**Chapter 8**

When she woke, she still felt tired.

Not the kind of tired that was your body telling you that you needed to sleep, the fatigue of a long day’s work, no, this feeling was her body telling her that, whatever she’d done last night, it’d been the *wrong* thing to do, so now it was best to go back to sleep rather than face the consequences of what had happened.

However, Anaïs was a Jedi, and Jedi faced the world as it was, they didn’t hide from it, and she’d face the world. It was *very* nice and warm under the covers though. She’d face the world as it was in five minutes.

Rousing herself, she noticed how quiet it was. There was always a low-level hum when in a city, of airspeeders flying by and the comings and goings of millions of people. The lack of such a hum had been something that, on her Master’s ship, she hadn’t realized she’d gotten used to. Now, though, she neither heard the barely there sounds of a ship’s drive, nor did she hear the sounds of the city she was so used to.

The silence was almost deafening, once she focused on it, though she could hear the occasional tap tap of gloved fingers on a datapad. Forcing her to sit up and open her eyes, she blinked blearily, not recognizing the room she was in at first, nor having any memory of going to sleep. Master Lucian nodded to her, glancing up from the tablet computer he was reading. “Morning, Padawan. Morning-ish, at least,” he amended, glancing towards the clock on the wall, showing it was almost noon. “Good to see you’ve decided to join the rest of us. Use the fresher, and take your time, but we should be leaving in the next hour.”

Blushing at having been so slothful, she slid out of bed, picking up the clothing set out, the other bags they’d dropped off earlier oddly absent, and she quickly went through her morning ab-, her ablutions, cleaning the grime off that’d she’d gone to bed smeared with, giving herself time to think.

Her memories of last night were disjointed and ephemeral, like a particularly vivid dream, or a Force-vision, but not one that slipped away if she did not hold onto it tightly. She remembered killing those people, even if it was in self-defense, and shuddered, trying to calm herself, trying to let the emotions go into the Force, though they stuck to her like tar. The outrage at being attacked, the relief when her master had killed a few, the horror at realizing she’d killed one herself, and everything that came after.

Finishing, toweling herself off, and braiding her still wet hair, she once again dressed in clothing far different than anything she was used to. Jedi tunics were rough yet tough, function over form exemplified, doubling as an effective meditation aid as one’s learning to ignore the feeling of the cloth helped one ignore one’s emotions, keeping oneself centered in the Force. These garments, black and grey, slid almost sensuously across her skin, fitting so closely that it almost felt like she wasn’t wearing anything at all.

With that thought, she hesitated opening the door, blushing. Centering herself, she moved back into the main room, where her *male* and very young-looking Master was waiting for her. Tossing her a bag, she stowed her dirty clothing inside it and looked at him inquisitively. “What are we doing next, Master?”

“Leaving,” he said simply. “Our business is completed, and there’s no reason to tarry any longer. Oh, yes, I almost forgot. ***Listen.***”

The word seemed to reverberate in her mind, before a wall of sound hit her, nearly making her stumble. Sirens blared from outside, the sounds of distant blaster-fire easily heard through the window. The normal sedate but constant sounds of the city had a frantic, almost dangerous edge to them, and it almost sounded like someone screamed in the distance.

Her master watched in amusement, not saying anything as they left the room. Outside there was an airspeeder waiting for them, which they both entered without a word, their destination pre-programmed. Lifting upwards she got a view of the city, and it was a city in chaos. Smoke rose from a dozen different places across the metropolis, and one large building was still on fire. Turning a questioning look to her Master, he stared out over the city dispassionately, almost bored.

Noticing her stare, he casually explained, “There were quite a few targets here, they gathered thinking themselves *safe* in the Core. Our first visit tipped a few off, which made the others more. . . *difficult* to eliminate. Usually only a few supports need to be broken, but the power structures here were surprisingly. . . *robust.*”

Looking over the city, she had to ask, “This is my fault?” If her tipping people off, with her inability to blend in, had caused the others to know her Master was coming for them then-

“What? *No*,” the Jedi scoffed. “If you do something wrong, Padawan, I’ll tell you, so you can get better. No, this has been decades in the making. Ah,” he sighed in realization. “Only a third of this,” he stated, a sweeping hand indicating the smoking city,” was me, young one.”

“Then who. . .” she trailed off, trying to think about what had happened, and what she’d learned in her studies to be a Sentinel. “But you put someone in charge, so there wouldn’t be a power vacuum.”

“But why should the others respect my choices?” he asked, settling back in his seat.

She wanted to say, ‘*Because you’re a Jedi*’, but her master did not announce that fact. His clothing, as well as her own now, were no longer the traditional clothing of the Order, which compounded with the fact that he made her hide her lightsaber. She hadn’t even *seen* her master’s saber, though she assumed he had one, as *all* Jedi did. She did wonder what color it would be, whether it would be blue, like a Guardian, green, like a Consular, yellow, like a Sentinel, or something else entirely. If she had to guess it would be orange, taken for red at first glance, as it would fit the man.

Her master cleared his throat, bringing her back on topic. “Because. . . because you’ll kill them if they don’t?” she guessed. It wasn’t what a Jedi was supposed to do, though, if one looked at the historical records from a certain point of view, it kind of *was* what they did, wasn’t it?

Master Lucian shook his head, “Trying to control things that tightly doesn’t work. Trust me*, I’ve tried*. No, as long as certain practices are not permitted, I care not for who hold the reins of power on this little, nearly insignificant world.”

If *that* was his perspective, then she could see how things could play out. Being a Sentinel meant dealing with people, and understanding them. It was a Sentinel’s place to be in the world, but not of the world, dealing with those deaf to the Force to help all follow its will. She winced, remembering the events of yesterday morning. If the Will of the Force was merely the Force helping one achieve their own, benevolent goals, that put a hydrospanner in the works of *that* concept.

Either way, all of a sudden criminal organizations, likely a lot of them by her Master’s comments, would be shaken up, and those were often violent affairs in history. Other organizations, seeing that shake up, may take the opportunity to gain territory, or eliminate their competition. “Is that why the city’s a warzone?” At her question, her master chuckled. “What?”

“*This* little spat?” he asked instead, shaking his head. “This barely qualifies.” As if in defiance to his words, a small explosion halfway across the city went off, sending a fireball up into the air. Continuing on, not having even flinched as the ripple of the Dark Side that came from the explosion, as dozens died, washed over them, he informed her, “No, this isn’t a warzone, though it’ll be quite a while before you see one, if I have my way. You are correct though, Padawan, the struggle for power is what’s causing the strife. It will settle, as it always does, and order shall be re-established. With my warnings in place, the new status quo will be a great deal lighter than the old, and, Force willing, I will not need to come back until long after you’ve reached the rank of Master yourself.”

“So, you kill some now, and cause this, to make things better in the long run?” she hazarded, not really sure what good could come from the chaos, fear, and death she felt coming off the city like a choking miasma. “Like. . . culling the herd?”

Her master, unaffected by the negative emotions wafting up and around them, smiled. “Exactly, young Padawan, though they are not cattle, but people, capable of making their own decisions, and taking responsibility for them. With the nexuses shattered, the order of things will change, and with proper constraints it shall realign itself. Like a broken limb that has healed wrongly, and that has started to rot. Surgery is rarely a painless affair, but needed all the same.”

Staring at the buildings as the approached the edge of the vast underground chamber, she asked, “Are we going to do this again?”

She felt her heart drop as he nodded, “Yes, but not for a while. I see what Er’izma was talking about now, so we’ll be heading somewhere else instead. After one last stop,” he added as an afterthought, “Though you can stay in the ship.”

“I can come,” she argued. She didn’t like what she’d seen, but she was a Jedi, she could-

“Oh, you’re trained for space operations?” he asked, smugly.

She felt a little offended, she *had* been training for almost her entire life for this sort of thing. “I can fly a ship, not as well as others, but-”

“Who said anything about ships?” Master Lucian smiled, sitting back in his seat, not saying another word.

<<SWPP>>

They left without incident, her master once more donning his old man disguise, complaining about how violent the cities were and how he wasn’t going to come back any time soon. As he’d coached her, she looked embarrassed and insisted it wasn’t normally like that, distracting the person logging them out to let Lucian manipulate their control panel without them noticing.

Their ship was just where they’d left it, still invisible, and they were gone within an hour. However, after leaving atmosphere, the Jedi Master turned their ship around, and waited. Without orders, and with her Master waiting patiently, Anaïs had settled back into a meditative trance, trying to center herself once again. Away from the chaos that was the city all around here, pressing in on her in a way that Coruscant hadn’t when she’d been in the Jedi Temple, she found it much easier.

Time passed without meaning as she rested in the Force, calming her own presence and letting it fill her being. She could feel her master beside her, a dark storm on the horizon, but one unmoving, less a dark portent then a stable feature of the terrain, like a mountain, or a lake. Distantly, she could feel the city of Fabrin she’d left, the all-encompassing miasma of pain, fear, and death that’d nearly choked her small and barely noticeable from here. Focusing, she could feel the other cities on the planet below them, the currents of the Dark Side present in Fabrin spreading to them in some ways, but lesser, though several of them had swirls of their own, chaotic whirlpools that churned the fabric of the Force, but were already starting to slow.

“Master, did you visit the other cities?” she asked.

“I did,” was the totality of his response.

Feeling them out, things weren’t nearly as bad. “Are they better off because I wasn’t there to tip off the criminals?”

She opened her eyes and cast her gaze towards the Jedi, who didn’t respond. “A little,” he finally stated, “But no, it was mostly because I only had a target or two there. Most of the corruption and filth congregated in the capital, as it often does. Evil calls to evil. It is easy for the weak to stand up to a single, small foe. But dozens of them, enough that they clog the enforcement of laws, enough that it is not the many against the few, but the one standing against innumerable foes? That is where such things thrive.”

She thought about what he’d said, and took it to the logical conclusion. “Then. . . Coruscant?”

“Has needed to be cleaned for millennia, but is so entrenched that doing so would likely destroy the Republic,” her master stated matter-of-factly. “That is why I work in the Rim, where a single person can do more good, though I’ll stop by the other locations from time to time. Now, I believe my last target has arrived.”

Moving the ship forward, it closed in on a large, blocky vessel that was leaving Thorgeld’s atmosphere at high speeds. According to the sensors, it was an Action VI transport, the name and registration an indecipherable mess of letters and numbers. Master Lucian’s ship started to hum as the moved up behind the medium freighter, a bright blue bolt of energy flying over her head and arcing towards the transport, faster lasers lashing out from below the bridge as well, depleting the other ships shields before the first shot hit.

The larger, slower shot punched straight through the transport’s shields and splashed across the ship, lightning arcing along the length of the craft. “An ion cannon?” she asked, only having heard of the weapons that disabled ships instead of destroying them.

Her master nodded as the other ship’s engines flickered and died, as second Ion blast disabling it completely. “You have the helm, Padawan,” he announced, waving towards the pilot’s seat as he walked to the back. “Just keep it behind the transport, I’ll be back shortly.”

Without another word, he left, leaving for her to move to the controls and wait, wondering what was going on. A minute later, her console displayed that the boarding ramp was open, and she saw a flicker of movement at the bottom of the bridge’s window. It was hard to make out against the blackness of space, but a humanoid figure holding a small grey device, the back glowing bright blue, moved to the ship she was following. Stopping at an airlock, Master Lucian’s body blocking her view, the hull around him glowed an actinic white before he was inside, the device he’d used to maneuver to the ship resting against the hull.

The windows were dark on the ship, but she could see the dancing glow of flashlights as the crew moved about. The red glow of blasterfire sprung up on one deck, quickly stopping as she felt the barest sensation in the Force. It happened again and again, the pauses between when firefights started, sometimes interspersed with a white glow, increasing, though she never saw the bright cylinder of a lightsaber’s blade.

Half an hour later, the lights on the ship flickered back on, and the ship started to move forward. Nearly jumping to the controls, she moved her ship to follow, behind and above the other. Less than a minute after that, a dark figure that must’ve been her Master opened an airlock and clambered out, jumping away from the ship, the small grey device he’d left behind flying to him seemingly on its own, though she knew he was likely pulling it to him with the Force.

Catching it, he started to make his way back to his ship, the freighter behind him suddenly jumping to hyperspace, leaving nothing but a starry sky behind him, which he blended right into. Moving underneath the ship, the boarding ramp closed, and he was back, smelling slightly of blaster-fire and burned flesh.

“And that’s the last one,” he announced cheerfully, taking his customary seat in the captain’s chair, the controls in front of her moving on their own. “And now I believe it is time for us to leave.”

The controls around the bridge lit up as the ship oriented and made a hyperspace jump, the stars streaking out into a tunnel of light. “Where are we going?”

“A bolt hole of mine, in the Uphrades system,” he stated. “I believe, before your next outing, it would be best if your Mental Shielding was improved. Or, you know, *existent*. It’s likely done well for your ability to sense with the Force, whatever you choose to call it, but, as I’m sure you can tell, it will be a liability in your chosen profession. Now, return to your quarters and put away your newest acquisitions. We’ll begin your training in an hour.”

She paused, a question striking her. She’d kept on referring to this ship as her Master’s, and never thought to ask. “Master?”

“Yes Padawan?”

“What’s the name of this ship?” she asked. It felt silly, having been on it for several days and not knowing its name.

Master Lucian was quiet for a long moment. “It doesn’t have one. Nor does it need one. Go order your things, Anaïs, we start in an hour.”

There was a story there, she was sure of it, and, if yesterday hadn’t happened, she might’ve pressed, to argue that *all* ships needed a name, but she was starting to realize how much she didn’t know. Once she understood the situation better, she’d ask again, but she left her master on the bridge, to go put away her new wardrobe, something she never thought she’d ever do.

<<SWPP>>

Five days later, they finally dropped out of hyperspace for the last time. She’d done her research, when she wasn’t being trained, and had learned that the Uphrades system, several thousand years ago, had been known as ‘Coruscant’s Granary’. The system only had one planet, also known as Uphrades, which had been an agriworld that’d helped supply the Core with food.

However, during the time of the Inter-Sith wars, the Sith Lord Darth Angral had used the Desolator, an experimental superweapon that ionized the atmosphere, trapping the sixteen million inhabitants on the planet as the core was destabilized. Of the millions, only a few hundred survivors lived long enough for the ionization to dissipate, due to the efforts of the Jedi in making sure they received the aid needed. It was a dead world, on a dead system, and she could see why her Master had set up a base here.

It was forgotten, a footnote in the Republic’s bloody history against the Sith, to the point that there were no longer any hyperspace routes to it. Not that her Master seemed to *need* hyperspace routes to travel.

She was glad for something new; the last five days having been more strenuous than any of her time at the temple. He’d trained her physically, pushing both her ability to channel the Force through her body, and to use the Force to heal the damage done to her muscles by said channeling. He’d trained her skill with Telekinesis, juggling items in pre-set patterns, first while meditating, then walking, then while trying to keep away from him as he slowly walked towards her across the loading bay over, and over, and over again, occasionally jumping forward, which required her to dart to the side while keeping the items moving. She could only do so once in every three attempts, but that itself was progress.

He’d trained her in lightsaber combat, not using his own saber, which she had yet to see, but with an *actual sword* of all things. When she’d asked why, he’d taken it with a small, calm smile, as he always did when she asked questions in training. “I’m not nearly as good with a sword as I am with a saber. If we were to fight lightsaber to lightsaber, you’d lose. Instantly. With a saber, I’m still more than skilled enough to defeat you, but the gap is smaller, allowing you to learn. Besides, at this point you’re far more likely to fight someone with a vibroblade than a lightsaber.”

“Far more likely?” she’d asked. “Who’d use a lightsaber that I’d fight?”

He’d just smiled, and informed her, “No one you’ll hopefully see any time soon,” before he resumed her training.

Fighting him had been difficult in of itself. He didn’t use any lightsaber form she was familiar with, which made sense, as it was a *sword*. He almost danced around her, dodging her blade while attacking from different angles. If anything, it was like fighting three people at once, and every time they sparred she ended up covered in bright red streaks, the painted, blunted edge of the blade showing every hit. She could see the benefit of it, and she was slowly improving, but the fact that he refused to even spar with her using his lightsaber, even once to prove the skill gap he claimed existed, was aggravating.

Hardest of all, however, had been the training of her Mental Shields. She thought they’d been prepared, that she’d been centered, but she hadn’t been. She’d been in the meditation room, centering herself, when she suddenly felt a presence. Dark and twisting, it reached out to her, cloying like oil on the waves of the Force. It whispered to her, that her master was being too hard on her, that the praise she’s received at the Temple meant she deserved better than to be treated as a rank novice, that she’d do better on her own than with such a restrictive Master.

Opening her eyes, she’d seen the Jedi in front of her, a black box in his lap and a lightsaber in his hand, held idly between two fingers as he spun it, seemingly bored. He’d met her gaze, even as it was drawn towards the weapon, which oozed malevolence and the promise of power. “Noticed that, did you?” he’d asked, voice amused but his eyes intent.

“What. . . what is that?” she’d asked in reply, repulsed by the weapon in his hands. Part of it called to her, to the part that’d been outraged when she’d learned the Jedi had been lying to her about the nature of the Force this entire time, and that only repulsed her more.

Master Lucian’s eyes had seemed to bore into hers, before he’d given a satisfied nod, approval in his voice. “This, my Padawan, is the saber of a Sith I killed personally. Oh, if you’d ask the Temple they’d say she was merely a ‘dark adept’ or something similar, but the difference is semantics. It contains her rage, her hate, and a fraction of her presence in the Dark Side of the Force.” With a flick of his fingers, the blade had ignited, a vivid bloody red, causing her to flinch as the feelings coming off the weapon redoubled their attempts to call to her, though, with an effort, she’d ignored them. “This, my Padawan, will be your training tool.”

He’d flicked it off, and she’d let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. “So. . . So I’m to take this with me, until I can ignore it?” she’d asked, dreading the order, while chastising herself for feeling such fear in the first place.

Her Master had blinked at her, nonplussed. “What. No? That sounds like a *horrible* idea. No, you’ll be meditating with this, *only* while I’m with you, daily. You’re going to start with five minutes in its unpowered state, and slowly work yourself up from there. We have time to train, and to do it correctly. This is *not* something that can be rushed,” he stated firmly, with a hint of chastisement in his tone.

“But,” she’d argued, not really knowing why she was doing it herself, “the longer we spend training, the longer you’ll be stopped from helping people.”

He’d winced, and she’d known she was right, only for him to say, “Let me tell you what Er’izma told me, and why I took another apprentice in the first place. Teaching you is slowing me down, yes, but let’s consider this. For the *entirety* of your training, however long it is, I will not be held up, only allowed to teach you and nothing else. Say it takes you six months to reach *base* proficiency, so we could do something like we did on Thorgeld, in Fabrin, again. I don’t think it will, but assume the worst, for the purposes of this exercise.

“And say,” he’d proposed, “over the course of rest of your training, five years, if we are following the Little One’s example, one week out of four is spent on training that could be spent elsewhere. Not while we’re travelling, like we’re doing now, but time dedicated to training that I could use doing something else. That means I would have lost less than two years of doing what I do.”

She’d nodded along, following his logic. With five days a week, seven weeks in a month, ten months in a year, along with the three festival weeks and three holidays, it’d come out to be about that much. Closer to one year than two, actually.

“Then, you pass your Knighthood trials, as I know you would by that point, and you go on to help people. Do you think that, in your entire time as a Knight, you could do more than I could in just over thirteen months?” he’d asked sardonically.

The question had been insultingly simple, and she’d started to say that of *course* she could, but there was the point he was trying to make. Lucian had just laughed, “I see you understood it faster than I did, but you are younger, and less set in your ways. Even one such as I had to have the point driven home before I could admit how foolish I’d been for the last century, but there is always something new to learn. So, if it takes you six months, if it takes you six *years*, it will be time well spent if you go on to help others more than I could alone.”

So she’d meditated with the Sith saber, feeling it offer her everything she desired, whispering to her sweet promises she knew were poisoned, but still tempting. Now, on route to the *planet* Uphrades, she was doing so again. She’d offered to do it on her own, while Master Lucian piloted, but he’d refused. “I do not set limitations lightly,” he’d said, “nor do I do so without reason. The autopilot will get us close enough. Now continue.”

She’d gotten to twenty minutes before she felt herself tiring, before her mental walls started to buckle, and she started to consider what it offered. She knew it was wrong, and she wouldn’t give in, but surely *listening* to what it said wasn’t the issue, only acting on it.

This time the weapon, a shadow of its strength when activated, pointed out that her master was being *unfair*, walled off as he was from his emotions. That he didn’t *understand* what she was going through, the *suffering* she was experiencing with such *extreme* and *excessive* training. That he wasn’t *seeing* her talent, but unfairly comparing her to *himself*, a being with *centuries* of experience. That if she didn’t improve *faster*, he’d set her *aside*, cutting his *losses* and not *wasting* his time, *punishing* her for a standard she could *never* meet. How he wasn’t *valuing* her the way she *deserved*, the way the *others* back at the *Temple* did.

“Master,” she asked, trying to ignore the intrusive thoughts, “How do you deal with the Dark Side? I know I’m supposed to block it out, but, but I *can’t*.” ***Don’t admit your failure****,* the weapon warned. ***It will only cause you to be abandoned faster, just like those you grew up with abandoned you. I won’t abandon you.***

“Because you’re *not* supposed to block it out, any more than you can block out the air, or light? No, you let it wash over you, but not allow it to find purchase. What does it say, Padawan?” he asked without judgement.

***Don’t tell him. He’ll see you aren’t worth teaching,*** the weapon had hissed, concern for Anaïs clear in its tone, mixed with worried fear. ***Say I offer you power. I have, and do, if you still desire it. You won’t have to lie at all.***

“It’s telling me to lie to you,” she announced, even as the Dark Side hissed, ***No, not lie, merely a truth, but not his truth.*** “It’s telling me I need to prove myself to you,” she pressed on, blocking out the whispers telling her how *stupid* this was, how she was going to lose *everything* because she was honest with someone who *wasn’t honest with her*, which was *stupid*, because he’d been nothing *but* honest. *Too* honest, at times. “That you don’t see what I’m worth, like those at the Temple did.”

“The same Temple that had been lying to you, had all but sold you off for political capitol without informing you, that had kept you worried and in fear instead of taking a *single* moment to inform you of your *potential* Master?” Lucian replied, amused.

Anaïs’ thoughts ground to a halt, the tendrils of the Dark Side squirming against her mental Shields cracking as she thought about what he’d just said. *Wait*, why did she care what *those* people thought of her? Those jerks who’d praised her mental shields,when they were so poor she was nearly overcome on her *first* outing? What did *they* know?

***Yes, they were afraid, afraid of what you could become,*** the Dark Side crooned. ***As is your Master, but you could become greater than them, greater than him. You-***

*Oh shut up,* she snapped at it, ignoring it completely. “Why didn’t I think of that?” she asked herself, but her Master answered.

“Because that’s how the Dark Side works. It clouds your judgement, showing you *a* path, but one veiled by deception,” the ancient Jedi answered simply. “It doesn’t stop, but once you’re strong enough you can ignore the lower levels. This,” he waved the weapon, “Is not a lower level, I’d put it at maybe a three out of ten.”

“What’s a ten?” she asked, without meaning to.

“*Moraband*,” he replied instantly. “As well as other locations, but we won’t be going anywhere near any of them until you’re a Jedi *Master*, and even then, not without sufficient cause.”

***It is a place of power, you could grow strong with its secrets, secrets even your ‘master’ is too scared to learn,*** she was informed.

*All the more reason not to go,* she informed it. “How does it know the things it knows?” Anaïs asked. “To offer what it does?”

“It’s the Force,” her Master shrugged. “The same way the Light Side can offer advice and support, the Dark Side can offer information, for a price. To know to offer what it does, well, it *is* a dark reflection of yourself, just as the light is a reflection of your better nature. It offers you what *you* want, on some level. Wanting is not wrong, my Padawan, acting on those wants, in the way the Dark Side suggests, *is.”*

Tossing the weapon from hand to hand, she couldn’t help but follow its flight. She’d known that touching the item made it worse, but her master didn’t seem to notice, and part of her wondered if he might’ve misjudged this training exercise, over-estimating her own abilities.

“From what you told me, I assume you’re not handling the fact that your training was as complete as you thought. . . badly,” he stated, and she reddened in shame. “That’s not something to be worried about, Padawan, you *are* getting better. However, you got used to the Knights, Masters, and the Educational Corp ‘Jedi’ praising you, maybe even struggling to match you in some cases, or at least *pretending* to. The former is more likely than I first thought, given how standards seem to have fallen in recent decades. Now, you are with someone who is leaps and bounds ahead of you in almost everything, and relegated to the metaphorical back of the class, someplace you clearly aren’t used to being.”

***He’s right, you are used to being better,*** the weapon whispered, ***because you are better. He’s treating you like someone weaker, someone of less worth, someone like Jorrel.***

“Master, can you please put that stick away, it’s starting to annoy me,” Anaïs requested, not liking it denigrating the closest thing she had to a friend.

***But he is your friend, maybe more, and Jedi are not allowed even friends. Maybe you aren’t as Jedi-like as you pretend, but you could become something more. Something better. You coul-*** the sensations coming from the weapon were cut off as the box closed, sealing itself with a click.

“It doesn’t stop, does it?” she asked.

“No, it doesn’t, which is why constant contact to a source of the Dark Side by one not ready can drive one *mad*,” Master Lucian agreed. “The Dark Side of the Force is called so, with variations in every Force-using culture that *all* align in those paradigms of light and dark, because of what it does. It works in deception, in manipulation, in everything that involves keeping one in the ‘dark’ as you seek to keep others similarly blinded. It is secrets made manifest, turned to weapon and armor alike. The Light reveals, in all its terrible and wondrous glory, though that can be just, if not more, dangerous than the Dark.”

“What does it offer you?” she asked, paling as she realized how personal that question was. From just a few comments about what it offered her he’d been able to learn a fear she didn’t even realize she’d had, that was-

“Peace, Padawan. Did I not say the light illuminates? One must be careful, for many times the truth is something one wishes to not know, for, knowing the truth, one can never un-know it. Do you *truly* wish to know?”

She *did,* but instead said, “You don’t have to tell me.”

He raised an eyebrow, and waited.

“*Yes*,” she finally admitted.

“You can likely guess the main thrust, from what you’ve seen. One thing the Dark Side offers, without fail, is *power.* Power, and *freedom.* There’s a reason the Sith Code is what it is,” he mused, and Anaïs blinked, never having heard of a ‘Sith Code’.

There was a Jedi Code, of course, she’d had to memorize it for her Initiate Trials, so it made sense that the Sith, the Jedi’s opposite would have a code of their own. It was such a stunningly obvious fact she wondered why she’d never thought of it, before another thought, of how *this* revelation was just as strong as when her Master had pointed out the flaws in the temptations the *Dark Side* was offering her moments ago, that it drew unpleasant parallels to the Temple.

“And that is what the Dark Side offers me,” her Master continued unabated, “*power*. Remember how, days ago, I mentioned that to clear Coruscant of corruption, of true evil, would likely destroy the Republic?” She nodded. “The Dark Side says ‘*Good. They don’t deserve to let their evil go unpunished.’* That I am a *coward* for letting it run rampant, for *hiding* in the Rim instead of going to the Core, where I could help *far* more people. That I am a *hypocrite*, for letting a *false* view of the Force dominate the Temple when I seek for *truth* myself.”

Her master stood, and his Force presence, normally calm and restrained, started to build, the dark storm picking up speed as he paced. “That, with it’s help, I could bring the Order back to the way it *was*, to the way it was *supposed to be*. Not *weak*, hiding behind the Senate and only caring for the Core instead of putting their ideals into *practice* and helping the galaxy, like *I do*. It speaks of you now,” he commented, and she felt a shiver of fear run down her. What would the Dark Side say about *her*?

“It says you are a good start, but I need *more* apprentices, and I need to control you all more *directly*. That letting you grow and develop on your own is too risky. That the possibility of you falling, and breaking badly is too great. That it would be *safer* to break you down in a controlled manner, to drag you through the Darkness until *nothing remains*, and to shape that empty shell into something that can better assist *me*, that won’t *betray* me, like others have.” The Dark Storm spun faster and faster, the shadowy clouds starting to thicken, oozing a malevolence they never had before. A malevolence she had grown used to from the weapon, but deeper, more intense in every way.

“I *wouldn’t!*” she protested, and he laughed, a broken, disdainful sound.

“You think *it* cares? That *I* would, if I gave in? No, it says the galaxy is *sick*, which I *know* to be true, and that I’m only treating the symptoms, not the cause. That curing the limbs is useless when the *heart* is rotten through and through, carrying it’s *disease* to every corner of the body. Slavery, drug addiction, rape, the abuse of children, the *Republic* decries it all, but supports it all the same. The fact that Kessel even *exists* would be damning enough to prove their words nothing but empty promises, lies to fool the masses, the Dark Side spreading from those not even *susceptible* to its call, but the rest? Ryloth, Zygerria, Hut Space in it’s *entirety!?* No, it’s out of sight, out of mind, for the Republic and those who have the *gall* to call themselves its *guardians*,” her master spat, his Force presence an umbral hurricane, cloying, suffocating blackness that put the Sith saber to shame lashing out in every direction. The darkness around her, her link to her master, spread out, the calm shadows holding the cyclone of hate and rage and pain at bay.

When he turned, his eyes were rimmed with a sickly yellow, contrasting with the purple of his iris. “The senators are beyond redemption, having done the kinds of things I’ve killed criminals for, and more, or having supported it, having ignored the laws and morals they claim to uphold for *political expediency*. And the rest of the galaxy gives them their approval, *supporting* them, *endorsing* them in an endless cycle of corruption held up by those who *claim* to support the Light. But with the Dark Side at my command, and the Light, I could *change* that. The Republic would fall, as it should’ve *centuries* ago. No, I could create an Empire, a *Jedi* Empire, be a Lord of the *Light* and bring *peace* to the Galaxy. And, with the Dark Side at my command, Coruscant would *fall*. And, when it did, I would become a ***god!***”

Then, in the space between pounding heartbeats, he stopped, the yellow fleeing his eyes, and his presence calmed, pulling back to the Dark Storm it was before, distant and unassuming. “But I know it wouldn’t work, and in trying to protect the galaxy, caging it for its own good, I’d crush its wings, and become the very thing I hate,” he stated sadly, almost ruefully. “If I thought it might work, I likely would’ve fallen, but while all medicines are poisons, you can’t cure with *disease*. That is what the Dark Side offers me, Padawan, and why I know, beyond all doubt, that it is an offer one should *never* accept. Now, if you excuse me, I do believe we’ve arrived.” He left, taking the boxed Sith artefact with him.

She sat, staring at where her Master had left, eyes wide. His own presence had protected her as he’d looked into the Dark, and told her what he saw, and she didn’t know what to do with that knowledge, the knowledge she’d *asked* for. No, she knew one thing she’d do. The next time the Dark Side whispered to her that he didn’t understand it, she was going to tell it to go *kriff itself.*