

Soronya Visht's eyes popped open. The Jedi was immediately alert, her mind searching for the disturbance that had roused her from her resting trance. Outside the canopy of her starfighter the brilliant blue/white streaks of hyperspace flashed by.

An unsettling sensation washed over her, causing a wave of dizziness. The Force rippled with the strength of the disturbance, it's intensity faltering like the vital signs of a dying creature. The sensation troubled Soronya and she pushed her senses further, desperate to find the source. She became aware of a pinpoint of light in the distance, beyond the sheltering embrace of hyperspace. A small planet, rich with life and The Force. As her thoughts gently touched the small world she was assaulted by another faltering wave as The Force was diminished.

The planet, whatever it was, was dying.

Hurriedly she reached for the hyperspace control and a moment later the view beyond her cockpit resolved itself into the pinpoint starlight of realspace. Glancing at the chronometer Soronya realized she was still more than twenty four standard hours travel from Coruscant.

"Dee-six, where are we? What's the nearest planet?"

A movement in her peripheral vision caught Soronya's attention as her astromech unit swiveled it's domed head toward her. The droid's response quickly scrolled across her center display.

"Chuul-Soth? I've never heard of that world." She had been returning to Coruscant from a diplomatic courier mission in the Kessel sector, far from the major galactic trade routes. Unfortunately, she did not remember seeing this particular planet on the star charts she'd studied before departing the Jedi temple.

A sector map popped up on her console, along with more text from her robotic partner.

Chuul-Soth: Severe geologic disturbances made the planet uninhabitable in 2417 BBY. Planetary surface continues to be categorized as "Restricted – Hazardous" by Office of Planetary Geology. Planet has one satellite: Phon-Chuul-Soth. Heavily forested moon inhabited by a small population of primitive indigenous humanoids. Categorized by the Office of Cultural Affairs as a protected sanctuary; all traffic prohibited.

"An inhabited moon?" Soronya knew that the transmitter in her ship would have to send a message through multiple subspace relays from this distance, and that getting a reply would likely take at least two standard hours. Rather than sit and wait, the Jedi decided the severity of the disturbance warranted action. "Dee-six, send a communication to the council to apprise them of the situation. Inform them that I've sensed a disturbance and am investigating."

Her fingers danced across the keys of her nav-computer as she calculated the micro jump that would bring her into orbit around the small moon and a moment later she was once more entering hyperspace for the short flight.

A countdown appeared on the flight display indicating thirty-seven seconds to reversion and she watched it tick steadily down. With three seconds remaining an alarm suddenly blared at the same time her senses warned her of an imminent threat. The fighter's fail safes took control and dropped her immediately back into real space.

"What just happened, Dee-six?" she asked, her mind whirling from the sudden jolt.

Proximity alert; near collision. Error: No anomalies detected.

That just didn't make sense. Why would her collision avoidance systems pull the ship out of hyperspace if there was nothing to collide with? She was still reeling, her thoughts grasping feebly for a plausible explanation.

Dimly The Force poked at the edge of her awareness. Taking a deep, calming breath she focused on the sensation; danger.

Soronya's brow creased in confusion. A collision warning for nothing to collide with and a sense of danger in this empty section of space didn't add up. Still, a Jedi trusted in their intuition, and in The Force, so she forced her thoughts to still.

She was hesitant to open herself fully, concerned with the possibility of another jarring ripple from the original disturbance, but she was even more concerned with warning that The Force was attempting to give her. Slowly she let it flow into her.

The undulating feeling was still there, though not as powerfully now, but there was something else as well. Soronya allowed more of the energy to infuse her, narrowing in on the anomaly. It felt angry and violent, a black scar within the otherwise pristine environment of The Force. There was only one way the Jedi could think to describe the feeling; evil.

Suddenly Soronya knew what it was she was sensing.

"Shields up!" she called frantically.

The fact that Dee-six reacted with the speed of a machine was all that saved her as the sudden impact of blaster fire rocked her ship. The droid made a long, trilling whistle and text scrolled across her screen.

Shields at 46%. No sensor contact. Conclusion: cloaked ship in vicinity.

Soronya thanked The Force that her reflexes had been fast enough to keep her from being vaporized.

"Transfer engine power to shields," she instructed as she focused her concentration. There, above and to the left, was the presence of her attacker. With something so specific to focus on now, there was no mistaking the presence.

Sith.

Soronya was somewhat shocked to discover that the ship wasn't actually cloaked though. Instead the *Fury* class starfighter flew perfectly visible off her left wing, slightly above her. Still nothing appeared on her screen.

"The enemy ship is right there Dee-six! Get me a tactical display."

No ships detected in range.

Outside the cockpit the little droid's dome swiveled a complete 360 degrees.

No ships detected on visual scan.

As Soronya watched the Sith craft descended slightly, placing the pilots at eye level with each other. Her gaze locked with that of her opponent.

He was human, a thick angry scar stretching from deep within his hairline diagonally to his jawline. In place of his left eye was some kind of patch or cybernetic implant in the shape of the emblem of the Sith Empire. His other eye was a brilliant blue, cold and appraising. His sandy blonde hair hung to his chin, creating a stark contrast with the jet black of his tunic.

Suddenly the comm unit crackled to life in her ear.

"Jedi..." a deep musical voice said, "how did you find me here?"

There was a pause as Soronya tried to overcome her shock at this Sith's ability to access her comm unit, but she quickly gathered herself and replied.

"It wasn't difficult with all of the damage you've done to this moon. I could feel that from light years away."

"Of course you could," the Sith replied. "So this meeting is one of pure chance then?"

"Yes. I found you through the will of The Force, and I'm going to stop you."

"Stop me from what, exactly? I've done nothing here. I'm merely transiting this sector. I also felt the disturbance, and have chosen to investigate it."

"You are a Sith, and a liar!" Soronya insisted.

This comment solicited a condescending *tsk, tsk, tsk*. "You are a feeble excuse for a Jedi. First you fail to sense me after nearly running directly into me, and now you fail to sense the truth in my words. How did you ever manage to pass your pathetic trials?"

A very un-Jedi-like embarrassment washed over Soronya at his words. She had, in fact, passed the trials. However, that had been a mere four months ago and this mission had only been her third as a Jedi Knight. She pushed the thoughts of his chiding aside and allowed herself to *feel* his words.

"I'm.....I'm sorry," she said as she detected the truth in what he was saying. He'd left his mind unusually open so that his intentions and meaning were very clear to her. "I shouldn't have jumped to such hasty conclusions."

"Well, at least you've got the vaunted Jedi humility. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be going to the surface now." They'd been steadily approaching the moon since the shots had been fired and with that, the *Fury* rolled over and dove toward the atmosphere.

Soronya was only caught off guard for a moment before she turned the nose of her own fighter toward the moon below. "You aren't going to finish me off?"

"Of course not. My time is better spent on other matters." That response was unexpected, to say the least.

"Then why did you attack me in the first place?"

"To prevent you from attacking me," the Sith answered flatly. "If my attack was successful you would know I was in the superior position and be less inclined to fight."

"That's...actually quite insightful. Once I realized you were Sith I probably would have attacked you. If you hadn't managed to hit me though," a brief flash of embarrassment hit again as she thought of her inattentiveness, "I'd have fought you too though."

"No doubt, and then I would have been burdened with your needless death."

"You sound like you'd be upset by that," she said over the noise as the friction shielding on her craft began to absorb the energy of her descent. The certainty of his victory was clear in both his words and his tone, and Soronya decided it was best not to question it.

"And I would have been. I despise waste."

"But you're Sith. Killing Jedi is what you do."

"It's that simple is it? Sith are evil and kill Jedi and frighten small children?"

"Are you saying it's not?"

"Nothing ever is Jedi. Yes, the practitioners of our opposing philosophies often clash, and those clashes often result in death on one side or the other, but the question at hand would be 'who initiates such conflict'?"

The Jedi levelled her ship's flight, unconsciously taking up a wingman position beside the Sith. "Are you saying that Jedi are the ones who start fights with Sith?"

"Not at all. They start these clashes no more often than we Sith do. Our relationship is one of shared animosity, and the transgressions are instigated by both sides. The only difference is that Sith allow their passions to drive them to battle, while the Jedi allow their perceptions to do so."

“We Jedi only fight to stop you from perpetuating your evil.”

“Ah, but you see, I do not consider myself evil. I will grant that there are those amongst the Sith who certainly are, but there are as many of us who are not. Much like there are many Jedi who are so devoted to their particular sense of justice that they follow it regardless of the context in which it is applied.”

Soronya had to admit to herself that she’d met a number of Jedi for whom that description was completely fitting, but she couldn’t resolve the possibility of Jedi as the aggressors. She strained her memory to recall all the times throughout her training that she’d seen a Jedi in battle. There had only been one instance she could recall involving Sith so she focused on that in particular, using a basic Force technique to amplify her recollection.

Her master had been investigating a high profile murder in the outer rim and she’d been following him through back alleys all around the city gathering evidence and testimony. She recalled the moment they’d entered a smoky back alley cantina and saw the Sith. He’d been a young Twi’lek, younger than she was now and concentrating so hard on masking his presence that he’d missed the entry of the two Jedi.

She remembered the Sith and her master spotting each other and all pretense vanished. In an instance their lightsabers had been drawn and within a few minutes the Sith lay dead on the floor.

But it was the drawing of the weapons that caught her attention. It was so sudden she could barely tell, even with the memory enhancement, but it was undeniable. Her master had drawn first. Although she was certain that fraction of a second difference had been due to her masters superior skill.

Well, mostly certain.

And only now did she realize she’d never questioned why the battle had occurred at all, simply accepting her master’s statement of “He was Sith”.

A sharp whistle from Dee-six shook Soronya from her reminiscing to discover the Fury moving away from her. There was a palpable sense of loss in the direction he was heading and she made to follow.

“Why do you follow me, Jedi?”

“I told you, I’m investigating the disturbance. I want to know what’s happening here.”

“Oh, I know what’s happening. I just want to know why.”

He knew what was happening? How could he know that? His smug superiority infuriated Soronya, forcing her into meditative exercises.

“And how can you possibly know that?”

“Because I can sense it in The Force. It’s right in front of your eyes. The planet is covered in life stretching in every direction, and that life is ending in huge swaths.”

That did make sense. As far away from most life as she’d been on her hyperspace route Soronya realized The Force should have been calm and faint. Because The Force was the connection between all living things, it became fainter where there was less life. This lush green planetoid was like an oasis of The Force in the middle of a desert.

Now that she thought of it, it was obvious that the loss of such life would cause the ripples she’d felt.

Again, she felt ashamed of her lack of understanding, and it caused her to become angry with the Sith in front of her.

“Even if I believed the Jedi would be the instigators of any battle, it’s the Sith who use the Dark Side.”

“Fool. Dark Side does not describe The Force. It merely describes the user,” his voice was that of a teacher losing patience with his student.

Soronya was about to ask what exactly he meant when Dee-Six announced an energy source on long range sensors.

“What is that, Dee-six?”

Two light corvette class starships, one freighter, multiple ground vehicles. Energy signatures indicate multiple weapons emplacements.

“Are those smugglers?” she said aloud, forgetting about the open channel.

“That would be a safe guess,” the Sith replied. “The question is, what exactly are they smuggling from this backwater?”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.”

Soronya began to accelerate past him, but the Sith’s ship juked sharply, blocking her path.

“Surely you realize those corvettes have better sensors than our fighters. They know that you’re here already. They’ll be waiting for you.”

“Well, they’ll be waiting for you too. You don’t seem concerned.”

“They don’t know I’m here. I am invisible to them, just like I was invisible to you.”

Soronya had already forgotten about that, but the mention piqued her curiosity. “Oh yeah. And how did you manage that without a cloaking field?”

“Simply. I used The Force. That is my area of expertise, using The Force to manipulate electronic devices like sensors, or your droid.”

Dee-six let out a sad whistle, obviously upset that he’d been so easily manipulated.

“It’s okay, Dee. It’s not your fault.”

“That is true, droid. Still, I’d suggest you not approach any closer. It would be fairly easy for their turbolasers to swat you out of the sky.”

Frustrated at the logic, Soronya began to decelerate.

“Find me a place to land Dee-six,” she instructed as the *Fury* pulled quickly ahead of her. “Looks like I’ll be taking a closer look on foot.”

Soronya had been trudging through the forest for several kilometers through the dense forest. The travel was relatively easy, the thick canopy of the trees making it difficult for much ground growth, and she was making quick progress. Several times she had seen native wildlife darting around out of the corner of her eyes, and she could almost taste the sheer amount of life flowing through The Force here.

She could also distantly sense, although she couldn’t pinpoint how far, the more evolved minds of the moon’s humanoid inhabitants. Their presence was markedly different in The Force than those of the other creatures.

But it was the foul, foreign taint that she was moving toward that occupied most of her attention. It was so out of place within the forest that it would have been comical if not for its destructive nature. A nauseating swirl of greed, malevolence, and desire made touching it feel almost oily in her mind.

And its source was getting closer.

With each step the feeling of the intruders became more and more clear. She began to feel undercurrent of pain and fear and hopelessness.

When she opened herself to The Force to the extent that she was now, Soronya was very attuned to states of emotion in the same way the Sith seemed to be attuned to machines. Unfortunately for the Jedi, this strength was also a weakness. Subconsciously her mind began to fall in sync with these very emotions and as she continued on she became aware of the depression settling on her.

Stoically she closed off the flow of The Force through her body, shutting down her very awareness of it as best she could. Immediately her mood began to improve, but the power of what was

being felt someplace in front of her was frightening. The speed with which she had been affected was greater than any she'd ever experienced. Pausing a moment she sucked in a deep, cleansing breath before resolutely continuing on.

The commlink at her belt gave a soft *chirp*, signaling that Dee-six had completed his mission. She had been unable to find an open area to land her ship, so instead she simply engaged her repulsor-lifts at treetop level and jumped to the ground. She'd left instructions with Dee-six to take the fighter back into orbit, and to update the council with what information they'd gathered so far.

Including the presence of the Sith.

Soronya pressed on for another handful of kilometers, allowing only the slightest trickle of The Force to guide her.

She smelled the interlopers well before she came upon them. The air became thick with the odor of smoke and ozone, telltale signs of heavy blaster fire. Another half klick and she could hear them. The shrieking grind of metal on metal cut through the air like a lightsaber blade, stabbing painfully into her ears. She diverted The Force she'd been channeling to deaden her hearing and pressed on.

Five hundred more meters brought them into sight. Soronya darted behind a tree to stay out of sight and peeked cautiously around its side.

Ahead of her were four people and a droid. The beings were all of varying species, a devaronian, a ree-yees, a bith, and a zabrak, the droid a large construction model. The devaronian stood back, away from the others. His clothes were relatively neat and of seemingly good quality and on his shoulder was propped a heavy blaster rifle. By contrast, the others were filthy and haggard, each wearing matching coveralls in varying states of disrepair. The people themselves looked to be the recipients of various forms of abuse. She saw one of the ree-yees eyes was drooping and flopping uselessly every time she moved her head. The zabrak had grotesque oozing wounds on his skull in spots where horns had been removed, and the bith had dark purple splotches about its bulbous head where it had no doubt been beaten repeatedly.

These people are slaves, Soronya realized. Her hand unconsciously flexed around the reassuring grip of the lightsaber at her belt.

Every fiber of her being strained with the desire to go free these poor people, but logic told her that would be foolish. Whatever was happening here, she had to deal with it at the source. So, instead of leaping in and bringing their captor to justice, the Jedi merely watched.

Soronya watched as the zabrak squatted down and dropped into some unseen hole. The droid floated forward and held out a device that the Jedi recognized as an excavating charge. *Are they tunneling?* she wondered quietly. The other two slaves attached synthcord lines to the bomb and it was lowered in behind the first man.

Convinced there was nothing more to see here, Soronya stealthily slipped back into the forest and toward the main force. She covered the few hundred meters to their landing site in mere minutes, stopping at the scorched edge of a wide, open field. Wisps of smoke still curled into the air in places around the clearing.

Soronya guessed, as she looked at the weapons laden forms of the corvettes in front of her, that they'd carved this impromptu staging area out of the forest with proton bombs and turbolasers. The ships were painted in dark green and black, blood red symbols the Jedi didn't recognize emblazoned on various spots around the hulls.

I guess that explains the initial fluctuations I felt. There's no telling how much life they extinguished creating this opening.

No sooner had she finished the thought than the big construction droid shot out of the forest, the slaves and their overseer hanging from its appendages. Still shut off from The Force as she was, Soronya was completely unprepared for what followed.

The forest behind her erupted in a plume of flames as the excavator bomb detonated. A wall of heat and dust hit her square in the back stinging her skin like sandpaper where her robe didn't cover. When the shockwave hit she was physically flung forward, landing heavily in a heap amongst the charred vegetation of the field.

Groggy and disoriented Soronya struggled to push herself to her feet. Absently she allowed more of The Force to flow into herself to augment her drastically reduced strength. She only barely heard the speeder that approached, and by the time she'd managed to stand it's passengers were already waiting to greet her.

"Well what have we here?" a high pitched, raspy voice asked.

Soronya willed her eyes to focus, and when they did she saw the powerful form of a female trandoshan standing before her, blaster pistol held unwaveringly pointed at the Jedi's head.

The slaver was over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and thick, powerful legs. She wore a flight suit, as most trandoshan's seemed to prefer but hers was missing the arms and legs, which made it more resemble a space worthy unitard. The exposed scales of her extremities shined with a vibrant bright green color. Soronya looked at the other woman's face to find herself reflected back in the huge, remorseless eyes.

"You aren't a local, that's for sure." The woman's basic was heavily accented, obviously difficult for her to speak with a reptilian tongue.

"Are you the leader here?" Soronya managed dryly, her voice hoarse and weak. Dimly she was aware of the other newcomers that were fanning out to circle her. There were five of them, four humans and a nikto, plus the trandoshan.

“Yeah, I sure am, and that’s the last question you get to ask. Now who are you, meat?”

“I’m Soronya Visht, Knight of the Jedi Order!”

By the end of the statement Soronya was lunging toward the imposing lizard woman, her lightsaber springing into her outstretched hand. The blade came to life with a distinctive *snap-hiss* and she brought it around to disarm her would be captor. The blade made contact with the inside of the trandoshan’s forearm.

And then it stopped.

Soronya froze, confusion etched into her features and totally unprepared for the powerful blow the woman’s other hand landed on her chin. The Jedi stumbled to on knee under the impact.

“Weren’t expecting that, were you?” the slaver mocked. The lizard woman struck Soronya’s right elbow with the blaster, hard. The Jedi’s fingers went numb, and her lightsaber fell lifelessly to the charred ground.

The next instant the Jedi found her face buried in the thick layer of ash, pinned in place by the force of the slaver’s knee in the back of her neck.

“You’ll make an interesting addition to our crew,” the trandoshan hissed.

“Jedi are trouble, we should just kill her Klix,” a man said as he approached.

“Could be that she’s trouble. Could be that she’s valuable. I’m not going to put a blaster bolt through her brain until I know which, Cayllus.”

“You’re the boss. Just thought I’d put in my two credits.”

The newcomer wrenched Soronya’s arms painfully behind her back as Klix continued to pin her to the ground. The Jedi felt the cold metal of a pair of restraints being clamped tightly onto her wrists.

“Get up!” Klix instructed as she and the man each lifted Soronya by one shoulder.

The Jedi used the opportunity to open herself to The Force, and as soon as her feet were under her telekinetically shoved the man as hard as she could manage. Still disoriented from the combination of the explosion and the punch, her shove barely set him five feet.

A moment later an incapacitating electrical current shot up her arms and her body went rigid.

“Those are stun cuffs you idiot,” Klix chastised as she held up a remote. The small machine was strapped to her wrist with a thick leather band. “You try that Force drek on us again and I’ll fry you from the inside.”

The current subsided and Soronya fell limply back to the sooty forest floor. She lay there helplessly, her body unresponsive. Klix crouched directly in front of her, reaching down to pick up the discarded lightsaber as she did so. "Do you understand me?"

Soronya tried to answer, but only managed an odd grunt through her still spasming jaw muscles.

"Good," the trandoshan said as she stood up, slipping the lightsaber into a large pouch on the utility belt around her waist. Once more Soronya was hoisted unceremoniously off of the ground.

"Take her to the ship and fit her in a shock collar. We won't get any work out of her with those cuffs on." Klix pulled the robe from Soronya's shoulders as she was hauled away, one last slap in the Jedi's face. As the trandoshan walked away she clasped the cloak around her neck, laughing. She and three of her cronies climbed back into the speeder and headed off back toward the mining operation.

Soronya was half dragged and half carried toward the main cargo bay doors of one of the waiting corvettes.

"We've never had a Jedi slave before," one of the humans holding her up observed. "I don't think I like the idea. Saw one of 'em take out a whole crew of scrappers once on Ord Radama."

"Boss says don't worry about it so I'm not worrying about it. Besides she's a Zeltron, so she could be lots of fun. Your kind is all about fun, ain't they Pinky?" The less than clever nickname was an obvious reference to her skin color.

"My name's not pinky," Soronya corrected him. She was feeling stronger, less disoriented with each step and eyed the lecherous speaker threateningly.

"You don't wanna do that, *Pinky*," he emphasized the name as he displayed a control unit similar to Klix's. "And if I don't get a chance to use mine..." he indicated his partner with a nod of his chin. Soronya glanced over to see one in his hand as well as they began to lead her up the long ramp toward the ship.

"I've already sent my report to the Jedi temple. More of us will be here before you know it."

The talkative one just shrugged. "Fastest ship they got'll take fourteen hours to get here from galactic center. We'll be long gone by then."

"Unless there are other Jedi closer than that," Soronya threatened.

As if on cue the second corvette powered up, rising on its repulsor bed. Four Z-95 Headhunters roared out of its hangar bay, and all five ships sped off toward orbit.

"Yeah," her captor said with a chuckle, "boss thought of that too. Now shut up and walk."

The three of them were halfway up the loading ramp, and Soronya got her first glimpse inside the cargo bay. What she saw made her stomach churn.

Soiled, filthy bedding lay strewn about across the entire floor as dozens of slaves in every species imaginable milled about. Armed guards patrolled from walkways overhead. On the far side of the ramp a pair of slavers led a group of twenty or so slaves off the ship.

"Take a good look, pinky. This is going to be home for...", but he never finished the thought.

Soronya caught the flash of a red disk as it flew past and arced in front of her like a boomerang, curving around to disappear behind her on the opposite side. Both of her escorts dropped heavily onto the metal ramp as their heads tumbled off and rolled toward the ground below.

She had a brief sense of The Force at work and then the Jedi was soaring backwards. She flew nearly fifty feet, hitting the soft ground hard on her backside and rolling head over feet for another ten. She came to a stop in a daze, staring painfully at the huge sun above her.

"You are pathetic," a familiar voice said as a silhouette appeared above her. "Get up, let's go."

The Sith's voice was commanding and Soronya found herself more than willing to comply. As she stood on legs shaky from the hard impact she heard the scream of a heavy blaster rifle.

"Head to the forest," her rescuer said calmly as the crimson blade of a lightsaber sprang to life in his hand. He flicked the weapon nonchalantly over his shoulder intercepting the beam that was flying at his back. The blaster bolt changed direction 180 degrees, and Soronya watched as it struck the sniper atop the corvette, sending him plummeting to the ground far below.

"You killed those men in cold blood!" she yelled.

"They were in my way." The Sith began unconcernedly walking away, and Soronya rushed to catch up as he melted into the shadows of the trees.

"But that was murder!" she insisted as she reached him, but he simply kept moving without acknowledging her.

Once sufficiently deep within the shelter of the densely packed trunks the Sith stopped. "You're an embarrassment to your order, letting yourself be captured like that."

"The cuffs make it difficult to fight back you know."

"So why are you still wearing them?" He waved one hand out to the side and the shackles sprang open, falling to the ground with a clunk.

"If I'd tried to open them then those slavers would have just shocked me."

"Which means what? I can think of at least a six ways The Force could protect me from the effects of such a device. Do you mean to tell me you couldn't even think of one?"

Soronya's cheeks reddened at the chastising. "I was disoriented from the explosion. Not to mention getting hit by that big trandoshaan."

"Were your trials all about making excuses for your failures? That's all you seem to be good at." The Sith began walking again, having not looked at her through the entire conversation.

"If I'm so useless then why did you rescue me? That's not a very Sith thing to do!"

Suddenly he spun on her, his features a mask of fury beneath the hood of his cloak. "I saved you because I felt you'd be useful to me; a tool I could use. That is actually very Sith of me."

"Use for what?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

"Too stop the destruction of this planet, obviously."

His answer caught her off guard. There was nothing about wanting to save anything that fit what she had been taught about Sith.

"But your kind thrives on destruction, on violence and death."

"I will grant that there are those among us whose passions are darker than others, but the Sith do not thrive on these things. We care only about order and control. If death and destruction help us to achieve that then so be it."

"So you crave power, just like my masters say."

"Having power is often the easiest way to exert control, to instill order."

Soronya opened her mouth to make another argument, but stopped herself. Something about what he'd just said made sense, and it frightened her that she felt that way. Instead of rebutting him she changed the topic.

"Then how does saving this forest fit into that?"

"Because its destruction affects The Force and The Force is my most valuable tool."

"But the Sith have wiped out entire populations without appearing too concerned by the repercussions in The Force."

"Each of those instances was the means to an end. This destruction is wanton."

Soronya began pacing, gripping her head between both hands. "Regardless of how you justify the actions, the outcome in each situation is the same. The Force is diminished."

"Imagine The Force is a sword," the Sith began, crossing his arms over his chest as though he were lecturing. "I have no qualms about using a sword in a battle to accomplish something I believe in, even though I know each strike will cause it to dull. However, I won't use that same sword to cut weeds because it dulls the blade as well. Those are two very different actions with the same outcome, but decidedly unique purposes."

He turned and spread his arms, indicating the forest around them. "If I had enemies hiding amongst these trees I wouldn't hesitate to burn it all to the ground. I wouldn't think twice about the effect it would have." Turning back around, he fixed her in the cold stare of his one good eye. "They are destroying it for profit, out of greed. They are weeds, dulling my sword."

Soronya returned the stare, her mind working to figure out the intricacies of the man in front of her. "I think there's more to it. You're not telling me something."

"Consider yourself lucky I've told you anything."

"Then why *did* you tell me anything?"

"Simply to correct some of the lies your order has told you about mine. Now come on, there's work to be done." He spun away, his black cloak flourishing behind him, and strode off once more.

Soronya jogged the few steps to walk beside him for the first time realizing how tall he was. The Sith stood close to a quarter meter taller than her already impressive 1.75 meters. "What's your name?"

He looked at her askance from the depths of his hood, not turning his head. A long silent moment passed before he answered.

"Jarlun Phelth," he said flatly.

Something about the name struck a chord within Soronya's memory, but she couldn't immediately figure out what it was. She noticed Jarlun continued to stare at her for a moment, almost expectantly, before finally looking away.

"My name is Soronya Visht."

"I could not possibly care less."

"My teachings also said that Sith are very unpleasant and difficult to deal with," she said sarcastically.

"At least the Jedi got that much accurate," he replied in the same tone, stone faced.

They walked in silence for a short distance as Soronya's thoughts swirled. She was concentrating on everything Jarlun had said since she'd first spoken to him in orbit, attempting to resolve his assertions in relation to her teachings. Although there were certainly parts of what he'd told her that sounded evil, a large portion of it actually made sense. Was it possible that the Sith weren't monster by their very nature as she'd been led to believe?

She glanced at the large, scarred man out of the corner of her eye. It was true that Jarlun was violent, and very obvious that he smoldered with anger and hatred, but now she wasn't so certain about what she'd sensed as evil before. Tentatively she allowed herself to feel his emotions.

A sharp pain behind her eyes caused her to nearly double over. It felt as if she'd been stabbed with a vibroblade, directly into her brain.

Jarlun stopped dead in his tracks. "Never attempt to touch my mind again, or I will kill you where you stand."

Soronya forced herself to stand, the agony in her head subsiding to a dull ache. "I wasn't trying to sense your thoughts, just your emotions."

"Are they not evident enough? I make no effort to hide them. Anger is first among them, which I had assumed would be obvious to you."

"Well, yes, it certainly is."

"Then you needn't use The Force to tell you anything more."

"I'm sorry. Empathy is my strongest ability in The Force, I just wanted to understand you better."

Jarlun growled a deep throaty rumble. "Why am I not surprised that one of your hedonistic race would deal in emotion. I imagine that with The Force augmenting your pheromones they are a potent weapon though."

"I wouldn't know. A Jedi doesn't do such things," she said as properly as possible.

"Then why is 'Jedi Mind Trick' such a common turn of phrase? Pheromones wouldn't be much different."

Again Soronya found herself without a retort and realized that she truly despised arguing with this man. Then again she had to admit she was merely restating what she'd been taught. Either way, she was getting tired of Jarlun always seeming to have an answer.

"Where are we going?" she snapped.

"Around the clearing. I plan to disrupt the mining operation, but before we do, we'll have to disable that corvette. Actually, disabling them both would be ideal. I don't relish the thought of trying to deflect turbolaser blasts."

"Why not use your stealth trick to fly up there and disable it?"

"Because my fighter doesn't have that kind of firepower and I sincerely doubt yours does either."

"Maybe together..."

"What exactly do you study at the vaunted Jedi Academy? It certainly appears to not have anything to do with ships. That's a corvette; a blockade runner. It is made for the primary purpose of

punching through heavy lines of defense. Hence powerful shields and thick armor that a few concussion missiles won't be much of a concern to."

"Maybe we could just take out their weapon batteries? They couldn't shoot us then."

"If you could get through the shields and be accurate enough to target them while fighting off those headhunters, and any reinforcements sent up from the second ship here, then maybe."

Jarlun's tone left no question about exactly how likely he found the success of that scenario.

"Okay, then why don't you just use your Force ability to shut down their communications?"

"Just because I can manipulate The Force to take control of a single communication panel in a starfighter does *not* mean I can do the same to the numerous devices on a ship the size of a corvette. The Force may have no limits, but we users do."

The wording he'd continued to use throughout their conversations struck Soronya as odd, so she decided to ask about it. "You keep referring to The Force as if it was just a weapon. Is that part of the Sith philosophy too?"

"In some ways it is, but we do not view it as a weapon. Rather, we see it as a tool; the most powerful of all tools and able to be applied to a myriad of tasks."

"How can anyone who has actually touched The Force believe that? You have to be able to feel the connections within it. There's no way you can't sense the grander purpose."

"Which feeds the notion you Jedi have about Light side and Dark side, but that's also why you are wrong. Is there a Dark side to a hydrospanner?"

"Of course not, but..."

"What if I were to use that same hydrospanner to crush an innocent person's skull? Then would it have a Dark side?"

"No, that would be you..."

"Exactly. My thoughts and actions would drive the tool, not the other way around."

"But the connection...surely you can tell just by letting it flow through you that it's more than a tool!"

"Perhaps by its nature it is, but when we Sith and Jedi manipulate it a tool is all it becomes. Bioelectricity is not just an energy signature, but when I use it to track someone with a scanner that's what I boil it down to. Ions are not merely a fuel source, but when I pull them through an Engine's intake that's all they need to be. When I use The Force I don't need the ultimate cosmic representation of life, I need a tool."

The words were reasonable enough, but Soronya couldn't bring herself to think of The Force that way. Each time she touched it was an almost spiritual experience. She was certain that there was more to it than what Jarlun had described.

"How do you explain the presence of so many sites around the galaxy where the Dark side can actually be felt? We have records of hundreds of instances of Sith ruins that are tainted by it."

"The same way I explain Tibanna gas becoming a blaster bolt. Energy can be changed to suit a unique purpose, and I believe The Force is no different. In a place where a powerful Force user applied it to cruel or evil ends, why is it unreasonable to think the energy wouldn't retain that feel?"

"I...I honestly don't know." Soronya was confused, certain in her own mind that Jarlun was wrong, but unable to present any evidence to support that.

Jarlun extended his hand as he walked and a fallen log suddenly rose from the ground. "You can sense me using The Force, can't you?"

"Sure," she replied, unsure of where this was going.

"I'm Sith. I use the Dark side. Does The Force that I'm using now *feel* dark?"

Soronya stared at the man, suddenly afraid of what he was asking her to do, but she steeled her nerves and tentatively opened herself to The Force. The energy began to flow through her and she instinctively recoiled before realizing it was the same comforting presence it always was.

"No, it feels perfectly normal," the Jedi admitted.

The log crashed to the ground and Jarlun withdrew his extended hand, palm up. There was a faint crackling sound, and Soronya looked down to see thin tendrils of blue lightning dancing between his fingers.

"I assume you know what this is. Does The Force that's creating this lightning feel Dark?"

Soronya swallowed past the lump that had formed in her throat. She had been taught that Force lightning was a very advanced technique, and only extremely powerful Sith could master it. The fact that she had thought of Jarlun as a peer suddenly made her feel very foolish, and very uneasy.

Wrapping herself within The Force as though it were armor she stretched her senses toward the energy dancing across his palm, and made the slightest of contact. Anger roared into her like a ship entering hyperspace, clouding her mind. It took all the self-control she could muster to push it back.

"There is so much anger and hatred there! How can it be anything but Dark?"

The energy seemingly had a mind of its own, not allowing her to break her connection to it. It continued to flow into her, battering her thoughts with raw, dark emotion.

"Forget the anger and the hate. Feel The Force."

Using every technique for control and calm that she'd ever been taught Soronya began to peel away the layers of negativity surrounding it. What actually only took seconds felt like it was taking minutes, but finally she peeled away the last thread of rage. There, in the middle of all of the blackness was a ray of light; The Force.

And then the connection was gone. Jarlun stopped, and Soronya did likewise, not realizing she'd continued to walk next to him that entire time.

"Did you see what I was talking about? The anger, the rage, the hatred, those things were mine and mine alone. There was darkness there, but it was not within The Force."

The Jedi simply stood there, staring at the ground. She felt as though her world had turned upside down, as if everything she had learned at the temple were a lie.

"Then why? Why would they teach that the Dark side is evil if there is no Dark side?"

"That is simple enough to answer," Jarlun said sounding almost compassionate. "When a person is holding tightly to such powerful emotion, it becomes easy to use something as powerful as The Force as a means of causing harm. Yet the same can be said of any emotion. Someone who loves too strongly could use The Force to cause another to love them just as strongly. Would it be right to manipulate a person in such a way?"

"No. No, of course not."

"And that is why Jedi are taught to control and suppress *all* emotion. The Dark side is simply an instrument to add a level of severity to the repercussions of the losing control to emotion of a less positive nature. The worst of the Sith throughout history have sufficiently demonstrated the need to such control."

"Then the Dark side is just....what?"

"A parable. It's merely the moral of the story. A manifestation of the most negative use of a power with no limits to keep those whose will is not strong enough to control it from abusing it. Think on that."

Soronya fell completely silent, deep in contemplation, following Jarlun by instinct alone.

They walked for the better part of an hour walking a wide circuit around the landing site.

"I have a plan for dealing with the corvette in orbit," Jarlun announced.

"Ok, how?" the Jedi asked.

"We commandeer the second one here on the ground, fly it up and ram it into the first. Whoever flies it up will come back down in an escape pod."

Soronya was appalled. "What? No, we can't. That ship is full of innocent people. The slaves aren't the enemy here."

"I'm open to alternative suggestions."

Soronya thought for a moment. "What about taking their leader hostage and making her force their surrender?"

"These people are obviously criminals. None of them would see that as a hostage situation. They would see it as a promotion opportunity."

Jarlun stopped and squatted down behind a thick tree trunk. "We are almost back to the clearing. If you intend to stop me from implementing my plan, think faster."

Soronya's eyes suddenly went wide with excitement. "I do have a better plan! But I need a proton torpedo from that ship, and we'll need to take out those headhunters. Can we both fit in the cockpit of your ship?"

Jarlun squinted at the corvette appraisingly for a moment before his scarred face broke into a faint knowing smile. "I think I see. That just may work."

Ten minutes later the pair had managed to work their way up to the corvette unseen. Soronya kept a close watch on the field around them while Jarlun went to work slicing a large hole in the ship, right at the inboard end of the proton torpedo tube. As the large slab of hull plating began to fall Jarlun caught it in a Force grip, lowering it gently.

Soronya spun and climbed up into the opening. Once inside she found the tubes load sensor and bypassed it, hoping that doing so would let them unload the live torpedo without being detected. She dropped back to the ground with only the slightest noise. "It's done," she announced as she reached out to grab the large projectile with The Force. Straining, she began to pull it out of the exposed tube. Once Jarlun added his effort the task became simple.

The proton torpedo came out with a slight wiggle and the pair turned to dash into the woods, their prize floating silently behind them.

"That part went pretty well," she said as they made their way through the forest to Jarlun's ship.

"It's a sound plan. As long as we do like we've discussed and don't make foolish mistakes we shouldn't have any problems."

It took almost twenty minutes to arrive at the *fury*, and once there Jarlun immediately jumped in the pilot's seat to prep for flight. Soronya tested her hold on the torpedo, lifting it a handful of times until she found the load easy to handle. Once satisfied, she climbed up the ladder.

"Hold on, this fighter is only one seat."

“Most fighters are. It may not be the most comfortable ride, but we’ll be able to execute your plan. Get in.”

Eyeing the tight squeeze uncomfortably, Soronya let out a resolved sigh and slipped in, resting herself on the Sith’s lap. He immediately lifted the ship off the ground, closing the canopy as they rose.

The situation embarrassed Soronya, disrupting her concentration and she failed to lift the torpedo on her first attempt.

“Focus!” Jarlun growled.

Closing her eyes to block out the cramped quarters, she grasped the projectile in a firm Force grip. Jarlun hit the thrusters and they sailed skyward, the deadly payload trailing behind them.

Once she was certain her hold wouldn’t falter, Soronya pulled out her commlink. “Dee-six, where are you?”

A series of beeps and whistles replied.

“Ok,” Soronya replied, having no idea what the astromech had said. “Do you know where the corvette battle group that came up from the planet it?”

Affirmative whistle.

“I need you to take the ship and lure the fighter escorts away. I’m authorizing you to use the weapons.”

There was a short pause, but then *affirmative whistle*.

“Go now, we’re on our way.”

The tactical display in front of her showed the corvette and its fighters, but a moment later it indicated a new contact as Dee-six charged toward the enemy.

“You’re sure the corvette can’t see us?”

“No more than you could see me.”

“But you couldn’t do this with their comms?”

“No. Sensors are a single equipment package. You should really try to pick up some mechanical skills.”

Soronya merely shrugged as best she could under the circumstances.

One of the headhunters disappeared from the display, followed immediately by a forlorn whistle over the commlink, and then the four remaining small blips were moving away from the corvette. Jarlun angled their climb to bring them up directly beneath the larger ship and the fighter clawed its way out of

the atmosphere. It took a few minutes of flying, worriedly watching the sensor display for the return of the Z-95's before they were within the corvette's shield diameter. As they'd expected the shields themselves were down, the criminals not wanting to waste the large amount of power it took to maintain them without any enemies present.

"No indication that they've spotted us visually. Plant the bomb," Jarlun instructed.

Soronya carefully guided the torpedo toward the thin connection between the engine housings and the main body of the ship, but try as she might she couldn't manage to precisely control the large, unwieldy object. They watched as it smacked solidly into the bulkhead.

"Drek!" she yelled as it bounced away, slipping from her mental grip. The torpedo spun twice and stopped.

"We have to hurry," Jarlun said as he pressed a hand against the canopy. "They'll be able to detect us now. Plus, someone likely heard that impact."

Soronya watched as he smoothly guided the weapon into place and quickly spun the ship around. He kicked the thrusters to full power, angling them straight toward the moon.

The acceleration pressed Soronya firmly against the Sith's chest and she felt her ears begin to burn. She was very grateful that her circumstantial ally couldn't see her face.

Jarlun waved a hand and a moment later a powerful shockwave slammed into the back of the ship, causing it to shake violently. The Sith angled the fighter back around giving them a view of the corvette, now neatly severed in half as it floated harmlessly.

"That worked well enough," he remarked.

"I just hope that the crew is able to escape. I know they're not good people, but they don't deserve to be executed. When more Jedi arrive we can round them up and arrest them."

"Not likely," Jarlun observed as a series of smaller secondary explosions began igniting throughout the ship's forward sections. Soronya watched helplessly as the entire thing tore itself apart, finally disappearing in a final, large fireball.

"No!" she yelled. "What happened? You said that blast would just split the ship in half through the engineering bays!"

"This is why you need to learn about ships, Jedi. Directly in front of engineering in a corvette are the magazines for the aft torpedo tubes. That blast no doubt caused a chain reaction." His response was flat, remorseless.

"Why didn't you tell me that? I'd have insisted we place the torpedo somewhere else, on the engines or something!"

"And that's *exactly* why I didn't tell you."

Soronya was in shock, hardly noticing as Jarlun brought the fighter around in pursuit of the remaining Headhunters. It took the Sith less than three minutes to hunt down and destroy all three, and then they were entering the atmosphere again.

"You used me," she said miserably.

"I told you I would when I rescued you. Don't concern yourself though. Those people all deserved to die."

"How can you even say that?"

Jarlun guided the fighter into the same small clearing he'd landed in earlier. "I've dealt with them before. I know them much better than I care to."

The canopy opened and Soronya scurried to get out, to put some distance between herself and this killer. She stopped and turned back as he exited the ship as well. "That doesn't give you the right to be judge, jury, and executioner."

"Of course it does. Any fool can see that what they do is evil. That is judgment. It's obvious that their actions hurt the people of this galaxy. That's jury. I took it upon myself to ensure they didn't continue to do so. That was executioner. It was entirely reasonable."

A shudder ran down Soronya's spine. This Sith was insane.

"They all deserved to die, even the cooks and the mechanics? Everyone on that ship was evil? It was that black and white?"

"Everyone on that ship knew who they were joining!" he roared furiously. "They were all guilty, even if only by association!"

His anger seemed to have spent itself in that outburst, and his shoulders suddenly sagged. "I won't stop until they're all dead."

Soronya realized that this man's entire presence in The Force had just changed in an instant. Her natural empathy sensed that beneath the rage and hate was deep regret, and even deeper loss.

"What happened? How do you know these people?" she asked quietly.

"You've seen the symbol on their ships. It's the sign of 'Dying Star'. They're an organized crime syndicate specializing in illegal salvage and mining. If it can be dug, harvested, or collected, they'll sell it. They use slaves as a disposable workforce."

The name 'Dying Star' was familiar. Soronya had read about them in the archives, about something they'd done years ago, but she couldn't remember the details.

"I first ran into them just a few years after I became a Jedi," Jarlun continued.

Soronya couldn't stop the sharp intake of shocked breath at this pronouncement. This powerful Sith warrior had once been a Jedi? Jarlun didn't seem to notice the interruption.

"The council had sent me to mediate a mining rights dispute between two colonies on Munto Codru. The inhabitants were some of the most stubborn beings I'd ever met and I was in the middle of my fourth months of negotiations when 'Dying Star' arrived."

"The colonies were the perfect target for them. Readily available labor near a lucrative source of product; everything they want in a haul. They showed up in force, destroying all lines of communication and blockading the entire hemisphere. Hundreds of colonists were shot out of the sky trying to escape."

The tall warrior sat down heavily on a nearby fallen tree trunk.

"Being the closest thing to an official representative the colonists had and unable to contact the council, I confronted the leaders of 'Dying Star'. I'd been on the planet long enough to befriend a number of the people I'd met, and I thought maybe I could protect them. I was wrong. The criminals didn't even bother to hear me out. They simply overwhelmed me with their numbers; cut me down."

As he spoke, he absent mindedly stroked the scar at his jawline, his good eye staring off at nothing in particular.

"My body instinctively entered a healing trance. I'm not sure for how long. When I awoke I was buried under rubble. I spent nearly a week trapped like that before help came. When I missed several reports to the council they'd sent a team to check on me. I climbed out of those ruins with a missing eye and this lovely reminder," he ran his finger down the scar's entire length.

Silence fell, stretching on for what felt like a very long time. Soronya had begun to recall the story as he spoke, having read the reports from the team who'd gone to investigate during her training. "And the colonists?" she asked quietly.

"They were still there, on the planet," he said angrily, the emotion beginning to return to his voice. "All of my friends....the people I cared about. Those monsters worked them until the mine ran empty!"

Standing up he gripped the trunk with The Force, flinging it through the forest with the velocity of a concussion missile. The projectile knocked over three smaller trees before impacting one twice its size. It exploded in a shower of splintering wood.

"They'd been sealed in the mine and left to die! While I lay there, less than five miles away four hundred and seventy two people starved and suffocated in a mass grave!"

"I returned to Coruscant and the Council told me they were '*investigating*'. They forbid me from being involved; told me it was no longer my concern!"

He finally turned to look at her, his rage plainly evident on his face.

"I left that day, and I never looked back."

Soronya's heart was nearly breaking as she witnessed the obvious pain the memories brought.

"Jarlung," she said soothingly, "I'm so sorry."

"Don't apologize for things that aren't your fault," he said harshly. Without another word he spun and began to walk away in long, fast strides.

Caught off guard Soronya jumped up to rush and catch up to him. "What are you doing?" she called.

"Finishing this chore; there's still the other corvette and freighter to take care of, not to mention the crews."

Even after hearing how depraved these 'Dying Star' slime were, Soronya couldn't accept the idea of outright killing them.

"There'll be other Jedi here in less than half a day. Let's just keep them from escaping, and then they can be arrested and brought to justice."

"Oh, they won't escape, and I promise they'll be brought to justice."

"I can't just let you keep killing these people in cold blood!"

He rounded on her so fast she nearly collided with the big man. "You can't let me? How do you plan on stopping me?"

He grabbed her by the throat, lifting her feet clear of the ground. "I don't need your help, so stay out of my way or I'll kill you!"

"My masters were right," she croaked through her constricted vocal chords. "You're driven by revenge. That's one of the Sith motivations."

"What you call revenge, I call justice. In my quest to wipe these scum out I've destroyed countless slavers, murderers, and other depraved beings. They've all deserved it! Revenge or not, I'm doing what's right. Sith or Jedi, all that's changed are my methods."

"I'll stop you," Soronya tried to say, but the words just came out garbled. Gathering all her strength she hit him with the most powerful Force push she could manage.

Jarlung took a step back as he dropped the Jedi, and then stopped. Soronya looked on in desperation as he shrugged off everything she had as though it were nothing at all. He peered down at her over the tip of his nose, and then she was flying.

It was just like when he'd pulled her from the ship, but ten times more powerful. She soared through the air, demolishing saplings and branches she collided with. One hundred feet, two hundred,

finally she hit the ground, three hundred and fifty feet away. She rolled like a ragdoll until she hit a tree large enough to stand against her momentum, impacting like a meteor.

She lay there for a long time, unable to move through the agony gripping her entire body. She carefully used The Force to take stock of her wounds. Punctured lung and spleen, ruptured bladder, most all of her ribs and both legs broken, four fractured vertebrae and a severed spine, a compound fracture in her left arm and a sizeable brain hemorrhage. The small part of her mind that was still coherent realized it was a miracle she was even alive.

She focused all the concentration her rapidly swelling brain could manage into focusing The Force on healing the worst of her injuries; spine, brain, lungs. Dimly she was aware of the bloody massacre that Jarlun was about to reap on the members of Dying Star, and she pleaded to The Force to work fast enough for her to stop that from happening.

Jarlun stepped out of the tree line as though he were strolling through the gardens of the Royal Palace on Alderaan, seemingly unconcerned by the flurry of activity around him. His face was set in a hard scowl, the hood of his cloak bathing his features in deep shadows. He'd made it nearly halfway to the corvette before anyone even noticed him.

"Over there! It's that Jedi's partner," someone shouted from the direction of the large ship. Atop it a pair of Dying Sun shooters carrying long range blasters appeared.

They're fairly smart, thought Jarlun. Simultaneous blaster fire is certainly difficult for a lightsaber to deflect.

The snipers took up their firing positions as he continued his advance. He imagined he could hear the countdown that would synchronize their shots. Two separate blaster bolts lanced out at him in perfect unity, one heading for the center of his chest, while the other targeted his stomach.

His heightened senses allowed him a moment to appreciate how well planned their hits had been. While holding his lightsaber in his dominant right hand there'd be almost no way to angle the blade so that it deflected both shots; he'd have to choose one of the other.

His lightsaber sprang to life in a brilliant red glow, casting his shadowed face in a demonic glow as he brought the blade up and deflected the bolt heading for his chest. The deadly energy went careening back toward the shooter, sizzling past the scope to burn a hole right between his eyes.

The second bolt did likewise to the other shooter.

Jarlun watched his attackers crumple impassively, the tips of his dual lightsabers scoring sizzling trails in the ground on either side of him as he continued his advance.

Someone in the ship must have been watching, and ordered an all-out attack, because Dying Sun enforcers began to stream down the ramp. Jarlun's expression didn't so much as twitch. He continued forward at the same measured pace, staring straight ahead.

Blaster fire began to pour at him from the direction of the freighter and the Sith deflected the first few shots harmlessly away, but the amount of energy steadily increased. Finally it had gotten too much for Jarlun to handle, even working both lightsabers furiously. Risking a hit he tossed one of his blades onto the sooty ground, using that now empty hand to Force grab a large ore bin nearby. He wrenched the bin toward himself and placed it in the shooters' line of fire.

The sound of shots hitting the bin trailed off quickly as his opponents realized that they wouldn't be hitting anything through the thick obstacle. He could sense their frustration, sense them cautiously emerge from behind their own cover, intending to advance and flank him. There was a note of optimism behind the caution as well. They were obviously bolstered by the fact he'd discarded one of his own weapons.

He didn't feel even slightly bad for their foolish mistake as he firmly gripped the inactive hilt with The Force. The lightsaber jumped from the ground, igniting as it rose and quickly becoming a whirling red blur.

His eyes closed, hand in front of his face, Jarlun systematically worked the flying blade through the group of Dying Sun. Thirty seconds passed, the Sith unmoving as his foes screamed in fear and pain beyond the makeshift wall he'd created.

The blade soared around the bin, landing firmly in Jarlun's waiting hand. He shut the blade off and returned the weapon to his belt, grabbing the ore container once more.

The cronies that had poured from the corvette were approaching quickly; some near enough already to take a shot. All the bolts flew wide at this range, and the Sith paid them no attention at all.

The muscles in his neck bulged with effort as he flung the bin. It leapt off the ground, tumbling end over end like an out of control landspeeder as he hurled it toward the large group of marauders. A number of them screamed and tried their best to get out of its path, but the bin was moving too fast. Ten or more Dying Sun disappeared beneath the monstrously heavy bin as it slid to a stop on the loose ground.

The remaining attackers had paused as the bin passed through their midst, but took up the charge once they realized they'd escape the same fate as their comrades. Jarlun glanced to the right to see the dismembered bodies of the first group, verifying there were no survivors before diverting his full attention to the group charging at him. Satisfied that there was no one left to attack from behind he turned and leapt.

The Sith covered the hundred plus feet remaining between himself and the group in a single Force augmented bound, landing directly in their midst. All at once the charge devolved into panic.

Both lightsabers hummed threateningly as Jarlun danced through the hysterical mob, cleaving anything that came within arm's reach.

It was a slaughter. The few combatants who weren't killed immediately turned and ran, scattering in every directions. Jarlun spun in a slow circle; there were five of them.

He tossed one lightsaber, sending it chasing the first of the runners, and then turned his attention to the next. That one he grabbed with The Force, lifting him off the ground and snapping his neck. He let the body fall unceremoniously in a heap. The third was fast, opening the distance between himself and the Sith quickly. Jarlun motioned toward the bin, and it slammed into the man from the left, coming to rest directly on top of him.

The Sith reached behind him just as the second lightsaber returned to his grip.

He tripped the first of the remaining pair with The Force and telekinetically pinned him to the ground, burying his face in the soot. The man thrashed violently as he tried to lift his head from the ashes, but he was held firmly in place. Jarlun watched as the flailing grew weaker, and eventually stopped altogether.

That just left the final one. Jarlun looked for him, but the cowardly klattu was nowhere to be found.

"You can't hide from The Force!" Jarlun yelled as he stretched his senses out to find his prey.

There you are! He thought, grabbing the man and lifting him straight off the ground. Jarlun pulled the pathetic creature toward him, disgusted by the whimpering and begging coming from the thing's mouth. He stopped the flight a lightsaber length away.

"Where is your leader?" he asked menacingly.

"Please...please don't kill me," the klattu sniveled.

Applying the slightest pressure, Jarlun began to choke his victim. "I will not ask you again. Where is your leader!"

The klattu gurgled something, trying to answer or trying to breathe. The Sith released the grip on its throat.

"She's.....right.....there," it croaked out, weakly flicking a finger toward the forest behind him.

"Yeah, Sith, I'm right here," said a voice.

Jarlun spun, snapping the klattu's neck and raising his lightsaber defensively in the same motion. He saw Klix and the five members of her entourage standing a short distance away at the near edge of the forest. The trandoshan held a pistol leveled directly at the Sith, and as he spun she fired.

Jarlun brought his blade up to block, realizing the weapon wasn't a blaster but an archaic slug thrower.

How quaint, he thought as the metal projectile met the concentrated energy of his weapon, and passed straight through.

The impact as the round hit his chest, burying itself between the ribs on his right side, knocked him backward. He landed with a thud, the back of his head striking the ground hard.

"You know how long I've been waiting to see if that would work?" he heard the trandoshan hiss.

Jarlun struggled to raise himself onto his elbow, applying pressure to the wound with his free hand. His lightsaber had been knocked away when he fell and lay a short distance from him, the second one buried beneath his wounded body. Klix walked up to straddle it where it lay, then raised the pistol and shot again. The round tore into his stomach.

"Like the pistol?" she asked tauntingly as she brandished the weapon. "The slugs are made out of Phrik. You force-users know what that is, right?"

Of course Jarlun knew what it was. Anyone who wielded a lightsaber would. After all, it was one of only three materials in the known galaxy that could stop one.

"That's why we're here, Sith. That's what we're mining. A whole mess of Phrik. Soon enough there won't be a single scum in this galaxy afraid of your glow sticks."

That explains a lot, Jarlun thought. *If I survive this, maybe Soronya would be interested in that little tidbit.*

A predatory smile appeared on her face as Klix squatted down and retrieved his weapon. She examined it for a moment before opening the pouch on her belt where she'd placed Soronya's blade earlier. The pocket was not big enough to accommodate them both, so she left the flap open.

"You've been giving us grief for years, Sith. I've never understood it. If you were a Jedi I'd get it, stopping us for the greater good and all, but why would one of your kind care about us slavers and smugglers?"

"Because we don't control you...you're too independent," Jarlun answered through gritted teeth. He'd already begun to use The Force to heal himself, but the process was slow. Too slow.

"Nah....there's more to it than that. I've seen holos of the other times you've hit our operations. It's always you every single time. If the Sith were really trying to shut us down they'd have come at us in force. This was personal."

Jarlun threw out his hand, trying to Force push the group away. The third shot bored into his palm.

"I don't think so, Darth. Isn't that what all you Sith are called, Darth something or other?" She walked up close enough that he could have reached out and grabbed her if he'd had the strength.

"You know what? It doesn't matter why you've been hassling us. I'm afraid this is where your vendetta ends." Jarlun stared defiantly as the barrel of the gun came up to point between his eyes.

Someone behind Klix sniffled, distracting her. Someone else whimpered. The trandoshan spun around angrily. "Is this upsetting you babies?"

The question had been sarcastic, rhetorical, but she found her men all fighting back tears, weapons hanging limply in their arms. "What on Hoth is wrong with you worthless idiots?" she demanded.

Jarlun saw his opportunity. Grasping with The Force he activated the blades on both the lightsabers at Klix's waist. A brilliant green spear lanced through the trandoshan's right thigh eliciting a scream, while the red one struck her under the right arm and severed the limb completely. She crashed heavily to the blackened dirt.

"Never turn your back on a Sith," Jarlun growled, yanking his weapon from the pouch. He caught it with his damaged hand, spinning it around and bringing it down across her throat in one smooth motion.

"Boss!" the five henchmen called out incredulously.

Jarlun braced himself with The Force, fighting his way to his feet. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of movement.

Soronya was approaching him, looking like she'd gone ten rounds with a rancor. She hobbled painfully on broken legs supported by The Force, dried blood making her skin even darker than its natural color.

Seeing him stand, she called out. "Let them go, Jarlun! There's been enough killing!"

Anger flared within him, pushing his pain away. "There will have been enough when there are none of these vermin left!" Shakily he drew the second saber from his belt, bringing both blades around in a killing blow.

"No!" Soronya used The Force to launch herself toward him, retrieving her lightsaber from where it had fallen when Klix died at the same time. She just barely managed to get her blade up in time to block the attack.

"You won't stop me Jedi," Jarlun roared, flecks of spit flying in his fury.

He looped the blades out, one to each side. Soronya blocked the one on the left, but the right blade swooped around and buried itself in a Dying Star chest.

Tears started to stream down the Jedi's face. "Please! This isn't the right way!" she begged.

Jarlun grabbed another man with The Force, pulling him onto the waiting blade. The man screamed as it burned through his chest. The Sith sent his blade flying once more to take a third.

"Stop! Stop right now!" she screamed, too wounded, too pressed by the second blade to do anything.

Jarlun Force pushed the fourth man into a nearby tree, where he impacted with a sickening *crunch*.

"Don't worry," he said quietly, looking Soronya in the eyes. "It's almost over now."

There was only one man left, the lieutenant Cayllus. Soronya was determined that she would make this man face civilized justice, even if she had to kill Jarlun to make it happen. She drew as much of The Force as she could manage, sharpening her senses to the highest point they'd ever reached.

Swing, block, swing, block. The pattern repeated itself over and over. Her lightsaber worked desperately to find an opening.

Suddenly there it was, a straight shot at the Sith's chest. "I'm sorry", she whispered as she launched her strike.

"So am I," Jarlun replied just as Cayllus passed between them, guided by the Sith's telekinesis.

Her blade was moving too fast, had too much momentum. Soronya couldn't stop it. It passed straight through Cayllus' chest and into Jarlun's. Horrified, she deactivated the blade and let the hilt fall to the ground.

Cayllus fell right beside it, and Jarlun collapsed to his knees.

"I told you it would be over soon. He was it; the last of Dying Star, and no more me to hunt them down." He slumped onto his side, his head listing loosely. "The galaxy's certain to be a better place without us."

"Why, Jarlun," Soronya asked so quietly she could barely hear herself. "Why did they all have to die? Why did you have to die?"

"For order.....and for justice," he said as his eyes slipped closed. "The way of the Sith, and the Jedi."

Soronya reached out with The Force and felt his life fade, getting weaker and weaker until it disappeared entirely.

The Jedi fell backwards heavily, her broken legs and broken spirit no longer able to support her. She sat there silently sobbing to herself as Dying Suns' slaves began to emerge from the corvette and trees.

Soronya Visht's eyes popped open to see shadowy figures leaning over her.

"She's awake, Master Drallen," a voice said.

Groggily her mind struggled to remember where she was, why her master would be here. She slowly sat up, clenching her teeth through the extreme pain that shot through her body.

"You need your rest, my old padawan," a kindly voice, thick with concern said.

"Master, you're here," she said as she finally managed a seated position. She realized she was on a hover gurney, still in Dying Sun's landing area. All around her Republic medical teams scurried about helping the various groups of slaves scattered about the area. A scattering of other Jedi milled about as well.

"Yes, I'm here," the old Mon Calamari answered. "The council received the message from your R2 unit. Where is the Sith you reported?"

Sudden alarm shot through her as Soronya remembered what had happened. Craning her neck she surveyed the spot they'd both fallen. Cayllus' body still lay there, covered with a tarp, but Jarlun was gone.

"He was right there, master. His body at least; I felt his spirit fade in The Force."

"The Sith are tricky ones, child. You wouldn't be the first they've fooled, nor will you be the last. You did well though, rescuing these poor souls and stopping a dangerous group of criminals."

Soronya's head dipped, her eyes focusing on the thin blanket covering the lower half of her body. "It wasn't enough, master. I couldn't save enough."

"Do not concern yourself. You did everything you could, and you must trust in The Force that it *was* enough."

"Yes, master," she replied as she clasped her hands in her lap. The reassuringly familiar shape of her lightsaber lay beneath the blanket, clipped to her belt.

"Rest now, we will take care of things here," Master Drallen said as he turned and walked away.

Soronya allowed herself to collapse backward, unconsciously stroking the hilt, taking comfort in the familiarity.

Wait, she thought, something's wrong.

Lifting the blanket she retrieved the hilt. There was something attached to it, a disk of some sort. Curious, she pulled it off and rolled it through her fingers. A faint smile came to her lips as she

looked at it. It was a miniature holo-recorder, the word *order* hurriedly scrawled on one side, and *justice* on the other.

Soronya slipped it into a pocket as a medical team came up to load her onto one of the waiting transports. She couldn't wait to have time alone to see what the disk contained.

To see what other secrets of The Force it had to impart.