Marda had given her. The girl had kissed her cheek, and Marda turned her face to kiss the corner of the girl's mouth—but then the girl's father had dragged her away, citing a mix of anti-Path and anti-Evereni vitriol it had taken Marda weeks to untangle. Yana had consoled her but said, "That's what your teeth are for," with a little snarl.

Yana probably wouldn't be any happier about Marda kissing a Jedi. But that was too bad, Marda thought with a giddy hop to her step.

The Mother's cottage bloomed with color, even in the aftermath of the flood. The gardens were as lush as always, if slightly bedraggled. She never lost whole plots to disease or drought, thanks to the strength of her connection to the Force. The flowers were the best sign of the Force's blessing on the Mother and, through her, on the Path of the Open Hand. As long as they bloomed, Marda would know her faith was true.

She smiled and opened her palms for the Wookiee Jukkyuk, who stood as an honor guard at the entrance. He returned the gesture: the pads of his fingers were stained blue instead of painted waves on his face, given his preponderance of fur. Then the Wookiee opened the door for Marda, and she went in. The cottage was merely the entrance to the Mother's caverns, but it stood as a monument to the home that had been built with love. The flood had not damaged it in the least, Marda was relieved to see. She headed for the staircase and descended to the Mother's listening room.

It was rare for Marda to visit, but she always loved to do so: the sun opal gleamed between stalactites and stalagmites, and the warm blues and thick gray carpets and pillows loaned it a softness and comfort Marda longed to savor.

The Mother sat on a lush pillow, cradling her large purple jewel in her lap. Beside her were the Herald and Elders Aris Ade and Delwin. All three had the upper halves of their faces painted entirely blue, as was right for Elders of the Path. Marda was surprised her audience included those three but not discouraged. In fact, it might make this easier. Aris Ade in particular had been encouraging Marda to choose how to more actively participate in the Path.

Marda knelt and bowed low, her hands open in her lap. “Mother, Herald, Elders,” she said.

The Herald said, “Marda. You have come before us with a request.”

Marda flicked her gaze to the Mother, who contemplated the massive jewel, caressing it with both hands, its weight clear in the way she cradled it. It gave off a soft lavender glow, making the Mother’s fingers look like the branches of a tree at sunset. And its surface seemed to shift, reminding Marda most of the Kessarine eggs just before they hatched.

Someone cleared their throat, and Marda tore her gaze from the strange jewel. “I...yes, Herald. I have a request of the Mother and the Elders of the Path.” She smiled slightly at Elder Aris Ade, who returned it broadly.

Finally, the Mother raised her head. “I hope it is not your same request, Marda Ro. I will not make you one of my Children.”

Marda held herself stiff as the old disappointment shook through her. Then she nodded. “I accept that, Mother. This is a different request, that I believe will greatly benefit the Path.”

“Let us hear it,” the Mother said, her features softening into encouragement.

Bolstered, Marda said, “My cousin Yana is leaving the Path.”

The Herald frowned.

“I was unable to persuade her, for many reasons. I am sorry for that failure. But—” Marda glanced around at her elders. “I want to go, too.”

Elder Aris Ade’s eyes widened in shock. Elder Delwin, a Weequay whose expressions Marda always had trouble reading, dropped his jaw—easy enough to read. The Herald was the one who spoke.

“Marda Ro,” he chided darkly.

But the Mother held up one hand, cradling the heavy jewel in her lap with her other. “Let us hear Marda speak, Werth. She is not going to leave the Path.”

“No, I would never,” Marda said passionately. “I want to take Yana to Jedha and establish the Path there.”

The Mother’s expression sharpened in a way Marda had never seen. But she said nothing.

“Jedha!” said Aris Ade.

Marda nodded. She kept her attention on the Mother. “There is a council of Force adherents on Jedha, and no voice from the Path. Conversations about the Force that affect not only the Outer Rim but the entire galaxy happen there!” Marda pulled back on her enthusiasm, determined to present her case plainly and diplomatically. She was not a child; this was not a whim.

“Jedha would be nothing but a distraction from the Path,” the Mother said.

Surprise gave Marda pause. She’d not expected such a hard line from the Mother. She sank back into her kneel to collect herself.

“Jedha,” the Herald said, “is a good idea.”

The Mother sliced a glance at him, then turned to Marda, her smile warming. “Remain patient, Marda Ro. Soon the *Gaze Electric* will be complete, and we will all go into the stars. I had thought to leave you here in charge of this home on Dalna, but if you are determined, you may join us. Then. Soon.”

Aris Ade turned one of her wrinkled hands over, palm up. “Marda, do you think you would be able to guide the Path on Jedha, amidst great distraction and noise?”

“Yes,” she answered immediately. It was a struggle not to let her hands turn to fists. “I know I can. I have done it every day of my life. I have held my own with the Jedi.”

“The young Jedi is very open to you,” Elder Delwin said, and Marda barely managed not to lower her eyes in embarrassment at his tone.

“The Jedi has been a challenge I have met well,” she insisted softly.

“Padawans are not a challenge,” the Mother said. She had returned her attention to the jewel, caressing it gently. It seemed to respond to her affection, glowing brighter.

“Mother,” Marda said tentatively. “What...is that?”

The Mother smiled. “A gift from the Force.”

Marda stared at it, looking for what the Mother saw. It was lovely, but Marda’s lack of sensitivity to the direct will of the Force did not let her appreciate it the same way. If anything, the longer she looked at it, the more the skin along her spine crawled. That she could never admit. She clicked her teeth together, then straightened her shoulders again. “Would it not be wise to send me, with my cousin, to Jedha first, as a—a vanguard? To learn the way of the planet, and of the council? Yana has been one of the Children for years and knows your needs, Mother. And I have experience with giving of the Path and passing unnoticed.”

“Two Evereni will hardly remain unnoticed in a place like Jedha,” Elder Delwin said.

This Marda had an answer for, and eagerly said, “Two Evereni bringing only gifts freely given, and the peaceful Path of the Open Hand, could be exactly what people need there. Sometimes surprise is the best open door.”

The Mother actually smiled indulgently at Marda, and she felt victory nearing.

But the Herald frowned again. “That is hardly Yana’s skill set.”

“She’s one of the Children,” Marda said, slightly confused. “Of course such proselytizing is within her abilities.”

Aris Ade said, “Yana’s skills are not what you are here to argue.”

“Yes,” Marda said. “I am here because I am suited to this. I know the Path. I live it, Mother. I do not hear the Force as you do, nor am I blessed with visions, but I work every day to live in harmony and clarity with it. I have sworn to see the Force free. I—it is what I want more than anything. And it feels right. To give myself even more to the Force and the Path. I am asking for this opportunity to be, myself, a gift freely given to the Outer Rim. Please.”

Both Elders and the Herald watched Marda with what she thought to be approval. She did not add to her argument. This was the heart of it: she was a devoted disciple of the Path, eager to spread the word, and singularly suited to representing the Path on Jedha. They would agree. They had to.

"I do not want the Path on Jedha at this time," the Mother said with finality.

Breathless at the firm denial, Marda bowed. "Mother. Yana will leave us. Forever. This is the only way."

"Begging is unbecoming," Elder Aris Ade said, but very gently.

Tears burned in Marda's throat. She nodded, remaining in her bowed position.

"You will one day be among our greatest," the Mother said. "But not today. Be patient."

"Soon, Marda-chi," Aris Ade said.

It was enough of a dismissal. Marda stood, trembling, and looked at the Mother. Her eyes had drifted closed, and she held the jewel against her body as if already communing with the Force. Marda looked at the Herald, who seemed displeased. She had failed him, too, in failing to find a way to keep Yana on Dalna with them.

With a final bow, Marda fled.

Up on the surface, under the sun, she dug her hands against her stomach until she could feel the tips of her nails. This did not feel right. She knew she was supposed to go.

Turning her face up to the bright twin suns, she stared. Her eyes could take it better than most, but it still burned the longer she looked.

I do not want the Path on Jedha at this time, the Mother had said. The words rang in Marda's skull.

I do not want

I do not

I

Not the Force.

Marda frowned. She'd never heard the Mother express her own needs in such a way. It was always the Force's needs, the will of the Force.

No—this was a slip of the tongue. The Mother was the will of the Force as far as Marda was concerned.

Taking a deep breath, Marda looked away from the suns. She would tell Yana of her plan, and what the Mother and Elders had said. Maybe it would be enough to keep Yana for a few weeks, until the *Gaze Electric* was complete.

Marda strode back to the heart of the commune to find her Littles. She had not been defeated—she needed only to be patient. Now that she knew what she was supposed to do, now that it had rooted inside her, she would not give up. She would just find a way to show the Mother, her cousin, all the Path that this was the will of the Force.



TWENTY-THREE

Yana didn't want to romanticize her last job with the Children, but she found she couldn't help it. Even the presence of a grubby prospector with unknown debts to the Mother didn't tarnish the shine of nostalgia too badly.

The *Scupper*, Sunshine Dobbs's ship, was a run-down pleasure yacht that stank like sweet smoke and old fish. As they boarded the ship, Treze began to complain about how smelly humans were, or at least Sunshine, and Yana thought, *This is almost the last time I will have to endure Treze's constant whining*. When Treze then began to criticize the plan to gain entry to the compound under a centuries-old tradition on Thelj called the Rite of Hospitality, Yana didn't even get angry.

It was amazing how freeing it was just to know she was leaving, even if the hurt glances Kor shot her way felt like actual blaster bolts lodging in her chest.

Yana tried speaking to Kor when they boarded the ship, but the Nautolan flipped her head tresses over her shoulder and ignored Yana, opting to chat with Treze instead, who was delighted by the turn of events. Yana didn't say anything or let her frustration show. Instead she just strapped into a chair and began to read one of the newest romances from the holonet. This one revolved around a senator who fell in love with a Jedi, who was torn between his allegiance to the Order and the love of his life. Yana thought it was a bit far-fetched, but it was a good way to pass the time in hyperspace, especially since Thelj was four sectors away from Dalna. The trip

would've taken multiple jumps on the public hyperspace routes, but Sunshine had the access codes to a private hyperspace route, so the entire trip would take only three days total: a day and a half there and a day and a half back. He was definitely the Mother's source for their previous private routes. Yana wondered, not for the first time, how the Mother made these contacts if she was just a prophet working to maintain the balance of the Force. It seemed like obvious proof the Mother was anything but what she said. Fortunately, that wouldn't be Yana's problem for much longer.

Just the people you are leaving behind, whispered a traitorous voice in her mind. She quashed it.

Based on Sunshine's intel, Cincey had sent a query to the personal secretary of Jacinda Graf, the owner of the compound on Thelj, about the Graf's possibly selling the Jedi Tears. It was an artifact that was rumored to be part of the same set as the Rod of Seasons, which they'd lifted from Hynestia, and in the message Cincey pretended to be a buyer interested in possibly making an offer for the artifact on behalf of the Hynestian royal family. The return message had been polite and forthcoming: Jacinda Graf and her entourage were off planet for at least the next month, but she would be happy to discuss a possible transfer of ownership sometime after that.

It was all Yana needed for her plan to make sense.

A compound full of Graf's would have been a problem. The Graf's were known as a ruthless hyperspace prospecting family, one of the first at the beginning of the rush. Even the holo-documentaries Yana had watched made a point of discussing the Graf's' dedication to security, a nice way of saying they were known for their mercilessness in dealing with their enemies.

But if there were no Graf's in residence, it stood to reason that the security would be lax. Employees were always less attentive when their employers were nowhere to be found, so Yana began to think perhaps this plan actually had a chance.

"You lot should get ready," Sunshine called from the cockpit when they exited hyperspace with a bump. "We'll be there soon."

Yana grabbed her robes and threw them on over a fitted black shirt and trousers. Her slicer set hung at her hip, and she watched as Kor began to do her warm-up exercises as usual. Treze was watching, as well, and he winked at Yana when their gazes met.

“I cannot believe you’re going to leave all this behind,” he said before moving off to use the refresher in the back of the ship. Yana waited until she heard the click of the locking mechanism before turning to Kor.

“Are we going to discuss it, or are you going to pretend that I’m standing here talking to myself?” Yana asked.

Kor snorted. “You’re the one who decided that I no longer exist, not the other way around.”

“Kor,” Yana began, but then shook her head. “You’re right. I should’ve told you first. Before I spoke with the Mother. But we’ve been talking about leaving the Path and Dalna for years.”

“Exactly,” Kor said, rounding on Yana, her stretches forgotten. “So why now? Why do you all of a sudden think it’s a good time to leave when you’ve never been in any kind of hurry before?”

“Kor. There are Jedi on Dalna. It’s just a matter of time until they find the artifacts in the caverns.”

“So? The Force will protect us,” Kor said. “It wants to be free, and by taking those artifacts away from people who use them to exploit the Force, we’re helping maintain the balance in the Force.”

Yana shook her head. “The Jedi use the Force, and if the Force actually felt some kind of way about that, I doubt the Jedi would still exist.” Yana looked to the cockpit, where Sunshine was steering them over a flat, frigid landscape that looked to be a frozen emerald ocean. Yana lowered her voice. “The Mother will lead everybody away from Dalna as soon as the *Gaze Electric* is complete anyway.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she could feel the rightness of them. “Leaving now is the only way to do it freely,” she said, flashing her teeth in annoyance.

Kor shook her head. “You’re wrong. Leaving with the Mother is freeing, too. Her work with the Force has saved my own mother’s life.”

“The medicine the Path finally bought saved your mother’s life,” Yana said with a sigh. “Kor, I love you. My heart breaks at the thought of leaving you behind. But how can I ask you to leave when you love the Path, when your mother is on the mend?”

“You should’ve asked,” Kor said. Then the ship was landing, and there was no more space for conversation as Treze departed the refresher, his knives in their holders on the bandoliers crisscrossing his body.

“All right,” Sunshine called from the cockpit. “I set us down about a kilometer from the compound, so you’ll have to walk a bit in the cold. There are some cloaks I managed to scrounge up so you’ll look like proper pilgrims.”

“These stink,” Treze said, opening the compartment Sunshine had indicated.

“You think religious dedicants have time to stop and do laundry?” the human said in response. “You have four hours. This ship will be running, so be quick. Fuel is still expensive thanks to the war between E’ronoh and Eiram, and after that it’ll be dicey whether or not we can get off planet and to the rendezvous point. Got it?”

The Children nodded. Then Sunshine opened the boarding ramp. A blast of icy air assaulted them, whipping their robes and cloaks about, and despite the smell of the material, Yana was thankful for the layers. She rarely felt the cold, but Thelj was colder than even Hynestia, and Yana was hard pressed to walk out into the frozen landscape.

One more job, she thought, and stepped out onto the ice.

The settlements on Thelj existed only in temperate zones created by the original settlers of the planet. The data Yana had read on the planet stated that it had been settled as a potential colony of the Republic nearly three centuries earlier, but shortly after that the planet’s sun had gone dark, collapsing into nothing. The result was a planet that quickly froze, killing nearly everyone unable to escape. A few scientists had found a way to use the planetary core to create vents of heated air that made life possible, and in the distance the dome of Thelj’s lone city, Bhatiqu, glowed. But it was the only landmark in the entirety of the landscape. Green ice extended before

them in all directions, the soft glow of lights under a dome the only sign that they were not the only living creatures on the entire planet.

“Are we in the right place?” Kor asked. Her voice seemed unnaturally loud. There was no sound at all, now that the wind had died down, just a heavy silence that seemed to press in on all sides. The stillness was a relief, though, alleviating some of the bite in the air.

“That’s the Graf compound there,” Yana said, pointing to a smaller lighted spot on the horizon. There was no dome, but the Graf compound was the next step in the engineering that allowed Bhatiqu to exist, a system of atmospheric generators that used the energy of the planet’s core to create a temperate zone.

“Look,” Treze said, pointing down at the ice beneath their boots. Far below, dark shadows shifted in mesmerizing patterns, circling.

“It’s an ocean,” Yana said, gesturing to encompass the landscape that surrounded them. “Or maybe a lake of some kind. It must be why it’s so flat.”

“We should get moving,” Kor said, looking down at the creatures circling beneath. “The ice is thick, but I don’t think we want to tempt them.”

They all began to walk, taking long strides. They didn’t run, but it was a near thing, and by the time they sentry point to the Graf complex was in sight, their gaits were jerky, their shoulders hunched against the cold seeping into their bones and bodies. Yana wished they’d done more to prepare for the weather.

The sentry point was monitored by a very shiny enforcer droid. Even the Grafs weren’t coldhearted enough to make an actual person guard the area outside of their temperate zone. But this seemed a bit over the top.

“State your business,” the droid demanded. It had plenty of panels sure to be packing blasters and worse.

“We seek to invoke the Rite of Hospitality,” Yana said, careful in her phrasing. The research she’d done had been clear that the Rite of Hospitality must be invoked, and even then it entitled the guest only to warm their bones for an hour unless an additional offer was made by the host. Yana didn’t think any such offer would be forthcoming, so

invoking Thelj's old-fashioned tradition was more about gaining access than anything else.

The droid hesitated before replying. "The Rite of Hospitality is acknowledged. Please proceed."

Yana nodded, and they continued on their way, the air warming quickly. They'd gone only a few steps before their shoulders relaxed, the temperature changing from frigid to balmy in a matter of steps. By the time they gained entrance to the gardens, Yana had stripped off her borrowed cloak and was beginning to wish she could strip off her Path robes, as well.

"Can I help you?" someone trilled from a nearby doorway. A pale-skinned human woman with a kind smile and gray hair, wearing a household uniform, stood nearby, the blaster on her hip unmistakable.

"Forgive us, kind friend," Treze said, the Mikkian falling into his role effortlessly. "We are but humble pilgrims seeking a moment to warm ourselves."

"You get an hour. No more," the human woman said, her friendliness leeching away. "And you can keep that Church of the Force nonsense to yourself."

"We are not from the Church of the Force," Kor said with a bow, her hands outstretched, palms facing the icy sky above. "We are from the Path of the Open Hand."

"I don't care if you're Jedi," the woman said. "You may remain here in the waiting garden until the hour has passed, and then you must be on your way."

"That is no problem, and we are sorry for the imposition," Yana said, her head bowed. "I do not suppose there is a refresher I might use?"

The woman's lips twisted with annoyance, and then she sighed heavily. "Follow me."

Yana followed the woman, but as she did, a couple of other similarly dressed people—a large human man with swirling blue tattoos covering his shirtless torso and a smaller Duros man with blue-green skin and bulging red eyes—went out to the garden,

ostensibly to supervise Treze and Kor. A spike of worry shot through Yana, but she tamped it down. This was fine. They could do this.

The refresher was down a long hallway, and the woman indicated it with a wave of her hand. Yana bowed in the way of the Path, palms up, and entered. She didn't have much time, and she would have to work fast.

Once inside the refresher, Yana stripped off her slicer kit and jammed it into the port meant for adjusting the lights within the space. One of the curious things she had read about the compound was how everything was controlled with a single system. The environmental controls, the security system, and the communications operated through a central hub. That meant that, theoretically, the communications and security could be reached through the environmental controls. It didn't always work that way, especially when a good engineer was paranoid enough to make sure there was an impressive barrier between systems, but rich people were funny in that they didn't always pay for the best kind of help when it came to things like their networks.

And Yana was pleased to discover that the Grafs were like too many other rich people the Children had stolen from: more worried about saving a credit than double-checking the work of their hired help. There was no digital barrier between the environmental controls and the others, so she accessed the security functions easily.

Right as the screaming started.

Yana left her slicer kit where it was and opened the door, only to find the human woman turned away from her, toward the sounds from the garden. Clearly expecting the screams. Yana wasn't sure what was happening, but one thing was certain, the sounds of distress came from Kor. And if her girlfriend was in trouble, there was nothing to do but take every single obstacle out of the way of her safety.

Yana moved quickly, Evereni stealth on her side. It was simple to step forward and grab the human woman's head, yanking it hard to the right and breaking her neck. The woman fell to the ground like a heap of dirty laundry. Humans were so fragile. Yana sometimes thought it was amazing they even survived to adulthood.

And then she was striding down the hallway, toward the garden and the sounds of the fight beyond.

When she stepped out into the garden, the grow lights temporarily blinding her before her eyesight adjusted, Treze was trying to fend off the Duros with his throwing knives while Kor had vaulted onto a nearby roof. The human had a blaster pointed at her, and Kor's hands were up in surrender.

Yana didn't hesitate. She ran toward the human man, who turned toward her at the last moment. He fired, but Yana was already crouched low, avoiding the shot. She slid toward the man, aiming a kick at his knee, which bent the wrong way with a sickening crunch.

"Gah!" he screamed, firing wildly. Yana didn't pause. She flipped herself onto the man's back, somehow avoiding the blaster bolts. She used her nails, jamming them into the soft skin of the man's neck. Blood fountained and the human gurgled, but Yana was already stalking toward the remaining guard as the human's body hit the ground with a hollow thunk.

The Duros man whirled on Yana, and Treze took the opportunity to stab him with his long knife. Once the guard was on the ground, Kor leapt off the roof and came to stand next to them, holding her side.

"Are you okay?" Yana asked as she picked up the blaster the human had dropped, and Kor shook her head.

"No," she said, her voice low. She lifted her hand to reveal a long gash in her robes, soaked through with bright green blood. "But I'll live."

"What happened?" Yana asked.

"I'm not sure how, but they knew why we were here," Treze said. "It's like somebody *told them*."

"Did you disarm the security system?" Kor asked, wincing as she adjusted her weight.

Fury built under Yana's skin as she pressed her hand to Kor's bleeding wound. *Somebody told them*.

"Yeah, but forget about that," Treze said. "We have to get out of here. There have to be more than three guards in a place this big."

“We need to find the artifact,” Kor said. But no sooner were the words out than she was falling forward, Yana reacting quickly to catch her.

“Kor,” Treze said, alarm widening his eyes. “Are you all right?”

Kor said nothing, and when Yana looped her arm around her girlfriend’s waist, her head lolled. She was clearly unconscious, and a tiny bud of panic began to unfurl in Yana’s middle.

“We have to get back to the ship,” she said. She grabbed the cloaks they’d thrown off and wrapped one around Kor while draping another across her own shoulders. Treze didn’t move, and Yana turned to glare at him.

“Treze, this is not the time,” she began before she saw the knife sticking out of his throat. His response was nothing but a wet gurgle, and as he fell to the ground Yana blinked stupidly in shock. It was Treze’s knife that the not-quite-dead Duros man had pulled out of his own chest to throw. He lay on the ground grievously injured, but still a threat.

Without a word Yana leveled the blaster at the Duros and pulled the trigger again and again until the blaster kicked, needing to recharge. Then she dropped it on the ground.

“Treze?” Yana said, but the Mikkian said nothing, his head trendrils slack and the blood pooling around him and soaking into the tender grass more than enough answer.

“We need to get out of here,” Yana said. She could hear far-off footsteps, but with the security system under her control, none of the doors would open unless she let them. She couldn’t get the artifact, not that she would even have tried at that point, but she had to get Kor to safety before she lost any more blood.

Yana turned to leave the Graf compound, Kor’s weight making the walk awkward as she turned them both toward the sentry point. They had taken only a couple of steps outside the compound before Kor awoke, the cold air a slap in the face even the injured Nautolan couldn’t ignore.

“I’m okay,” Kor said sleepily, but Yana just kept on walking. There was nearly a kilometer between the compound and the *Scupper*. They would make it.

Yana had to believe that.



It didn't take long out in the cold for Yana to realize she and Kor were in a bad sort of way. The temperature had dropped even further, so the cloaks didn't provide much protection. The wind had kicked up again, the icy fury of it slicing right through the fabric with frigid knives. Kor's blood had already soaked through her robes, so the chill dampness of it also marred Yana's robes, freezing and causing the material to twist and gape oddly. Yana tried not to think, tried not to give into the panic scratching at her. But when Kor fell for the second time, refusing to get up off the ice, Yana could no longer avoid the reality of their situation.

"Kor. You have to get up. It's just a little farther." It wasn't true. Yana didn't have any idea where Sunshine was. He wasn't where they'd left him, and there was no outline of a ship anywhere on the horizon. Yana could sense the damage the cold was doing to her body. Evereni weren't fragile by any means, but the cloaks were no match for the weather on Thelj. Especially now that the wind had come up. She'd tried to contact Sunshine on her comlink, but there was nothing but static.

Somebody told them, Treze had said.

Kor gripped Yana just as the ground began to rumble. At first Yana thought it was a groundquake, but when she looked down, she realized that the dark shadows of the whales under the ice had amassed once more, this time in greater number than before. The rumbling came again, and the ice nearby cracked, the sound startlingly loud despite the howling wind.

Yana swallowed fear. "Kor, if we don't move, we're going to be lunch."

"You should've asked."

Yana blinked, and for a long moment she thought perhaps Kor was dreaming. But that liquid gaze was on her, even if Kor's face was pinched with pain.

"What?"

“You should’ve asked. Me to go. I would’ve said yes.”

Yana reeled as if struck. “But your mom. And the Path. And your dad. I couldn’t ask you to leave everything you love.”

“I love you...more,” Kor said. Her head lolled to the side, and hot tears burned Yana’s eyes. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d cried, but it had been a long time.

“Kor?” Yana said, voice low. Her mind knew that Kor was gone. There was something wrong in the way her body felt, but Yana shook her anyway. “Get up, Kor! We have to get moving.”

But there was no response.

The whales beneath the ice slammed into the barrier once more, harder than before. Yana was knocked off balance, and myriad cracks erupted around her. She had to move.

For a moment she debated taking Kor’s body with her, taking her home to Dalna. But another strike against the ice was all Yana needed to realize that if she didn’t move, they would both be devoured by the creatures beneath.

She gave Kor one last kiss and laced a head tress around her fingers. “Your father was right. You were too good for me.” And then Yana hardened her heart and set out across the ice toward the rendezvous point.

She’d gone only a few steps when the ice fractured, sending her running. There was a panicked moment when Yana thought she’d fall in, but it held, and she was soon on steadier footing. A glance over her shoulder revealed dark shapes scuttling across the ice, pulling at Kor’s body, dragging it into the hole the creatures had made.

A gift freely given, Yana thought bitterly.

Yana ran. The exercise warmed her some, and when she saw the *Scupper*, the embers of her rage flared into flames. The information broker wasn’t where he was supposed to be, and when Yana rapped on the side of the ship to be let in, she was greeted by the man holding a blaster level at her chest.

“I didn’t think you’d make it,” he said. “The Mother doesn’t make mistakes.”

“The Mother,” Yana said coldly.

“I don’t want no trouble,” he said, his pale face sweaty despite the frigid air. He didn’t seem surprised to see Yana alone, and that confirmed it. This had been a setup.

“What did she tell you to do?”

“Bring you here.”

“What else?” Yana growled.

Sunshine hesitated.

“You do know that I could kill you before you even pull the trigger, right?” Yana said. It wasn’t true, but the Evereni had a reputation in the galaxy. And as an information broker, Sunshine had definitely heard stories of the brutality of her people. He hesitated. She leaned in. “Even if you do pull the trigger, I’ll have your intestines for bracelets.”

“What do you want?” the prospector asked, trying to glare.

“She sent us here to die.” Yana took two long, deep breaths, staring at Sunshine. “You called them, didn’t you? Alerted the Grafts?”

“I do what she tells me.”

Yana bared her sharp teeth. “Why shouldn’t I destroy you right where you stand and let your skin freeze to candy for those ice whales?”

“I’ll take you back to Dalna,” he said, stepping back, keeping the blaster on her. “You can settle it out with Elecia. But you need to ride in the head. I won’t have you slitting my throat while we’re in hyperspace.”

Yana would do no such thing, because she didn’t know how to fly the ship. But she nodded, letting her fury and grief put a deadly sparkle in her eyes. *Elecia*, he’d called the Mother. She’d say that name, too, right before she tore out the Mother’s throat.

Sunshine walked her to the refresher and locked her in. The sudden change in temperature sent her body into a fight of spasms. She hugged her knees and listened to the sounds of the ship lifting off, and nursed the flickering flame of her hatred.

The Mother would pay. Yana would make sure.



TWENTY-FOUR

It was late morning, and both Dalnan suns beat down on Kevmo as he whirled in one of his favorite lightsaber forms. Master Zallah actually smiled as she stepped in to meet his lightsaber with hers. The cool blue and vivid yellow hummed together. Kevmo felt the Force all around him, pulsing through him with his quickening heartbeat.

He was so at peace in the physical activity and living Force, he easily sensed when Lady Jara and her neighbor, a Trandoshan woman in the process of regenerating her left arm, were joined by a third presence. A nonhostile, welcome presence. It didn't rock Kevmo at all as he gradually realized he knew her.

Master Zallah shifted tactics to quickly end the session, and Kevmo ducked around, laughing as his feet landed perfectly despite the rough gravel left in Lady Jara's yard from the flood. He panted as he shut off his lightsaber and bowed to her with it clasped in his hands. Master Zallah returned the bow, not smiling, but satisfaction blazed in her cool lilac eyes.

They'd both stripped down to undershirts and trousers, but unlike Kevmo, who sweated like an Alderaanian pine boar, Master Zallah didn't even look flushed. Maybe it was her people in general, but more likely she was simply better at regulating her body's reactions through the Force. Kevmo looked forward to the day he could do that—if he ever managed it.

Kevmo returned his lightsaber to the holster on his belt and turned to their audience. Lady Jara was listening while pretending to turn up her nose at Marda's gentle questioning of the Trandoshan's injury. When Jara realized the Jedi had finished, she stood up. "Impressive show. I'll miss seeing it when you're gone. But not as much as we'll miss your Force muscles."

Zallah nodded in acknowledgment, but Kevmo winced a little, worried about Marda's reaction.

But the Evereni stood gracefully, without displaying any emotion toward Lady Jara. Marda turned to them and opened her hands palms up, then bowed to Master Zallah. "Master Jedi," she said with soft formality. Her black hair gleamed in the sunlight, and Kevmo felt a traitorous urge to slide his fingers through it. He quashed it quickly.

Master Zallah said, "Marda, what can we do for you? We have not yet been able to fix our skiff and have no departure date as yet."

Kevmo had been right that Master Zallah wouldn't mind giving Marda and her cousin a lift to Port Haileap—assuming they'd completed their task first and the Path members still wanted to associate with them. And assuming Kevmo could keep himself and his emotions in line. He'd assured her he was definitely capable of that.

"Thank you," Marda said. "That is what I wished to speak of. I appreciate the offer to travel with you, but I must decline. I am not to leave Dalna quite yet."

"Marda," Kevmo said, surprised. She'd been so sure and giddy about it. Now she was almost like a different person.

But when she finally looked at him, a smile spread across her face, bright enough her sharp teeth flashed. "I'll see you again, Kevmo. And thank you, too, for...being a challenge."

Kevmo's mouth fell open in a hot wave of surprise and indignation. He did not glance at his master to discover if she was amused. "Um," he said, "you're welcome?"

Marda stepped nearer. "I needed it. I'll never approve of how Jedi use the Force, or agree with your ways. But speaking with you and spending time with you helped me find a clarity I didn't have before.

And you saved the lives of people I care about.” Marda lowered her voice. “That will always matter to me.”

He swallowed, unsure what to say, how to tell her she mattered to him, too, but they couldn’t, he couldn’t...

Master Zallah clearly noticed his struggle but only dryly said, “We’ll leave you to your farewells,” before ushering Lady Jara and the Trandoshan away. This was her Padawan’s problem that he’d made for himself. Kevmo knew that; he just hadn’t expected to have to do anything about it...quite yet.

Marda didn’t seem to notice them leave at all, her starry black eyes on only Kevmo. When they were alone, Kevmo said, “Are you really all right? You were so excited to be leaving.”

“The Mother reminded me to be patient.” Marda glanced away, finally a sign she was less at peace with this than she pretended. “I have not given up, but it may take longer, and I don’t want you to be waiting for us.”

“It will still be a few days, at least,” he admitted.

“Yana is due back today, but I don’t know if she’ll be willing to be patient at my side. Probably not.”

Kevmo nodded. He put his hand behind his back before he could reach to touch her. Then it struck him, and he asked, “The Mother told you that? She’s on world, not with your cousin? Or on her ship?”

“Yes. I spoke with her yesterday afternoon. She should be with us through the Children’s return, at least. She is often here to greet them.”

“I’m sorry I never got to meet her,” Kevmo said, hoping for more information.

“It is strange,” Marda admitted. “But the Force must have kept her away from you for its own reasons.”

Kevmo just bet it had. Master Zallah and he had talked that out, too, and were pretty sure the Mother had to be someone they’d recognize or could easily sense something about. Why else avoid them? But if she was in the commune and the Children were due back this afternoon...maybe they should make their move tonight. He wished he could warn Marda. No matter what the Path was involved

in, Marda was a true believer. She'd never willingly participate in smuggling, surely.

Unless...she believed it was what the Force wanted. If someone she had faith in convinced her. Kevmo knew this Mother could do it, so he couldn't say anything. Only hope Marda remained out of the crossfire.

The thought made him feel terrible, and he took her hand. "I—thank you, too, Marda. I have liked challenging you." He tacked on his best grin. "I hope we get to do it again someday soon—on Jedha, maybe."

"Yes," Marda gushed. Her gaze flicked away and then back, and she tilted her head shyly. "And...I would also like to kiss you again."

Kevmo sucked in a too-fast breath.

Marda laughed. It lit her up until she was so beautiful, Kevmo wanted to give her anything—everything—she wanted.

Putting her hand on his chest, she leaned closer. Kevmo cupped her elbows again and gently held her back. Marda blinked, surprised but he hoped not offended. Kevmo said, "I can't. It isn't something we do."

"Kissing?" Marda lifted her brow. "Jedi don't...kiss?"

It did sound stupid when she put it that way. He let go of her, grasping at air as he tried to explain. "Relationships like that, or any, really...they're distractions. We don't want to be bound to anything but the Force, and the Temple."

Marda hummed thoughtfully. "That's so sad," she murmured.

"Sad?"

"The Force is life, and life is all about relationships and creation. Don't you have family, or home?"

"But if we attach ourselves to one thing over others, that doesn't leave us room for focusing on justice and light, or to devote ourselves entirely to the Force. We do have relationships. They just must be..." Kevmo struggled to remember anything directly from a lesson he could tell her.

"Secondary?"

"If even. Careful, I suppose. Part of our service to the Force."

Marda nodded. "You'll never have children?"

"Marda." Kevmo laughed nervously. "That sounds like something a grandsire would say."

With a grin, she reached up and pinched his cheek. "That you're too handsome not to pass it on?"

He leaned a little into her touch and felt his smile soften. He liked her so much.

Marda flattened her hand to his cheek. "Friends, then?"

"Yes," he said, a little too ferociously. Her eyes widened. He ached to beg her to promise she'd still want to be his friend the next day. After she found out the truth they were sure to reveal about the Mother and her cult.

She nodded decisively and let her hand fall away. "Farewell, Kevmo Zink."

"Until we meet again, Marda Ro." His throat was thick with everything else he wanted to say.

Marda turned to leave, but before she vanished into the boarding house, she turned and bared her teeth playfully at him—it was so unexpected, so tempting, he froze. She said, "Someday, on Jedha, I'm going to convince you I'm right about the Force, and you'll be able to shed all that. Fall in love. Make babies." Her lips quirked up on one side.

"My hypothetical grandsire will love you for it," Kevmo teased back.

"I'll be their favorite then," she said, and left.

Kevmo looked forward to her trying.

Later, he hid in the shadows of the flood-damaged port office. Zallah had permission from the sheriff to access the beacon and docking data when the Path ship arrived. The ship had just hit orbit, and its pilot was in the process of coding in for access. Zallah was hoping to back trace their signals and get into the ship's navicomputer to access their flight plans—Kevmo would slip behind the ship after they'd unloaded and infiltrate it for information and evidence. Between the two of them, they should definitely find out

whatever false names the captain had registered, and they hoped the real names, too.

It didn't take long for the run-down pleasure yacht to break the atmosphere. It was the same ship they'd seen a few days earlier, but Kevmo had to admit he'd not been expecting this to be the Children's ship. The registry was lovingly forged, but good enough for Sheriff Jinx—she didn't seem to worry about smugglers, and Zallah suspected it wasn't because she was on the take, rather that smuggling was one of the only avenues for any goods or credits to reach Ferdan at all. The Outer Rim was just like that sometimes. Jinx had said she didn't love the Path, but they'd done their part in sharing the burden of all the refugees recently and certainly put what little credits they had right where their mouth was.

Of course Kevmo and Master Zallah were pretty sure the Mother was bringing in a lot more goods and credits to the Path than anybody knew about.

Kevmo glanced around to catch Zallah's eye, and she nodded at him, her hands on the comm controls. They really needed more droids on this planet, Kevmo thought as he slipped outside over the rubble and dashed the long way around the wide landing field. Before, the pleasure yacht had landed in a certain configuration, and he was guessing it would do the same again. He wanted to be far to the rear, avoid the reverse thrusters, but be on the opposite side of the door when it dropped.

The evening suns glared in his eyes, bloody orange, and he hoped it wasn't a sign. Kevmo drew on the Force to angle any attention away from him and crouched to wait as the yacht made landfall. For such a shoddy-looking ship, it was surprisingly quiet. The pilot had a light touch.

Then it was down, and Kevmo waited, keeping calm with his hand on his lightsaber.

The door slicked open, and the ramp extended. Almost immediately, someone stormed off—it was Marda's cousin. Kevmo couldn't imagine Marda stalking like that, or wearing such a tight, functional space uniform. There was something about the way she hurried that convinced Kevmo something was wrong.

Nobody followed Yana out of the ship right away.

The Evereni walked hard toward the rear gate of the landing field—the way that avoided town but could circle around to the Path commune.

Kevmo held his breath for a long moment. Where were the others?

But the yacht shut down all power then, except a gentle hum.

Was nobody else coming out? This was really bad. At least two others had left with them. Had they been left behind? Killed?

Unfortunately, a death might work in his and Master Zallah's favor by providing a distraction for the Path while they infiltrated.

Kevmo gathered himself with a hope that nobody Marda cared about was hurt, then he quickly made his way to the entry ramp. It remained lowered, despite the ship having powered down. Probably somebody was still on board, then. He'd have to be careful.

Centering himself, he welcomed the Force past all his boundaries and let himself be flooded with its warmth. With a hand on his lightsaber, he ducked around to hop onto the ramp.

Only to dive back into hiding under the hull as another person plodded out, grumbling into a comlink. A human in a threadbare orange coverall, with a round face and big hands...He looked familiar.

“—supposed to do? These Evereni are ruthless. If I'd left her there and she'd survived, that would be it for us—” he said urgently. He paused at the base of the ramp and slammed the side of his fist into the control to close it. The hiss and squeal of the hydraulics overwhelmed whatever answer he got from the comlink.

But the pause was enough for Kevmo to recognize him.

Just that morning, they'd received updated information on the who's who of wanted smugglers, felons, and thieves in the nearby sectors, sent by a Republic official called Yarli Yren. The same one who'd been on Dalna their first night at Lady Jara's boarding house—the small, dark-skinned human with a worn-out Pathfinder insignia. They'd totally ignored Kevmo but apparently had spoken briefly with Master Zallah and given her a datacard with a wanted list. Then they'd been called away for an investigation just before the flood.

The man stomping away from the pleasure yacht was featured heavily on the list: Sunshine Dobbs, wanted for reckless flying, smuggling, abandonment, a redacted crime, and potentially the murder of Alonso San Tekka, another Republic official with a Pathfinder team.

Oh, poodoo, Kevmo thought, staring as the prospector disappeared toward town.

When he burst into the docking office, he felt a little wild still. Master Zallah looked right at him. She was grim, her hand on her lightsaber. “Not enough people came out of that ship.”

Kevmo wanted to grimace, but he kept himself solid and simply said, “I think it belongs to Sunshine Dobbs. That was him, following Yana.”

Zallah said, “We’re going in tonight.”



TWENTY-FIVE

Marda was so anxious to speak with Yana as soon as the Children returned to Dalna, she found herself haunting the commune gate. The last time she'd seen her cousin, Yana had dismissed Marda, dismissed the Path itself, and said the Force didn't care about a small group of outcasts. She'd implored Marda to think for herself.

Well, Marda had. She knew Yana was right that the Force did not concern itself particularly with the Path of the Open Hand. It did not think they were special. The Force didn't work like that. But what Marda realized Yana didn't understand was that the Force was too big for such small questions. The Force cared not like a thinking being, not like a god. But the Force cared the way life itself cared. The Path didn't matter more than the Jedi, or more than refugees or smugglers or lompop or flutterbugs. The Path mattered the same. Everything had its place in the vast, incredible Force galaxy. The greatest thing they could do—that the Path could do—was promote the will of the Force. Work to share the burden of life. That was why it didn't matter if Marda—or Yana—understood why the Force had chosen the Mother. It had. The Mother saw its will more clearly than others, shared a natural harmony and clarity with it.

Marda needed to work harder for such clarity. She needed to be an open hand, to uncurl her instincts until she was capable of harmony. Most people did. She thought it probably came harder to Evereni than most, to be an open hand.

If she could only explain this to Yana, maybe Yana would stay with her, at least long enough for Marda to win her place as a speaker for

the Path. To prove she was capable, ready, and open. Get permission to go to Jedha, to lead. When the *Gaze Electric* soared through the Outer Rim, Marda would be a home for the Path. Or if Yana would not wait, Marda would fight to keep Yana at her side, follow her and drag her with her on the Path, too, because abandoning her cousin could never be the will of the Force.

But the moment she saw Yana storming up the road toward the commune gate, Marda's chest tightened with dread.

Yana walked with a cold grace Marda had never seen before, her focus internal, her mouth in a hard line. And she was alone.

"Yana," Marda said as she stepped into her cousin's way.

Yana snarled and jerked into an attack motion. Marda flinched. Yana stopped, hands flexed so her sharp nails were like claws.

Taking her cousin's shoulders gently, Marda shook her once. Yana blinked. She said nothing, but it was obvious she had returned to herself by the great shudder of her whole body.

As Marda studied her, she saw dark green splatters of Nautolan blood—she could smell it, too—under Yana's nails. In her hairline. There was a yellow tinge to Yana's gray skin around her eyes, and her clothing was filthy. Ragged. "Yana," she said again, her voice soft with fear.

"Marda," Yana said. The name sounded dragged out of ice, cracking and ancient. Yana looked into Marda's eyes. Her lip curled. She said, "Your *Mother* killed Kor."

Every single word that spat from Yana's mouth hit Marda like blaster fire. She reeled, her fingers digging into Yana's shoulders. Those words were impossible. Every last one.

"Yes, Marda," Yana said, and tore free.

Marda cried out and clutched at Yana's arm. She caught her and pulled. "Stop," she gasped. "Wait."

Yana did.

Shaking, Marda held tight to her cousin's forearm. "Explain. Kor—she can't be...but—"

"She is dead," Yana said calmly.

“The Mother has been here on Dalna the whole time. She couldn’t have—”

“Of course that’s what you care about,” Yana said bitterly.

That brought Marda up short. She paused. Her pulse pounded in her skull, but it felt...crisp. Clarifying. She narrowed her attention on Yana. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Kor was...important. Family. You loved her.”

Yana nodded once, very slowly.

“Did you bring her back?” Marda murmured.

“No. She was...” Yana jerked free of Marda’s grip. It caused Marda’s nails to slash her sleeve, into her flesh.

Marda glanced at her cousin’s blood on her hand and did not wipe it away. “What happened?”

“The mission failed. In every way,” Yana said. Her frown was venomous again.

“How is that possible? The Mother’s visions—”

Yana cursed viciously. She whirled. “You’re so naive! The Mother sent us there and betrayed us. She wanted us gone. I don’t know why. She couldn’t control us anymore, I was leaving, Treze was—was going to be a father. Kor loved the Mother, so I guess she was just necessary collateral damage.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Marda insisted. “The Force—”

“The Force doesn’t care, and the Mother doesn’t, either. Maybe she does have Force visions—maybe she saw something that changed her plans. I don’t know. And I don’t care, because whether or not her visions are real, whether it’s all a *lie*, Kor is just as dead.”

“Yana,” Marda whispered.

“I’m going to kill her.”

Suddenly, Marda threw her arms around her cousin. She held her as tightly as she could. “Stop, Yana. Don’t say that.”

Yana was stiff in her arms. “I only say what I mean.”

“I know.” Marda refused to loosen her grip. She couldn’t give Yana a second to free herself, to go through with her promise. Marda trusted Yana to do exactly what she said. But it couldn’t happen—not in such horrible grief. Not...It would ruin so many things. “Please,

Yana,” she whispered into Yana’s ear. She could smell sweat and blood in her cousin’s hair. It broke her heart knowing it was Kor’s blood. That it could have been Yana who’d died. Violence wasn’t supposed to come for the Path. Not like this. Something went wrong, but it couldn’t have been the Mother’s fault.

“Please, what?” Yana hissed.

Marda held her tighter. “Let me take you inside, clean you up. Feed you. You’re shaking. You can tell me, and I’ll listen.”

For a moment there was silence. Then, slowly, Yana lifted her arms and hugged Marda back, but gently. Limp, as if she couldn’t bear anything more. “Fine,” Yana said dully. “She knows I made it back already anyway. I’m sure that traitor told her.”

It was enough. Marda kissed her cheek and pulled back.

The suns were low, casting directly into their eyes. Marda took Yana’s hand and led her around to the south instead of heading into the commune. She took her toward the river, briefly considered dragging Yana there to trip her and dunk her the way Yana had done to Marda when the eggs had hatched.

Marda kept her thoughts still. She held Yana’s slack hand and said nothing. Thought nothing. There would be too much if she let herself begin. She continued pulling her along, taking a circuitous route to the living area, one that would avoid the other members of the Path and questions that would fracture Yana’s quiet fury into something more violent.

In Marda’s cell, she sat Yana on the bed. “I’m going to run you a bath.”

Yana nodded.

Working quickly, Marda darted to the shared facilities at the end of the living cells and gathered soap and a towel and extra robes. She dumped them beside the tub and returned to her cell, anxious Yana might not remain.

But she had. Relief brought tears to her eyes, and Marda blinked them away fast before Yana could see. If she began to cry, Marda wouldn’t stop. She’d think about Kor, and the Herald and poor Opari. It had been two years since they’d had a Path funeral. Longer since it had been for someone so young.

Marda clicked her teeth and stood Yana up. She walked her to the bathing room, thankful it was too early in the evening for most of the Path to have finished working for the day. She stripped Yana and nearly shoved her into the tub. Yana took soap and began digging under her nails. Marda used a dipper to pour water over her hair and washed it.

Once she'd rinsed and oiled Yana's short dark hair, she carefully combed it out with her fingers, her nails. She wanted to show Yana the weapons they'd been born with could nurture, too. There had to be cultivation somewhere in their people's long history.

"It's fine, Marda," Yana said. Her voice was low and dark. But she sounded exhausted.

"Get dressed. I'll bring some food to my cell."

Yana twisted her neck to meet Marda's gaze. She was expressionless. But after a moment she nodded once.

Marda left her and hurried to fetch a small meal for them to share. She spread it out on the bed in her cell, pushing most of it toward Yana.

Yana took a dark gnostra cracker. She broke off the corner and put it in her mouth, didn't chew for a moment, then crushed the rest of the cracker in her fist. "The Mother sent us to Thelj to steal a Force artifact from the Graf compound. It was a trap. They knew who we were, and they killed Treze and Kor. The Mother had to know—that's why she sent Sunshine with us this time. So she didn't lose a shuttle along with all her Children. This is what she wanted."

Marda couldn't eat, either. She tasted sweet bile at the back of her tongue. Who was Sunshine?

"And why now? Why betray us now? Because I was leaving? Because...Treze has a girlfriend? We're too close?" Yana glared at the floor, as if it had offended her. "Because we were going to see through her sooner or later. She needs to start over. Clear a path for new Children—like you, maybe. People who won't ask too many questions."

"You aren't making sense, Yana."

Yana's eyes flashed. "The Mother hasn't been working for the Force. She's a lying grifter, using us...using the Path. That's the only

explanation. Nothing the Mother does is for the Force, only for herself.”

“The Force chose her.”

Yana laughed—it sounded tinged with hysteria. Marda had never heard such a strain in her cousin’s voice before. “Then the Force is just as corrupt as she is,” Yana managed.

“No.” Marda surged over the food to grab Yana’s wrists.

“Yes!”

They both breathed hard in the silence after the outburst.

Marda said, “I know we aren’t special. I know that what you said before, about the Force not caring about outcasts like us, is true. But the Force is...it’s...real, and it’s a power for life. I believe that, Yana. I know it’s true the way I know Dalna will keep turning until someday those volcanoes erupt and destroy all this. And that will lead to life somewhere, too. The Force is too big, too complicated for us to understand how it works, or why it works. But it does work.”

“Oh, Marda,” Yana murmured.

“I don’t know why this all happened. But it wasn’t the Force.”

“Fine. It was the Mother.”

Marda couldn’t help her little growl of frustration. “You can’t kill her for this wild speculation!”

“It isn’t speculation. That prospector Sunshine essentially confirmed it. The only reason he isn’t dead is because I can’t fly. But he’s dying right after I gut the Mother.”

“She deserves the chance to hear your accusations, at least.”

“Oh, I intend to give her that opportunity,” Yana said very coldly.

It made Marda feel just as cold. “Yana. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I thought you believed in the Mother,” Yana sneered. “How can you be worried about me if your magnanimous, beloved Mother is so good?”

Marda stared at her cousin. She didn’t have a good answer for that. Instead she offered, “You should speak to the Herald and Opari. Tell them. They deserve to hear about their daughter from someone who loved her.”

Yana's face pinched. She looked away.

"Don't you think Kor would want that?"

Yana hissed in displeasure.

"Kor believed in the Open Hand. She loved the Path."

"It doesn't matter what she believed, or what she loved! She's dead."

To Marda's shock, Yana had tears in her eyes. They spilled over, and Yana wiped them furiously away. "Marda. I have to ask." Yana turned those furious eyes on her. "Will you go with me? When I leave?"

Marda's mouth went dry. Her lips parted.

"After I...speak to the Herald, and the *Mother*"—she spat the word—"I am leaving. This place is awful, and it's going to get worse. Come with me."

Marda said, "Yes."

Her cousin reared back in surprise. "You will?"

"I will." Righteousness flooded Marda. "I will. You're wrong about the Force and the Mother, but I'll go with you. With open hands."

"We'll see," Yana muttered. She picked up another cracker and stuffed it in her mouth. "I don't know how we'll get off planet, though," she said through her food.

"The Jedi will take us."

Yana laughed. "You're crazy, Marda. The Jedi are here to get back what the Mother stole, what I stole. They won't help me."

"They'll help *me*," Marda said. She smiled, and it was warm. She was right about this. Doing the right thing. "I trust Kevmo."

The dark amusement fell off Yana's expression. She contemplated Marda, who did her best to keep her face lifted, not to squirm. Yana said, "We can't trust anybody. If you retain nothing else, let it be that. We can't trust anybody."

Marda reached for Yana's hands and turned them over, palms up. "We can trust the Force."



TWENTY-SIX

Yana fled Marda's cell as soon as her cousin would let her. Marda was too soft, too kind. She didn't have the stomach to do what needed to be done.

But Yana did.

Yana strode through the compound, ignoring the greetings called out by the other members of the Path. She had no attention for them. Her rage might not be as hot as it had been when they landed, but her grief still sat heavy in her middle. Kor deserved a better death, an end that was far in the future, surrounded by people who loved her. Instead she had bled out on the ice of a planet far from her mother and father. It was a tragic end.

Yana would make sure that the Mother's death was equally terrible.

When Yana arrived at the Mother's cottage, there was no one guarding the way. That was strange, and while Yana made note of it, she didn't slow her gait in the least. She continued on her route, each step a call to arms, her hands clenched into fists. The Mother was soft and human, and Yana was Evereni. There was nothing for Yana to fear.

But as she made her way through the tunnels, Yana could tell that there was something amiss. She couldn't quite say what it was; it was more a feeling than anything else. Outside of the Mother's listening room, Yana heard low voices, and when she entered the room, it was to find Jedi.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” Yana said, the first words that leapt to mind. Marda’s Padawan rounded on her with wide eyes, but his master was not so surprised to see her.

“How many artifacts have you purloined beyond the Rod of Seasons?” she said, holding up the glowing purple rod that Yana, Kor, and Treze had taken from the Hynestian Royal Treasury. Just the sight of the artifact made tears prickle Yana’s eyes. It seemed like a lifetime before that they had so boldly walked into the treasury under the guise of teaching the way of the Path and pocketed the rod. It seemed amazing that it had taken everyone so long to figure out they had been the ones to steal the artifact. She crossed her arms and snorted to hide her anguish.

“Kick rocks, Jedi,” Yana said, her voice a near snarl. “You’re out of your depth. You have no reason to be here, and last time I checked, trespassing is illegal even if you have the ability to manipulate the Force.”

“Yana is correct,” came a soft voice behind Yana. She turned. The Mother stood behind her in the entryway, a hand settled on the strange gem that now rested in a nest of silk on a plinth. The Herald, Jukkyuk, and Qwerb stood on either side. Sunshine slouched a little bit behind them, most likely the reason they’d been absent when she’d come through the entrance. Sunshine had beat her to the caverns, but only because she’d been waylaid by Marda. Not that it mattered. He was a dead man walking.

Either way, Yana stepped to the side. She might not like the Mother and might even want her dead, but she was savvy enough to realize the Jedi were the bigger threat.

“We liberated these artifacts from those who would utilize the Force for their own gains,” the Mother said, her voice calm. “And I would thank you to place that back where you found it and take your leave.”

“You must be the Mother,” said Marda’s Padawan. Kevmo, Marda had just said.

“I am,” the Mother said with one of her calming smiles. Yana was delighted to see that the Jedi seemed completely unaffected. “And I suggest you take your leave before you regret your abuse of the

Force. I will even be so magnanimous as to let you have the Rod of Seasons, since you seem to think it stolen rather than liberated. We have no desire to quarrel with you, Jedi, even though your abuses of the Force will one day cause a reckoning.”

The Soikan smiled humorlessly. “Oh, we are taking all the artifacts hidden down here. And you, as well.”

The Mother tilted her head, her expression fearless. She stroked the jewel on its plinth and hefted it up in both hands. She sighed. “No.”

What came next seemed to happen all at once. The Jedi powered up their lightsabers as the Herald and his retainers produced blasters from under their robes. The first few shots ricocheted off the Jedi’s lightsabers, the bolts flying wildly around the cavern. Yana threw herself to the ground beside one of the shelves, trying to keep from being a casualty in a fight she did not want to be part of.

The Jedi were completely unfazed by the blasters, their lightsabers more than an adequate defense. They looked almost bored, and Yana marveled that the Jedi could be so calm when they were being shot at. But then the Soikan Jedi lowered her saber and held out her hand, using the Force to pull the blaster from the Herald and crumple the device into nothing more than metal and diodes. She reached for the second blaster and the third while her Padawan deflected every single blaster bolt sent in her direction.

It would’ve been awe-inspiring if it wasn’t for the scream that ripped out of the Mother, an animalistic sound of pain that caused everyone to hesitate.

In the Mother’s hands, her jewel pulsed, the purple glow dimming and brightening in a rhythm like a heartbeat. Her hands became spotted with an odd gray scale, and she dropped the jewel. It hit the ground with a loud crack and burst open, revealing a bright blue squirming creature, wet and covered in fluid.

The elder Jedi frowned. “What in the name of—” She didn’t get a chance to finish. The creature—it was little more than a blob of iridescent blue flesh, really—flung itself at her. There were meters separating the Mother and the Jedi, and yet the creature closed the

distance in the blink of an eye. The thing clung to the Soikan's arm, and the Jedi drew back in revulsion.

"What is that?" Marda's Padawan asked, but his master said nothing. She only let out a high keening sound of pain and terror, and Yana watched as the strange gray scale extended over her body. It spread slowly at first before increasing its pace. Yana thought of the time she and Kor had watched a flutterbug spin its cocoon, how long it took the creature to change. This took less than a fraction of the time. The woman's pale silvery skin was replaced with something akin to the stone that made up the walls of the caverns, and the sounds of fear, revulsion, and pain that came from her cut through Yana like a vibroblade.

What was that thing? Had the Mother known she was incubating such a creature?

"Zallah!" Kevmo cried as his master fell to her knees, a choked sobbing the only sound coming from her. He started to reach out but stopped, eyes huge. His lightsaber shook, and the blade vanished. Everyone had frozen in a mixture of awe and horror as the Jedi was changed by the creature. Yana had never seen something so horrifying, and she had just watched her girlfriend die a handful of hours before. The Jedi's suffering made Kor's end seem peaceful.

Yana hissed as the Jedi calcified, clicking her teeth in distress. After a few heartbeats the Jedi was gone, a crumbling stone statue in her place. The creature had changed her entirely, leaving behind a disintegrating pile of despair where a woman had stood only moments before.

"The Force has spoken," the Mother said, her voice whispery and strange. The Wookiee Jukkyuk came to help her stand while Sunshine hovered nearby, sweating profusely.

"What did you do?" Marda's Padawan screamed. But then the creature was slithering toward him, and he was holding his hands out in terror as the glowing blue glob—larger already—reached a single tendril toward him. "No, no! Please," the boy sobbed. He thrust out both hands as if pushing, using the Force. It did not even slow the creature down.

The creature wrapped the tendril around an ankle in what looked like a caress, and the Padawan kicked it away, his eyes wild. For a moment Yana thought the fight would resume, but the Padawan was consumed by fear, jerky and irrational.

“No. No. I can’t be here,” he said before running out of the chamber, pushing past Sunshine as he headed deeper into the caves.

The Herald’s retainers made to follow him, but the Mother waved them off. Her cowl slipped back a little, revealing gray streaks in her dark hair. Had those been there before? Yana wasn’t sure.

Yana blinked and stood, walking over to claim the Rod of Seasons. Her mind was all over the place trying to make sense of what she had just seen. The Mother’s jewel hadn’t been a jewel at all, but an egg of some kind. And now the creature was changing from a blobby glowing blue shape to something that vaguely resembled a tooka cat: four legs, a stubby kind of tail, and wide dark eyes that seemed too large in an iridescent blue face. The creature glowed in the dimness of the cavern, and when it beheld Yana, she had a curious feeling, like the creature was seeing through her to the most fundamental parts of her being.

She didn’t like it.

Jukkyuk and Qwerb were seeing to the Mother, who was putting on quite the show of being exhausted. “I knew the Force would protect us,” she said over and over again. “We are the stewards of the Force, and the Force will be free!” Her calming smile was once more securely in place, even if the edges of her mouth were bracketed with lines of pain and exhaustion. Yana could only curse herself for her hesitation. She had missed her chance to kill the woman. Her grief curdled her stomach, and she watched as the woman bent over to scoop up the strange Jedi-killing creature.

“Take the Mother to her meditation chamber,” the Herald said. His retainers helped her walk, her gait uneven, the blue creature cradled in her arms. Would the strange creature protect the Mother from any threat? Yana’s eyes fell on the stone edifice that had once been the Jedi. Yana had the feeling that it would, especially when the Mother began to coo at it like it was a beloved child.

“The Force has given us a powerful gift indeed,” the Herald said, a smile playing around his lips as he watched the Mother go. “This is a new day for the Path of the Open Hand.”

“Kor is dead,” Yana said, waiting for her words to land. “Treze, as well.”

The Herald rounded on her, his joy melting into horror. “I...What happened? Did you secure the artifact?”

Yana clenched her fist around the Rod of Seasons. “No. And we need to talk.”



TWENTY-SEVEN

Kevmo fled the cavern in a daze, agony stripping his senses and making him feral. Everything hurt, and his heart pounded with panic as he kept glancing over his shoulder, fearful the creature would follow. Ringing, scathing *fear* was the only sensation pouring through him.

Stumbling through the cave system, he tried to recall the markers and what they meant. But terror clouded his mind, and he ran down the tunnels heedlessly.

The more he ran, the worse he felt. There was some part of him that thought the creature's effects should be fading. But they weren't. For a moment Kevmo remembered his first day at the Temple on Coruscant as a youngling. He'd been little more than three or four, nearly a baby, and he'd been so afraid. And then a human Jedi had smiled and reached out to him with the Force, smoothing away the fear and showing him how to reach for the Force, as well, how to let that all-encompassing energy steady him and guide him.

Kevmo reached for the Force now and found...nothing. The well of calm and focus that was usually just a thought away was gone, lost. He tried again—still nothing! That warm, ever-loving bright Force he'd always known was just *gone*.

That was when Kevmo fell.

He stumbled over nothing and hit the ground hard. For a moment he lay there on the damp stone, and he idly wondered what his master would think of this weakness. It was unbecoming of a Jedi.

That was when he remembered.

Zallah! The memory of her keening fear, of the panic writ large across her features, broke through a little of Kevmo's dread and despair. He had to tell someone about the creature, about the Mother and her monster.

He got up. And he began to walk. There, the orange marking meant the sun. An exit. Light.

The farther he went, the stiffer he felt. His jaw locked first, teeth gritted tight, and he moaned. Something was happening to him. Something bad. He couldn't feel the Force, and his body felt brittle and old, the joints creaky and unfamiliar. But still he pulled himself along, farther down the passageway.

He had to tell someone. The Order had to know about the threat that awaited them on Dalna. Any creature that could so easily dispatch a Jedi was a threat to the galaxy as a whole.

So Kevmo kept walking, pulling himself along the wall. Someone would help him.

There had to be someone.

And they would warn the Jedi that terror lived on Dalna.



TWENTY-EIGHT

Marda packed quickly and efficiently. She had little and needed less. A change of underclothes, a thicker outer robe, a handful of pebbles some of her Littles had given her from an afternoon along the river the previous summer. Her crystal file for her nails and teeth. The small pot of brikal-shell blue. Everything else in her cell was either communal or nothing she truly needed. The flower petals would fade too fast to survive even the shortest galactic journey.

Though loath to admit it, Marda was excited.

The timing was poor, the reasons awful, but she was leaving Dalna for the stars.

Not the Path. She would never leave the Path. But the Path was not Dalna; it was a community of people with shared understanding of the Force, and none of that required Marda to be on the planet.

Marda clicked her teeth in slight chagrin. She knew she was convincing herself. But that didn't make any of it less true. This was what the Force needed from her, because this was what her cousin needed. Yana was in pain, and Marda could do something about it. So she must. It would be a service to the Mother, to take Yana away before she could do something irreversible.

And Marda had felt this way already, before the past two weeks when so much had changed. She'd longed to travel for the Path, with the Path. That had always been behind her desperation to join the Children. Maybe the Mother consistently denied her that because the Force wanted to protect Marda from the disaster that had befallen Kor

and the others. Wanted to keep her on Dalna for the Jedi, for the Kessarine, for the Littles, until she was ready for her real purpose, to go to Jedha with Yana.

For the final time—she knew in her gut she'd never be in this cell again—Marda opened the small jar of brikal-shell blue and dipped in her three fingers. She painted fresh lines of the Force across her forehead in smooth, cool waves. She looked into her own big black eyes, tinged brassy by the copper of the old mirror. This was it.

Marda folded a small blanket into a sling with her scant belongings inside, put it over her shoulder, and slipped her feet into her boots. Then she left the cell in which she'd lived for most of her life.

The suns had just set, leaving only a rim of vivid violet edging the western volcanoes. Stars glittered overhead, and around her glowed a few of the flutterbugs that had emerged in the nights since the flood.

The main commune hummed with repaired lights, and Marda decided not to make her way toward the community garden or the barn. There were too many to say goodbye to them all. Besides, she'd see them when the *Gaze Electric* was finished and all the Path joined her in the stars.

But Marda had to see Ferize and her family.

Nobody noticed Marda as she keyed in her code for entrance to the caverns. The people she passed moved sedately as usual, without any urgency of tragedy. Whatever Yana had done when they parted had not involved making wild public accusations, and the news of what befell the Children on Thelj had clearly not spread. Marda hoped Yana remained with the Herald and his wife and the three could share these initial hours of grief before Yana confronted the Mother.

Regardless, without gossip turning the peaceful night into an emergency, Marda had time to visit the Kessarine.

The nesting chamber had been fully repaired, though the corner where Er Dal and the hatchling had nearly drowned was cracked in two places and the sun opal deposits that used to glow there had fallen dark from changed underground strata. Because of that, Fel Ix

had erected a string of lights near that corner. They had fresh blankets and a thick nest of pillows.

Marda smiled to see all five of the babies squirming in the blankets for tummy time, with all three of their parents crouched near. Ferize dangled a string of beads that blinked in musical patterns in front of the largest of the babies, and Er Dal had one long finger in the furred tail of another as the baby gurgled happily. Fel Ix was knitting something fuzzy and keeping a tender eye on his whole family.

“Marda,” Fel Ix greeted in his gravelly voice. His cheek frills flicked happily.

“Hello,” she said. The word trembled with Marda’s effort to rein in her emotions. She took a deep breath, then let her sling slide off her shoulder.

“Marda?” Ferize repeated, her cheek frills drooping. “What is wrong?”

Marda walked to the blanket nest and knelt. She opened her mouth, stopped, and then lowered her eyes. She reached for the nearest baby and picked him up, bringing his squirming little body to her chest. Bowing her face over the baby, she breathed in the soothing smell of soft scales and damp frills and spit-up.

When she looked up again, it was to see the three Kessarine adults watching her solemnly. She cradled the baby. “I came to say goodbye. Yana...I am leaving with Yana.”

“You...” Ferize shook her head. Her partners both reached out until everybody was touching at least one baby, as if in mutual comfort.

“I’m not leaving the Path,” Marda said quickly. “Just going offworld for a bit. You’ll barely miss me.”

The three Kessarine studied her sadly.

Marda smiled, but it was sad, too. “Yana must go. Something... There was an accident on their trip. Kor and the Mikkian boy, Treze? They died.” She paused at their hissed surprise. None of them had known Treze well, but Kor had been kind and strong and always found time to share the Path. Marda nodded, her own thin grief settling in her lungs. “Yana needs to go. I have to take her.”

“We understand,” Ferize said. “Family.”

“You’re my family, too,” Marda said firmly.

Fel Ix set aside his knitting and stood, coming around the edge of the nest to kneel at Marda’s side. “We know.” He put a cool hand on her cheek.

Marda took such comfort in the touch. She closed her eyes. It was not her place to tell them what Yana had said about the Mother, about using the Children, lying about the Force. It would only upset them and might not relieve her at all. If she could tell Elder Aris Ade, who had suggested Marda find a way to give back to the Force, the Elder might be able to talk it through with Marda. But she couldn’t put that weight on the Kessarine. It was too sharp and sour even to think on for long.

“You’ll be on the Gaze, won’t you?” she murmured, looking first at Fel Ix, then at Er Dal and Ferize. “The babies will be able to travel by the time it’s ready?”

“Of course,” Ferize said. “We could go now, if necessary. Our hatchlings are hardy, as are we all.”

“Especially,” added Er Dal, “when we walk the Path with the Force.”

In the low cavern lights, Marda felt a little bit better. It was warm there, in the nesting cell, with the Kessarine’s musty clean scent so pervasive.

As if sensing Marda’s state of mind, Ferize got up and dug into their small trunk for a flask. She poured it into the tin kettle that rested always on the hot plate, then flipped the temperature higher. “Sweet and spirits for us all,” she said.

Marda pulled reluctantly away from Fel Ix’s touch. “I can stay for one cup. Then I need to find Yana. I don’t like to leave her for long.”

Putting the baby into her lap, Marda caressed the soft lashes of his cheek furl, making squishy faces at him to see if he would smile. He did, just a little twist of his mouth. Marda laughed, and when the baby saw her teeth, he squirmed in what seemed like joy.

This was so good. Marda didn’t want to leave them. She bent over and kissed the baby’s nose.

When Ferize put a cup into her hand, the sweet smell soothed the sharpness of Marda's uncertainty. She breathed it in and sipped.

"Will you give this to the Herald?" Marda asked after they'd shared the drink. She pulled a small rolled-up letter from her robe. It was very brief, written carefully on a scrap of cloth because she didn't have any datapads to write something longer, or better. "I am not certain I'll see him."

Ferize took the letter. "We'll be sure he gets it."

Marda stared at Ferize. Unlike with her cell, she knew she would see Ferize again after this moment. She felt it, and the surety was comforting. It reminded her that she was making the best choice, to go with her cousin. To take herself and the Path to the stars as a—*a* vanguard before the *Gaze Electric*. Because she wasn't losing anything except safety and the everyday rhythms she'd grown to know and love. What mattered, she took with her.

Just as Marda began to smile brightly, a strange scraping sounded from one of the tunnels.

She turned toward it just as the Kessarine all tensed. Ferize was on her feet, to the wall, and facing the dark mouth of the tunnel from which the sound had come.

Both Er Dal and Fel IX were gathering the babies up in the blankets.

Marda stood.

The sound came again. She could not quite pinpoint what was off about it, but she was not surprised the Kessarine had reacted defensively instead of with curiosity.

The tunnel in question was marked with colors for the way to the Mother's chamber, several twists and turns and long dark corridors away.

Marda was breathless as she waited. She had no weapons but her nails and teeth. There shouldn't be anything too truly dangerous down there.

Sun opal filled the room with latent pink-orange light, but it shone only a few steps into the dark tunnel.

Marda stared into the darkness. There should be light, from whatever approached, from the tunnel lights auto-responding to motion.

Her skin tingled.

The scraping came again and again, nearer, and then she heard harsh gasping.

Someone was in pain. Marda darted forward, some instinct pushing her to the tunnel, and she caught Kevmo just as he stumbled into the light and fell forward. He was heavy, but she grasped at his shoulders. Her own knee hit the stone floor hard, jarring her body. She whimpered in pain and distress.

Kevmo shuddered, all his body weight against her. One of the Kessarine helped her lower Kevmo, but she didn't want to let go and cradled him against her as she knelt fully. He felt...stiff, like he couldn't move well.

The smell of blood and scorched hair filled her nose, and she wiped sweat from his brow.

"Kevmo," she whispered. "What happened? Where are you—" She held his head against her shoulder and slid her hand down his front, seeking injury.

His body was rigid but uninjured, it seemed—except for his clenched jaw, his painfully squeezed-shut eyes, the gleaming sweat at his hairline.

"Kevmo," she tried again, leaning in with her arms around him. "What can I do?"

His blue lips pulled back, but that only bared his blunt teeth in a grimace. He shuddered again, a full-body quake.

"Kevmo."

Crouched beside her, Ferize said, "My partners are taking the babies up and fetching help. Here is water."

"He can't...open his mouth," she said, trying not to sound as frantic as she felt. She pressed her hand to his cheek, thumb skimming his golden tattoos, and his eyes opened. His pupils were blasted wide, his sclera pink.

“I’m here,” Marda said, holding his feverish gaze. “It’s Marda. We’ll help you.”

Suddenly, his back bowed and he made a horrible sound through his teeth. Marda clung to him through the—whatever was happening. She pushed her forehead to his temple, holding him. “Kevmo,” she whispered again and again. “Kevmo.”

She smelled something on him she’d never smelled before: something chalky, astringent. “Kevmo,” she said in his ear. “Can you show me what hurts? What I can do?”

His hand came to her face, too hard to be a kind touch but not purposefully pushing her away. It was clumsy! His hand barely cupped her jaw, and it felt wrong. Marda grasped his hand. His skin had no give; he gripped her too hard. But Marda leaned in.

“Force...” he managed to say. “The...Force.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand. The Force...You...Kev, I don’t understand.”

Panic brought tears to her eyes.

Then his back bowed again and she saw, at his neck, something pale crawling up his skin like a growth of gray lichen up a tree. But she could see it spreading. Marda gasped and pulled back her hand, which had nearly touched it. “What is that?”

“M...” Kevmo shook all over, and she looked back at his urgent, pained eyes. Then she looked at his mouth. His lips pressed. “Mmm...” he said.

“I’m Marda. I’m here, Kevmo.” She kissed his cheek, kissed the corner of his mouth. “I’m not leaving.”

“Mmm,” he said again, and then, “*Mother.*”

Marda reeled back, but he was in her lap, leaning into her. She shook her head. “The Mother did this? That’s impossible! I don’t even know what this is. She doesn’t have the power to...whatever...this...”

Kevmo closed his eyes, grimaced awfully.

Marda grasped his face again. “No, stay. Kevmo, stay here. Help is coming.”

He didn’t move.

The chalk smell worsened. He seemed to weigh more and more against her leg and chest. For such a long moment, Marda stared at the gray spreading up his neck. She tugged at his collar, pulling back the edge of his robe. The gray flaked off under her nail, but there was only more gray beneath—as if his body had transformed to stone! It was cold, heavy, awful.

Kevmo was supposed to be only warm, laughing; he was—

With a shocked gasp Marda realized he wasn't breathing.

"No," she whispered. "No."

Marda squeezed her eyes closed and hugged him tight. This couldn't be happening.

She didn't know how to help. Leaning over, she put her mouth to his and pushed air against his teeth. She tried to pry them open, but his jaw was locked. She slapped his cheek. A hot tear fell. "Kevmo, breathe. Please. Ferize! Where are they? Where is help?"

No answer came but for a dry scaled hand on the back of her neck that felt too hot. But it was Marda who was too cold.

Kevmo didn't breathe again. She pressed herself against him, cheek to cheek, and dug her fingers under his jaw for a pulse, but his neck was stone.

The only sound was Marda's harsh panting. Then a distant voice, echoing from behind and above.

But it was too late.

Marda laid Kevmo down, struggling out from under him. She knelt at his shoulder. Staring. Shivering. He was dead.

Cold stone. There was no vibrant grin. No teasing. Not even residual warmth.

The gray growth crept onward, though, under her dull, horrified stare. It did not give up with his death but continued eating, or changing, or—or taking him away. The tips of his fingers were crumbling.

Marda wanted to dig her nails in and destroy it, tear this thing that had been her friend into rocky chunks.

But she did not.

She leaned back. As she shifted, she heard a click. There, under a fold of his cloak, was the lightsaber.

Marda took it. It glinted gold and rosy in the sun opal light. Bright, sunny against the gray of her palm.

Slowly, Marda pushed to her feet. She ignored Ferize. Ignored everyone coming into the nesting chamber. She walked to the tunnel from which Kevmo had arrived.

Inside her, something burned icy cold.

Marda held the lightsaber in both hands, and when she stepped into the darkness, she touched the button Kevmo had touched to ignite it.

A hum tingled up her wrists, and the lightsaber burst to life. Brilliant yellow, like a ray of sunlight. Like him.

Marda trembled, and in her hands the lightsaber did, too.

But it lit her way as she walked into the dark tunnel.



TWENTY-NINE

The Herald gaped as Yana spoke. She talked quickly, not sure if the Mother would suddenly appear and try to redirect the conversation, but the woman seemed to have retired for the moment. Sunshine had scampered after her.

“How do you know the Mother orchestrated the ambush on Thelj?” the Herald said. He hadn’t reacted at all the way Yana had thought he would when she told him his only child was dead, had bled out on a far-off frozen ocean. Instead, he’d demanded every single detail of the failed theft, his expression inscrutable.

“Sunshine all but verified it when I returned to the ship. He said he does what the Mother tells him. He called her *Elecia*.”

“Elecia,” the Herald sneered, standing a bit taller. Kor had once told Yana that his life before coming to Dalna and joining the Path had been one of violence, but the only evidence Yana had ever seen was the ugly scars of his ruined head tresses. The man had always seemed like the Mother’s simpering bootlicker. She was starting to think perhaps that had merely been a facade to hide the true Herald.

“We have to kill her now, before that creature gets any stronger,” Yana said. “Before more Jedi arrive.”

“Jedi? They are hardly an obstacle at this point.”

“Are you serious?” Yana exclaimed. “Marda’s Padawan just ran off back to Ferdan. We’re going to have the Order crawling over Dalna before sunset.”

“And if they do, we will show them the fury of the Force.” The Mother stood in the doorway to the listening room, her creature crouched at her feet. It had grown again since Yana had last seen it. It was nearly of a size with a charhound, and its rapid growth caused a frisson of fear to sing down Yana’s spine. There was something deeply unnatural about this creature.

“I don’t think one of your creatures can take on the entire Order. And the Jedi are the least of your worries. You killed Kor,” Yana said, advancing.

The Mother held her gaze level and gave a short nod. “I see your mission did not go well. It was a risky endeavor, and I do believe I pointed that out.”

“You lying, deceitful...” Yana strode toward the Mother with purposeful steps, but her forward progress was halted by the Herald, who blocked her passage.

“Move,” Yana snarled.

“This is not the time for personal vendettas,” the Herald said. “Yana is right. As incredible as this creature is that the Force has seen fit to bestow upon the Path, we cannot defend ourselves here on Dalna. It is time that we took to the *Gaze Electric*.”

Yana stumbled backward. “What?” Her head felt too light, and she wasn’t sure the Herald had actually just spoken. “Did you say that we should go to the *Gaze Electric*?”

“Yes. The ship is missing many of its planned flourishes, but it is spaceworthy. Taking to the stars will buy us some time. As you should know as an Evereni.”

Yana frowned, her rage giving way to confusion and fear. This wasn’t how this conversation was supposed to go. They were supposed to be united in their anger at the Mother and make her pay for Kor’s death. But the Herald seemed to have already forgiven the Mother for his daughter’s death, and Yana began to panic as the situation once more got away from her, just like back on Thelj.

The Herald, for his part, did not seem to notice.

“What is the meaning of all the yelling?” demanded Aris Ade as she and a few of the other Elders entered. “Mother, you know it is

almost time for the evening meditation.” The group froze when they saw the calcified Jedi, her visage frozen in pain and agony.

“Elders,” the Herald said with an open-handed bow. “Apologies for the distraction, but the Force has granted us a miracle today.”

“Yes, a miracle,” the Mother said with a tremulous smile. She still seemed unsteady, but she was definitely getting better by the moment, the more people entered the room. Was it a true recovery or just another part of her endless performance?

“This creature is called the Leveler,” the Mother said. “I saw it in a vision from the Force, but I did not know if it was a true vision or just my heart’s wish.” She stroked the flowing blue quadruped crouched next to her. The tendrils around its snout reached toward her, as though they were scenting the air. It was eerie.

The Elders murmured, but not one of them strode forward to stroke the creature or otherwise investigate it. Perhaps they, like Yana, felt a keen sense of unease in the company of the creature. Suddenly, she remembered how badly Kor had disliked that egg from the very beginning.

“One small creature cannot stop the many Force users in the galaxy,” said Aris Ade. “How will your Leveler stop them?”

“There are more,” came another voice. Sunshine cleared his throat, his hat in his hands. “Deep in Wild Space, on a planet unlike any other. These, uh, jewels, their—their eggs litter the landscape, and it would be no hardship to raise an army of Levelers to spread the love of the Path.”

Yana didn’t think anyone would actually listen to Sunshine, but when everyone around the room began to nod, she clenched her hands so hard she nearly cracked the Rod of Seasons. These fools couldn’t even see when they were being played.

The Herald cleared his throat. “We have other exciting news, friends. It is time for us to set out amongst the stars. We will begin our transition to the *Gaze Electric* immediately.”

“So soon?” said a wizened old human Yana didn’t recognize. She thought it was Old Waiden, but she had trouble telling many of the Elders apart. “Last we spoke, the ship had only traveled through

hyperspace a handful of times. And what of the droids commissioned for the ship? Have they been delivered already?”

“Yes. The *Gaze Electric* is for the most part complete, although it is not nearly so grand as our original designs. But the Force works in mysterious ways, and it may have been that the Mother was only partially correct in intuiting its will.”

The Herald did not give the Mother time to interject; he continued on smoothly: “The Leveler must have time to grow into its full strength, away from enemies who would rather continue to use the Force for their own personal gain. This creature is just a hatchling. We will give it time to mature, and when it is an adult, it will be a match for all the Jedi. Whether that takes a year or a hundred years is no matter to the Path. We will carry on.”

“The Force will be free,” the Mother said quickly, like she wanted to make sure she had the final word. “The Force will be free!”

Her voice echoed throughout the cavern, and the cry was repeated over and over again until Yana had to turn on her heel and leave.

She couldn't take it.

The Herald and the Mother were obviously locked in some kind of power struggle, one Yana had no interest in being a part of. She'd thought the Herald would be her ally, would share her rage and grief over Kor. But if he did, he had opted to follow his own ambitions instead, seeing the death of the Jedi and the discovery of the Leveler as an opportunity to grow his power, to finally eclipse the Mother in influence within the Path.

The two of them were welcome to each other. She just wanted as far away from the Path and the Leveler as she could get. Something about the creature made her anxious, like it was just waiting for a moment to take a bite out of her.

She'd gone only a few steps when there was a gasp. The room had fallen silent behind her, and as Yana turned she could see why. The creature had left the Mother's side and was following Yana like a lost child following an older sibling. The glowing blue creature sat before Yana and let out a low bellow that felt like a bell echoing through Yana's chest. It was more energy than actual sound, and for

a moment Yana wasn't sure what the thing wanted. But then she saw its face tendrils reaching toward the Rod of Seasons.

"The Leveler has chosen its champion," the Herald said, his deep voice startling Yana from her musings. Her gaze met his inky one, so like Kor's it made Yana want to weep, and he gave her a slight nod. This was her chance to deny it, to say the creature was merely attracted to the Rod of Seasons. But Yana put it behind her back, reaching out with her free hand to let the creature's face tendrils curl around her fingers. The rod grew warm in her hand, but it was nothing unbearable, and it was worth it for the expression on the Mother's face.

For a moment her calm, benevolent facade fractured and a cold, calculating rage was revealed. But just as quickly it was shuttered, and she was smiling benignly once more.

"I am humbled that this agent of the Force has chosen me," Yana said, her words slow and deliberate. "I will take this duty just as seriously as I did being one of the Mother's faithful Children."

"You have always completed your duties admirably, and now you will be the Leveler's champion," the Mother said before the Herald could speak. "What an incredible day for us all."

Yana tucked the rod away, her gaze finding the Herald's for a moment before she was surrounded by well-wishers, Elders congratulating her on being a great asset to the Force.

Yana barely heard them all. There was a plot afoot, and whatever the Herald was planning, she was now wholly a part of it.

She just hoped that meant she would eventually get to watch the Mother die.



THIRTY

Marda walked with a numb clarity through the underground tunnels. The lightsaber hummed before her. She felt it through the metal, in both her palms. Comforting. Bright. She understood why the Jedi liked this weapon.

Ahead, from the direction of the Mother's listening room, voices of excitement drifted toward Marda. Nothing like what she'd expected: fear, battle, distress. How could Kevmo have died in such a way, and there in the Mother's warmly lit room, people gathered as if to celebrate?

First Marda saw the Herald and several Elders surrounding Yana, who accepted their attention with obvious discomfort. Elder Aris Ade caught sight of Marda and lifted a hand in greeting with a smile. But Marda's gaze shot past her to the Mother, kneeling on a pillow near a strange creature that glowed blue and stared with knowing eyes at Yana.

When she entered, the golden glow of Kevmo's lightsaber was swallowed by the brighter lights of the room. Like an afterthought. It broke her heart. He had been alone in the tunnels, and now he was dead. Marda's lips trembled, and she wanted to call out to her cousin. She understood the quivering depths of that grief Yana had felt. She wanted to be comforted. She wanted...

On the floor of the cavern room, a dark gray statue in Jedi robes. Marda blinked.

The Jedi Knight's face was twisted in fear and agony. The tip of her nose had crumbled.

Marda approached. Her breath heaved, and the lightsaber in her hand slashed through the air as she lowered it. The tip gouged the rug with a smolder and hiss, and Marda thumbed it off. Still in a daze.

The Jedi Zallah Macri, Kevmo's master, was just as dead as her apprentice. Turned somehow to mineral. "What happened?" she said. Her voice was soft, but it carried through the new silence.

"Marda," Yana and the Herald said at the same time.

But Marda slid her gaze toward the Mother. The Mother's eyes were shut, her hands on her lap, palms up, as she sat on the floor pillow. Beside her, the creature's long neck waved, its eyes on Marda. Studying her before once again turning its attention to Yana.

"You have the Jedi's weapon," one of the Elders said.

"Did you stop him?" asked another.

"He's dead," Marda said to the Mother.

"Good," the Herald said, and Marda snapped her head around in shock. "Do you know if he had a communication device? A way to let others know before he succumbed?"

Marda ignored him and stepped toward the Mother. The Herald was to be obeyed; he understood the Path, but the Mother was who mattered. "What happened?" she asked again.

Elder Aris Ade said, "The Jedi attacked the Mother."

Old Waiden frowned. "Are you injured, Marda?"

The Herald began to speak, but the Mother finally opened her eyes. "Marda. This is the Leveler. It is what happened."

Marda knelt in front of the creature. It was a quadruped the size of a charhound, with delicate hooves, a tail, and a long neck. It emanated bluish energy, and something that felt like...wisdom. Marda folded her hands around the lightsaber. "It killed the Jedi."

"Yes. They abused the Force, and the Leveler returned balance. It is a pure agent of the Force."

Marda glanced sharply back at the crumbling body of Zallah Macri. "To stop their abuse of the Force from harming others," she

murmured. Awed, she carefully evened out her breathing. She closed her eyes, and tears she hadn't noticed spilled onto her cheeks.

She'd told Kevmo again and again he couldn't take from the Force. She'd told him. He hadn't listened, and now he was dead. This avatar of the Force had appeared to bring harmony again.

Marda's hand curled into a fist around the lightsaber. Why hadn't he listened? He'd been raised so wrongly. He was dead because of the Jedi and their ways. They could not be allowed to maintain their lies. Corrupting the galaxy with their virtuous-seeming abuse of the Force. Turning bright boys like Kevmo Zink into ashes and chalk.

"We have to stop them," she said quietly. But when she opened her eyes, the Mother was watching her with the most open expression Marda had ever seen: Agreement. Understanding.

"We have to stop them," the Mother said so everyone could hear Marda's words. "We are vessels of the Force, Marda knows. We live in harmony with a free Force. This blessed creature is the will of that Force, and it will stop them. This creature and its incredible siblings, in harmony with the Force." She reached a hand toward Marda.

Keeping one hand on the lightsaber—her lightsaber now—Marda put her other hand into the Mother's.

Standing over Marda, the Herald said, "Yana Ro has been chosen by the Leveler to be its champion."

Marda looked to Yana. Her cousin looked back. Yana was angry. But not trying to leave. Not trying to hurt the Mother. "Has Yana accepted?" she asked the Herald, but she was looking only at Yana. She needed Yana. She would trust only the Force, but she needed her cousin.

Yana bared her teeth slightly. And nodded.

"The Mother has seen a vision of us," Old Waiden said. "In the stars." His voice quavered with uncertainty. A question.

"It is time to take to the *Gaze Electric*," the Mother said.

"Take the Path to the stars," the Herald added.

"I know where we are needed," Marda said, thinking about the Convocation on Jedha. They would take proof of what the Jedi had

wrought upon themselves. They would take the Leveler. They would take the Path of the Open Hand.

She stood up but lowered her gaze to the Leveler. It wavered in place, as if moving in a breeze or to a song only it could hear. The Force.

Marda felt an indescribable rightness as she looked at it. She held Kevmo's lightsaber. Then she looked at Old Waiden. At Elder Aris Ade. Elder Sarevelin. They each had the upper half of their face painted full blue. The same blue as the Leveler's glow.

The Mother's smile was beautiful when she turned it to Marda. "Marda Ro will be at my side. A guide along with our champion. The Force sees these cousins. They are vessels of its will."

Marda nodded at the Elders. She bowed to them, hands out: lightsaber in one, the other an open palm.



THIRTY-ONE

Sunshine looked out the viewport of the Mother's quarters aboard the *Gaze Electric* onto the inky black of open space. How had he gotten there? It felt strange to think that he was embarking on a new adventure with the Path, at the Mother's side. Every time he considered the fact too closely, he felt unmoored, adrift, as though he'd somehow ended up there without really taking a single step.

But then Elecia would smile at him and it wouldn't matter. It couldn't matter. There was nothing as important as her happiness.

When the door slid open to reveal Elecia on the other side, Sunshine felt his world constrict. Elecia was all there was. She was darkness and she was light. She was everything Sunshine had ever wanted.

When she stumbled Sunshine was there to catch her, quick on his feet despite his size. But she waved him off. "I mustn't look weak," she said.

"You could never be weak," he murmured, but she made her way to a low couch positioned opposite the door. Everything in this room, the finest aboard the ship, was designed to impress. Sunshine had never been anywhere so fine.

But Elecia didn't seem to see the grandeur. Instead she scowled. "The Leveler is the only thing I need to be strong again, to regain my influence." She paused a moment before turning to Sunshine.

"Before, you said there was another rod. On Jedha, correct?"

"Ah, yes. The Rod of Daybreak."

“Did you ever find its location?”

“Yes, but it’s in a vault. One controlled by the Jedi, last I heard. Very inaccessible.”

“Maybe, once before. But with the Leveler, all things are possible.” The Mother closed her eyes and leaned back, and for a moment Sunshine thought she was resting. But then her eyes flew open. “I need you to go to Jedha. Prepare for our arrival.”

Sunshine blinked stupidly. “I...How do I do that?”

“By letting everyone know just who we are. The Path of the Open Hand will not be stopped.”



THIRTY-TWO

Yana looked out into the emptiness of space and tried not to feel the grief that pounded behind her eyes. Kor would have loved the view from the temple hall of the *Gaze Electric*. The sun opal tapestries hadn't been finished and flickered despondently in shades of blue, but the floor-to-ceiling viewscreen was impressive. It made Yana feel small and weak. Insignificant. Which was probably the intent of the design.

"I thought I'd find you here."

Yana turned to see the Herald approaching. He had exchanged his robes of blue and gray for fitted black shirt and pants, a swath of blue material draped asymmetrically across his shoulders. His twin blasters were visible at his hips. He had changed in those moments in the cavern, something in him hardening just as the Jedi had been turned to stone.

"I needed a moment to breathe."

It was true. Ever since Yana had been named the Champion, the Rod of Seasons had been secreted under the layers of her robes, but that only meant whenever she was near the Leveler, the creature followed her around. It frustrated the Mother that the creature appeared to like Yana more than her, and Marda saw it as a sign that Yana had returned to the way of the Path. It was exhausting to maintain the ruse, so Yana had taken to speaking even less than before, and when queried about it, she always said she was listening to the pulse of the Force. That made people steer clear of her,

everyone except Marda. She wanted Yana to describe what it sounded like.

“She would’ve loved this,” the Herald said into the silence, and Yana had to take a moment to recalibrate and realize he was talking about Kor, not her cousin.

“Yes.” Yana hesitated. The Herald had never much cared for Yana, and she doubted their new arrangement had changed that. But Kor was gone, and perhaps the man would appreciate a new memory of his daughter. “We used to talk about leaving Dalna, and one of the things Kor always said was that she wanted to spend the first year on a hauler of some kind, just seeing the galaxy, especially the Core Worlds. Coruscant and Hosnian Prime and places like that. She really wanted to go to Alderaan. I never understood why, but she talked about it all the time.”

The Herald said nothing for a moment before nodding. “I miss her.”

“I do, too,” Yana said, sudden tears clogging her throat. She took a deep breath and let it out, burying the pain deep as her mother had taught her long ago. “The Mother has to pay for what she did to her.”

“And Treze, as well,” the Herald said, his voice even. Cold and emotionless. “I know you didn’t care for the boy, but he was a victim, too. I spoke with his girlfriend in Ferdan. Did you know he has a baby on the way?”

“Yes, and I’m not going to lie, the thought makes me a bit ill. But I’m happy to avenge him, as well.” Yana adjusted the Rod of Seasons where it lay at the small of her back, tucked under layers of material.

“We will bide our time and destroy the Mother when the opportunity arises,” the Herald said. “We both know what kind of person she truly is, and to let her continue to exploit the Force for her own personal gain is not an option. Lucky for us, the Mother is weak, and out here in space her hold will weaken. But while we wait for the perfect moment to strike, you must corral your cousin.”

“Marda? What does she have to do with this?” Yana asked, feeling put out.

“Your cousin is a true believer,” the Herald said. “Where she goes, the rest of the Path will follow. Have you seen the way they look at

her? The Elders, the Littles? She makes them brave when they are scared, and she shows them kindness when they are bereft. Marda should be the next Mother, giving guidance and care to our members.” The Herald hesitated. “No. She will be something more than a mockery of parental love. She will be our Guide.”

Yana was annoyed that the Herald had made this about Marda, but then he rested his hand on her shoulder. “With Marda as the Guide, communing with the Force and making its will known, we will need someone to protect her from harm. You will be the Guardian, forever at your cousin’s side, protecting her from all those who would seek to strike down her vision.”

“And what will you be?” Yana asked, but the Herald was already moving away, back into the belly of the *Gaze Electric*. He didn’t answer Yana, and when he was gone, a feeling like suddenly being weightless came over her. She wished she knew what his plan was. But it didn’t really matter. The die had been cast, and Yana had made her choice. She would see this through until the end.

Once the Herald had taken his leave, Yana made her way back to the chamber she shared with her cousin. No one else had wanted to room with Yana, and for the first time ever, it had nothing to do with her being Evereni. Rather, most people in the Path feared the Leveler, and they did not want the risk of angering the Champion. Yana thought it was more about the possibility that the creature would visit during a sleep cycle. Luckily, Marda was not so wary. It was as if nothing made her afraid anymore.

Yana entered to find her cousin humming a low tune as she drew her devotional lines. She’d also changed the style of her robes—nothing obvious, but Yana noticed that Marda wrapped her outer cloth tight enough to hold the Jedi’s lightsaber against her ribs. It was always with her now.

“Yana,” Marda said, “the Mother asked me to lead our evening meditation.”

“Congratulations. You deserve it.” Yana dropped onto her bed, the Rod of Seasons digging into her flesh. It was a constant reminder of the choice she’d made, and the discomfort it caused seemed right.

Marda turned to her. Yana was surprised to see Marda's devotional lines were no longer three wavy brikal-shell blue smears across her forehead. She had instead drawn three hard vertical lines down her face: one bisecting her left eye, another her right, and a final line from her hairline down the bridge of her nose and all the way to her throat. Marda smiled. Not tight-lipped, not like she used to. She apparently felt confident enough to show her teeth now. Yana liked it on her; she only wished it hadn't come at such a high price.

"What's up with your face paint?"

"It is a new day for the Path, now that we are in the stars. Now that we have the Leveler to cut through abuse of the Force without bias. I will not be caught unaware again, Yana. I will serve the Force and make it free. And so I no longer will wear the lines of my devotion as a gentle symbol, but cut them through my eyes, illuminating the truth of the Force. And my Path."

Something about the new pattern made Yana hesitate. She couldn't have said how or why, but there was definitely something... unsettling about it. And the gleam in Marda's black eyes.

And then Marda was gone, leaving Yana in an empty room, wondering how long until misfortune would find them, as it did all Evereni.

What had Yana agreed to? More important, would she survive it?



THIRTY-THREE

Jedi Knight Azlin Rell stood amid the remains of an abandoned settlement on the small planet Dalna, under a scatter of stars. He was alone in the dark but for his astromech, C-9, and the ghosts.

The settlement had been abandoned quickly, most supplies and belongings taken, though remnants remained, marking the lives of those who had lived there. A scatter of spilled grain. Tattered blankets snagged on the splintered doorframe of a barn. Chairs and stools straight and tipped over. A hastily harvested garden. Thin blue smears in horizontal lines up the trunk of a narrow gray tree with waxy leaves that glinted reddish in the starlight. The smears were labeled with what seemed to be names, as if children had marked their heights. Those were the sorts of ghosts Azlin saw.

C-9 beeped quietly to itself about the thick pink mud sticking in the tracks of its rollers. There'd been a portion of the road from Ferdan too muddy for it to easily cross, and it had blazed a trail through flowers that popped loudly when crushed. Azlin allowed himself to be comforted by C-9's muttering. Though the green-domed astromech had slowed him down slightly, it was worth it to have it along. Two months into this tour of the Outer Rim, C-9 had improvised itself a new arm out of a strangely charged alloy it identified on one of the Relik moons and stuck it to its own dome. That little arm was remarkably sensitive to certain electromagnetic fields, and often C-9 knew something or someone was approaching even before Azlin did.

When he'd pointed that out, C-9 cheekily suggested they call the new appendage its Jedi hat.

C-9 made it easy for Azlin to prefer droids to people.

But Azlin had liked Padawan Kevmo Zink. He'd been easy to laugh with.

The emergency message had interrupted his sleepy flight to Jedha, containing a request from Jedi Master Lahru that he stop on the small planet Dalna to check in on Master Zallah Macri and her Padawan, Kevmo. There'd been no contact from them in days, and the local sheriff had notified the outpost of their apparently abandoned shuttle. The credits they'd put down for the spot in the docking yard were nearly out, and locals wanted to confiscate it.

But Jedi did not simply vanish. Something awful must have happened. Though Azlin could imagine Kevmo just falling into a hole or something equally silly, Master Zallah Macri would never. She was serious, skilled, and particular. She'd have left a warning or sent for backup if she'd had a chance.

So they must have been caught off guard.

He and C-9 had landed a couple of hours earlier, made quick work of breaking into Zallah's shuttle with shared codes, and downloaded the computer's information onto a datapad. Azlin had spoken with the sheriff, Jinx Pickwick, a no-nonsense human both concerned for the missing Jedi and extremely reluctant to help Azlin get involved in whatever mess had slurped them in. But the owner of the boarding house where Zallah and Kevmo had stayed was very quick to blame the local cult for the Jedi's disappearance.

Azlin had heard of the Path of the Open Hand. He knew quite a lot about the various planets, moons, settlements, and communities out on the frontier. He found that a solid research background was necessary to completing any missions with a satisfactory outcome, and if he wanted to aim toward exemplary, more information was essential. Knowing everything he could *before* he dove into anything dramatic had saved him on several occasions. There hadn't been much time to investigate Dalna when the emergency message reached him, but thanks to his efforts to study constantly, he had what he needed: the Path was a Force cult that preached living in harmony

with the Force in a way that meant non-interference with it. They believed to touch the Force, to use it or influence it, was wrong. Azlin could easily imagine how much trouble any Jedi, but especially someone like Kevmo, could get into with such a group.

Two days before, the Path, according to Sheriff Jinx, had shuttled all their people up to a large hyperspace-capable ship they'd been building for months. They'd left. Whether they intended to return, Jinx couldn't say, but they'd certainly all gone for now.

Azlin had walked throughout the compound, the garden and small honeycomb of cells, the small plots of vegetables, a barn, and communal buildings, and he stood before a locked door with a panel of numbers. There were underground rooms, according to rumor in Ferdan, and this was proof. The caves had flooded recently, Jinx told him, and the Jedi had helped the cult survive.

Closing his eyes, Azlin brushed his fingers against the cool metal of his lightsaber in a self-comforting gesture he allowed himself only when alone. Which, fortunately, was most of the time. He reached for the Force. This world was flush with it, vivid and alive with life and tangles of hope. But there, Azlin felt it go thin. Thinner, at least.

Under most circumstances, he wouldn't be worried, but for some reason his skin pebbled with nerves. Azlin was not a fearful person. He was cautious, careful, but trusted in the Force. It was part of him and he part of it. Adrenaline was useful in times of stress and action. But Azlin did what was required of him. That was all any Jedi could do: what was required by their calling, by the light.

Breathing carefully, Azlin aligned himself with the Force around him and patted C-9 on the dome. Instead of asking the droid to pick the electric lock, he unclipped his lightsaber and thumbed it on.

The pale blue glow sliced through the night, and Azlin smoothly stepped forward, pushing the blade directly into the metal door. It hissed, and Azlin raised the saber. He cut easily through the door. In moments, he flicked the lightsaber off again and gently kicked the door in. It clanged, echoing ahead.

Only darkness greeted him. A narrow black tunnel, heading down shallow stone stairs.

Taking out his glow rod, Azlin turned back to C-9. “Stay here. Be ready to send that emergency burst back to the ship if anything happens. I’ll keep in touch with the comlink.”

C-9 beeped a reluctant affirmative.

The white light cut through the darkness, and Azlin started down. “Hello?”

His voice rang out, not quite echoing. No reply came. He walked steadily but with caution, his pulse beating thickly through his body. Azlin kept his breathing even and latched on to the Force, ready, listening, feeling anything he could. There was very little.

The stairs ended only a handful of meters underground, but there were three tunnels. Each was marked with paint: blue, black, pink. Nothing hinted at where they led. There weren’t any rugs or stools or anything. Just a damp stone smell and a musty breeze from behind him.

Reaching out again, Azlin pushed his awareness of the Force in every direction. There was little life, barely the sense of anything as simple as lichen or the sort of root systems one might find underground. Nothing sentient.

But...

Azlin moved instinctively toward the only unusual feeling. A sensation, a yearning almost.

He held the light before him, lightsaber in his other hand, and walked with his eyes closed. The Force guided him. He turned twice down different tunnels, walked down another shallow set of stairs, and nearly stumbled as he hit a wall.

Not a physical wall: a thin wall like a Force mirror, reflecting his own growing dread back at him.

He opened his eyes, fighting off a shiver. He was in some sort of chamber. Toward the far edge, a pile of boulders hulked in shadows beside another dark exit. The rounded ceiling glinted under his glow rod in strange rainbow streaks and spots. The opal found in this valley. There was a basin clearly meant for water and a musty damp towel. And on the smooth stone floor, an odd scatter of what looked like crumbled chalk, chunks of stone that had been pulverized inside brown and white cloth.

Frowning, Azlin went to one knee beside it. He reholstered his lightsaber and reached out. His finger had just come into contact with a long stretch of the brown cloth when he flung himself away. Azlin didn't stop until his back hit the stone wall.

That was a Jedi's cloak.

His hand shook as he shone the light back onto the pile of crumbled stone and clothing.

Heat flooded his face as shock pounded with his heartbeat, insisting he knew what that was.

Jedi. Jedi.

As if—as if the body had been turned to stone. Calcified and broken.

"Kevmo," Azlin said softly. He knew. There were two missing, but he knew. He felt it.

Despite horror thickening his stomach, crawling up his throat, Azlin gripped his lightsaber again and walked past the remains of Kevmo Zink. He'd return. He would come back for Kevmo. He would.

Azlin made himself reach for the Force again, ready for the echoes of dread layered in this room.

It was awful. He'd never felt anything like it.

One step, then another, and another—he was out of the chamber containing what was left of Kevmo Zink. He breathed carefully. Listened. Moved forward along the strange yearning thread in the Force. Azlin clenched his jaw, mouth locked in a grimace, and tried to breathe through it all. The Force was all around him. There was nobody there. He would be all right. He—

It didn't matter, he told himself. He had to find Zallah Macri. He had to know what had happened, where she'd died. There was no pretending she was anything other than dead.

Underground, deep in the twisting caverns, it was only Azlin and the Force, and shadows pressing in. He tried to ignore the part of himself that couldn't stop thinking about Kevmo laughing, stuffing fish stew in his mouth, urging Azlin to join them on this mission. Zallah Macri's tolerant rebuke of her Padawan.

The Path was supposed to be harmless. Jedi didn't just vanish. They didn't just die, either, not out there, not in such inexplicable ways.

Azlin stopped.

In the darkness, under meters of pink sandstone, he took another deep breath and reached out to the Force with everything he had.

It answered. It always answered.

Reassurance, connection, the living Force was all he needed. He was where he needed to be, and even alone he was never alone.

Azlin breathed out, slow and firm with determination. Then he continued on.

The room in which he found the remains of Jedi Master Zallah Macri lit up when he entered. Automatic lights, warm and eager, flooded the chamber. Smaller than Kevmo's sepulchre, this one retained curtains and a few small pillows shoved to the side. Light green. Empty shelves were carved into the stone wall. Azlin felt—he felt a hidden door in the wall and knew there had been powerful items imbued with the Force beyond it once. But no more.

This place was nothing now.

Azlin knelt beside the crumbled gold, brown, white of Zallah Macri's remains. He would need to collect them. Somehow. Her belt, boots, utility items, they would not usually be burned with her upon death, but her robes could be. Sent back home to Coruscant. Kevmo's, too.

Both their lightsabers were missing.

Without realizing it, Azlin touched two fingers to the rough, chalky remains of her body. A shudder passed through him, deep as his bones, deep as the Force.

Azlin had no idea what had happened there. What could have done this. Destroyed them.

Whatever it was, the idea of it filled him with a nameless dread. Thick and awful. It pressed in from every edge of the stone chamber, but even with his eyes wide open, Azlin saw nothing—and he knew, he *felt* that this razor-sharp sensation came from inside himself. Suddenly, he had a name for it.

Fear.



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