

## THE GOLDEN PADAWAN

By Diane Lau

### PART ONE

My first recollection of him is one of the clearest memories I possess. Of course it would be so. Because it was not so much the sight of him, standing next to the Great Door in his long dark gray cloak, but that sensation, so strange and so wonderful. That feeling, like nothing else before.

So I asked my friend Cal: “Can you feel that?”

Cal, sitting next to me at the banquet table, set down his goblet and said, “Feel what?”

Feel what indeed? What exactly was it that seemed to radiate from the strange new figure who had just entered the hall? A hundred Jedi trainees, Knights, Masters were in the room, and no one else seemed to take particular notice of this emanation I sensed so clearly.

I took a different approach. “See that Knight standing to the right of the Great Door? With the golden hair, and the gray cloak?”

Cal sat up a bit to get a clear view. “Oh, the one talking with Master Djeda?”

“Yes, who is he?” I asked, agitated with the sensation that bore upon me.

“If I’m not mistaken...yes, I’m quite sure it’s Auri-Owan.”

“*The* Auri-Owan?” I asked, astonished.

Brenan Auri-Owan was only the best Jedi swordsman in the galaxy. Or so many said, and I believed. Hopefully I would get confirmation with my own eyes the very next morning, for I was among the lucky trainees who would get to be present in a special seminar he had come to the Temple to teach. I had never seen him in person before, but he had in a sense been my mentor for years. I had seen every hologram of him in the library time and time again, read every treatise he had written till his words were etched in my head, and applied myself wholeheartedly to his lightsaber techniques. My obsession paid off; in the competition to qualify for Auri-Owan’s seminar, I acquitted myself handily.

And this was the man himself. I did not wonder so much then that he should give off this strange power. I said out loud, “So, it must be the Force then.”

“What?” asked Cal, confused and obviously not sharing my experience.

I was not yet astute enough to discern the Force's presence in individuals except in the rarest of cases, with the truly great ones like Yoda and Mace Windu. And it was true, this didn't feel like that. But it was something, I was sure of that, and seeing as he was obviously great and gifted...

No. It wasn't the Force at all. The Force didn't make one feel like this. The emotions the emanation evoked in me were overwhelming: emotions you would feel for someone who had saved your life. Devotion...a deep and tender regard, with a richness that could only come from years of close friendship. This man was a stranger to me, so why...how was it possible? Who was he to me that I should feel this for him?

Just then something even more unsettling happened. His eyes, casting about the faces present at the banquet, came to rest upon me. The feeling got stronger and changed a little in quality. I tried to do as I had been taught, to quiet myself inwardly and be receptive, to let my mind's perceptions grow clearer. I looked the great Jedi Knight straight in the eye and tried to be as calm as possible. But in spite of my efforts, all I felt was a rush of baffling confusion, and in the eye of the storm, this emotion that could be nothing other than love. Why?

*Our destiny.*

I heard the words in my mind like a whisper, only soundless, the consonants and vowels present only in spirit. "Our destiny." The voice was gentle, affectionate almost, but under it was a current of great excitement and...anticipation. The "voice"? There had been no voice. And yet, I knew if I heard it again I would recognize it in an instant. Recognize it as his.

I felt Cal's hand on my arm. "Aeli? What planet are you currently visiting?"

I turned to Cal, my consciousness catching up, and said, "I have to meet him."

"Well, you will, lucky girl, tomorrow morning. As for now, I'm sure he has twenty Knights and Masters wanting to talk to him."

I stood up.

"Aeli, are you insane?"

"I'll be back," I told him.

I walked swiftly towards my target, terrified that my sudden resolve would dissipate if I allowed myself to consider for a moment this folly. Figures passed before my eyes, people coming and going from the tables, but when I could see him, he was still conversing with Master Djeda. And how did I plan on interrupting such a conversation? I had some stature among the trainees, being intelligent and good with the lightsaber and nearly of the age to be chosen a Padawan, but nothing to permit me to commit such an audacity.

So when I got there I simply stopped in my tracks and stood, my head bowed. Auri-Owan seemed to be completing some informal report to the Master, and at that moment he summed up. Then I heard him say, "Master Djeda, I see one of your good students has appeared to speak with us."

This was the polite way of handling the matter, but when I raised my chin and looked at him, I found his eyes sparkling with mirth. I dared think he had a bit of the devil in him, quite ironic for one in whom the Force had to be very great.

“This is Aelida Camil, she’s one of our best with the lightsaber,” said the Master graciously. “I’m sure you’ll see her tomorrow morning. Aeli, this is Brenan Auri-Owan.”

I bowed respectfully. “I’m honored, sir.”

“The pleasure is mine, Aeli,” he said, extending his hand.

I took it. Two things happened then. First, I felt warmth in his palm, a powerful warmth that spread rapidly up my arm. It was not at all normal. Second, I heard the voice again. *Don’t be scared.*

If he said it, I would obey him.

I looked him steadily in the eyes—for the record, laughing eyes of crystal blue—and spoke my peace. “I came to ask for the privilege of Brenan Auri-Owan’s presence at our table,” I said.

He laughed. He actually laughed. “It would be my honor,” he said.

I was certain Master Djeda was shocked, but of course he was too disciplined and well mannered to show it. “As you wish,” he simply said, and nodded his leave.

“Lead on, Aeli,” said the Knight, his eyes not leaving mine.

“Thank you, Master,” I said without thinking.

“You flatter me,” he replied, “but I am not yet a Master, good Padawan.”

“Not yet, but soon,” I said, giving him with my eyes all the respect I could muster. “And likewise you flatter me, for I am not yet a Padawan.”

He reached over and put his hand on my arm. “Not yet,” he said, “but soon.”

Then he smiled, and I felt a world of things about him. I felt how he fought his enemies by laughing at them. I felt how he hid his fears by pretending they were not there. I sensed how his trust in the Force was utterly unshakable. I discerned that he was almost ageless, a mischievous boy who could become a wise old man in an instant’s turning. I knew he possessed an infinite capacity to make me laugh, to engage me, to inspire me. I also marveled that one so accomplished, a renowned Jedi Knight, was still so human, so flawed, so much like me as I could feel him to be.

All these things came to me, but I wouldn’t have time to make sense of them all until later. In that moment, I needed to take him to my table, and I put one foot in front of the other and walked to the place I had left.

I found Cal rising to his feet, mouth agape.

“She did it,” said the Knight to my friend, all the while grinning from ear to ear.

“Brenan Auri-Owan, this is my fellow Jedi trainee, Calnor A’dur.”

The two shook hands, and I watched Cal’s face for some reaction. There was none, beyond amazement and wonder.

“You must both call me Brenan,” said the Knight.

“Honored to meet you, sir,” faltered Cal.

The Knight took the open place opposite us at the table. Our friends stared until he introduced himself to them as well. Then Cal regained his wits and called for food to be passed for the new guest, and I rushed off to find him a goblet of wine.

As I sought the steward, my mind was spinning. The long and short of it was, I didn't know what was happening to me. I compared it to every other experience of my life for some point of similarity. I had met great men before; it was impossible not to while training at the Jedi Temple. This was not celebrity-awe. I had fallen in love before as well, and it wasn't that either. I had barely had a chance yet to note what the man looked like, and certainly not experienced enough of him to feel some romantic spark. But one thing was certain, beyond all doubt: if I spent any time at all with him, I would grow so fond that I'd lay down my life for him.

The realization of this terrified me to the core.

What was happening to me?

*Don't be scared.*

The words came back to me as I took a goblet from the steward's hand. He had said that, don't be scared, and I thought he meant I shouldn't be afraid to talk to him about eating with us. But that wasn't what he meant, was it? It was this, not to be scared of what was happening to me.

How did he know? As I approached him from behind, bearing the goblet of wine, I was seized with the mad desire to take him from here, someplace we could be alone, and make him explain this to me. It was an extreme passion, and according to my training, set off immediate internal alarms. Patience, I told myself. As usual, your passions will be your undoing if you don't calm them.

So I touched Brennan on the shoulder and handed him the wine. "Thank you," he said. "You have only missed the very beginning of the story of my recent adventures, which your friends asked me to share."

I sat down to listen. He went on: "So rumor had it that this palace—the name of which, sad to say, is classified—was hosting the Sith Apprentice himself, and perhaps also a number of his cohorts. Cohorts we found in plenty, you couldn't knock over a chair without concussing a cohort." That drew a laugh. "Of course we expected some opposition, but the communiqué had been a bit vague about the number. My fellow Knights and I determined the best course of action was reconnaissance. In other words, get our asses out of there intact." He paused to examine the smiling and expectant expressions around the table. "In more other words, there will be no lightsaber battle in this tale, my friends."

"Aw..." I said, which broke the tension of the star-struck trainees enough for them to join me in a wail of regret.

"Yes, it's too bad," said Brennan, taking a hearty swallow of his wine. "So, with sabers well sheathed, we located a storeroom packed to the ceiling with what seemed like mostly geeddotubers. Now I like a good geeddotuber just fine, especially fried with lots of salt, but sharing the room with them for 16 hours was not so great."

"16 hours?" said Cal, appalled.

“This, then, is the moral of my story: Sometimes it’s glorious battles on the ramparts, sometimes it’s geddotubers.”

Everyone laughed. I commented, “But obviously you escaped eternal entombment with the tubers.”

“Aeli is wise,” said Brennan. “Yes, 16 hours passed, the place was quiet, we slipped out under cover of darkness and abandoned our mission. But the Council did find our reconnaissance valuable, at least.” We all waited expectantly for the details of this. “Come now, the Council is still allowed some secrets,” he concluded.

There was a collective sigh. Brennan set to eating, and we let him. All the while he gave off that sense to me, a warm trembling feeling, of something comforting and thrilling all at once. After awhile I almost got used to it.

These wonders aside, the banquet was amazing—sitting with the famous Jedi all through dinner was like a dream in its own right. To my surprise, he really didn’t talk a great deal, certainly didn’t dominate the conversation. He just as often listened to our dull student’s banter, or asked us questions and attended closely to our replies. He had a rather high voice, a little reedy, naturally soft; it was well modulated and he could speak with a pleasant tone reminiscent of entertainers or public speakers. I discovered I could make him laugh with great ease. I was known as a fairly humorous person, but he would even catch my quirkier comments, the ones I normally made more in order to amuse myself. After a half an hour we had all nearly forgotten with whom we shared our table, so like us he seemed to be. I would never have dreamed a Knight could have such a manner.

After the meal there were the usual requisite speeches for such an occasion, formal introductions of the various guest instructors who had come for the week’s activities. Then the event was formally over, and we were free to mingle as we saw fit. Once everyone was loosed from their seats, Brennan was quickly snagged by one admirer or another from the crowd.

I too wandered about the room, making conversation with my fellows and with a couple of the Masters who were my instructors. But mostly I availed myself of the opportunity to further contemplate Auri-Owan. The great Knight did not call too much attention to himself, a quality I had observed before about Jedi Masters in particular, but in other ways he was quite unlike them. As adept as he was at friendly conversation, I could tell he wanted to be elsewhere, I could tell he wasn’t quite getting to be himself. I liked when I observed him in a moment of laughter; that was when he seemed most natural. It was funny, I had always expected in the flesh he would be a very mystical, dignified sort. On the contrary, he would be more at home in a tavern, sharing ale with a friend or two, than in this exalted company in the Jedi Temple.

How exactly did I know these things? It felt so much more certain than imagination, although I had no evidence. The only clear facts before me were these: He was strong-looking, sturdy and broad-shouldered, and handsome in a warm and comfortable way. His most striking traits were the color of his hair, which he wore long and tied back in waves of spun gold, and a smile brighter than any lightsaber beam. But I could in fact not fairly judge him by appearance, I could not objectively analyze these clear facts, due to the still lingering sensation which emanated from him. It excited and soothed me by turns. In one moment I wanted to be by his side forever, in the next I longed for peace and desired only to flee to my room.

Finally, I let him drift away, quite sated for excitement for one evening, and resolved to calm myself with a walk in the Room of a Thousand Fountains before I retired.

As usual, the white noise of the water cleared my head of distractions. I relaxed, put the questions out of my mind, and reordered my thoughts. The first thing that occurred to me was that I had done almost nothing to prepare myself for the lightsaber seminar in the morning. Here it was, an occasion I had dreamed of for years, an opportunity for which I should have taken a full day to ready myself, and I hadn't even meditated for five minutes about it.

I found a remote spot and began the Three Routines, the key regimen of preparation for battle according to the teachings of Auri-Owan. I had been practicing the Routines for two years, practically daily, to make it so habitual that someday I would be capable of performing it unconsciously while in the heat of battle.

First Stance/First Focus: These were easy enough for me, almost second nature, and I found it soothing just to begin the habitual steps. The Stances were physical acts, the Foci were spiritual, but in each Routine both aspects were essential. In the First, you centered yourself physically, found perfect balance to left and right, fore and aft, connected yourself to your lightsaber in mass and weight and gravity. And meanwhile, spiritually, you sought the Force, let it infuse you fully, gave your consciousness over to it. When First Stance and First Focus were complete, you had placed yourself properly for battle.

I did not of course have my saber with me, but I imagined the handle in my grip, the flow of energy from the Adegan crystal humming in my palms, the precise length of the beam and thus the precise reach of my aggression. Imagining it was, in a way, more effective than holding the real thing: it forced me to use my mind. First Stance came easily to me tonight for some reason. First Focus less so: When I reached for the Force and opened to its flow, I had a twinge of recollection of the emanation from Brennan. I forced the distraction away. Much practice served me well...in a few moments I was satisfied with my spiritual state.

In Second Stance the Jedi turned outward, taking complete stock of his environment and also of his foe. Second Stance could not be properly executed without the benefits of having achieved First Routine: The physical steadiness accomplished therein allowed the Jedi to wisely and fully evaluate his surroundings, and the connection forged with the Force provided the preternatural knowledge of possible dangers as well as possible benefits. Second Focus, the spiritual side, would of course be utterly impossible without what came before. In Second Focus you evaluated the hidden power of the opponent, his state of mind, his emotional and spiritual strengths and weaknesses.

I could perform the Second Routine well enough in a training setting, in fact I excelled at it. However, I also knew in all humility that to do it in the sorts of circumstances Jedi Knights faced would be altogether different. As a Padawan I would improve the Second, I would have to. But for now, I did my best, and it was not terrible.

For this occasion, when I was in fact alone, I imagined my foe was the brilliant Auri-Owan. I recalled the impressions I had taken of him earlier, and I studied these briefly, not judging them or plotting about them, but simply clarifying my concept of my opponent. When I did the Second Focus well, and I was tonight, I would sense a balance between my own power and that of my rival, I could almost feel where the conflicting powers met, could almost see the borderline

between. See in my mind's eye, that is, for my eyes were closed that I hold more certainty in my conjured image of Auri-Owan.

The Third Routine was of course the most daunting of all. I would like to say I had a rudimentary mastery of it as well, but this would not be completely true. In the Third Stance the Jedi brought all his power to bear, gathered his physical strength, diverted it to the parts of his body which would need it most in the first attack, based upon all the knowledge gathered in the First and Second. This I could do full well, and did, as I stood with my eyes closed and my imaginary lightsaber raised. For the Third Focus, it was taught that the Jedi meanwhile laid aside all his passions and made himself nothing but a vessel for the Force.

And that was my downfall.

Granted, to do this properly was a challenge to any Knight, much less one not yet even a Padawan. But I couldn't even quite grasp the concept. To me, the Third Stance and the Third Focus seemed almost counterproductive, at odds with one another. Of course for a Jedi to fight successfully, he had to rely as much as possible upon the Force. But to become submissive all the while raising your physical powers to their greatest peak? How was this possible? When I gathered my strength, I consistently became more aware of my own powers, I felt my aggressive side come to the fore, I felt almost arrogant. This was, of course, the polar opposite of the submissive state I sought when meditating, when my sense of self diminished to the point where my identity nearly became lost. And tonight, same problem, I completed Third Stance while trying to do Third Focus—after all, they were to be simultaneous in each of the Routines—and I could sustain neither. The best I could do was to not lose the ground I gained in First and Second...and this attempt seemed especially poor, I was feeling bombarded with some sort of strange agitation...

"Trouble with Third then, soon-to-be Padawan?" came a voice from in front of me.

My eyes flew open. It was, of course, Brennan. "Master!" The word slipped out and could not be taken back, making things worse. "Oh, I embarrass myself!" was all I could utter.

He grinned, his arms folded across his chest, and a look in his eye like he was trying to decide how cruelly he wanted to tease me. The look softened; he had chosen mercy. "It took me six years to master," he said, "you would therefore insult me to do it properly now."

"I've worked on the Routines a long time...but nothing so important ever comes easy, I guess." I had let my arms drop to my sides. I knew my concentration had been good, for I felt as if I had literally dropped my lightsaber on the ground. I also knew it had been good because I had actually been picking up Brennan's presence, which had quieted now from that peculiar agitation to a steady warm humming.

"I'd say your work has paid off. Discipline is always more important than talent." He took a stride closer to me, smiling broadly. "Listen to me, I sound like one of my treatises."

"And shouldn't you?"

"Spend enough time with me, you'll never believe I wrote them. And I have no desire to talk right now, there was too much talk at the banquet. I assume you have your own lightsaber?"

Confused, I nodded. "Yes, of course."

“Then go get it, I want to try you out.”

The bottom fairly fell out of my stomach. “Oh no, I—I—”

“A moment ago you called me Master, now you refuse me?” His eyes were sparkling. The warmth I felt from him then reassured me, but nevertheless, this was my idol, and I was horrified at the prospect of showing him how poorly I fought. But in my rational mind I did want to do it. After all, what could be more thrilling than a private battle with Brennan Auri-Owan? How I wished I could steady my pounding heart!

Then I had a crazy idea. I remembered the feeling I had had when we shook hands at the banquet. So I reached across to him and took hold of his wrist for a moment. In an instant, the sensation washed away my fear, and in its wake was an overwhelming sense that nothing I could do would turn him from me.

“Do you mean my practice saber?” I asked him calmly, releasing his wrist.

I saw him look down as my hand drew away, a flicker of confusion on his face. In an instant he had mastered it and looked up again to meet my gaze. “Only if it can stand up to this, which is all I have with me,” he said, and drew his own lightsaber. The beam extended, pure gold, surely the most beautiful lightsaber I had ever seen.

“It’s magnificent,” I said.

“Thank you,” he answered in a modest tone, which wordlessly told me he had made the weapon himself. “Now go get your real lightsaber, I can see you’re good enough not to hurt me with it—bring it here quickly.”

“Here?” I asked, sorry at once to sound so disrespectful. “Not the Room of a Thousand Fountains, sir?”

He grimaced dramatically, feigning aggravation, and extinguished his saber. “Damn, I suppose not. But wouldn’t it be fun, slashing around trying to avoid bringing down all the marble and venzite and slicing up the regelia blossoms?”

I stared at him a moment, then burst out laughing. “Yes,” I agreed. “And if you and I had no obligations, I would be happy to do it. However, I am not even a Padawan, and I would get disapprobation. Worst of all, I would lose my privilege to attend your seminar tomorrow.”

“Hmm. Well, all right. You could recommend a better spot?”

“There’s a courtyard south of the trainees’ chambers, it’s quite large, down by the south end is far enough away not to trouble anyone, and it’s permitted. Sort of. If you were there with me, I’m certain it would be all right.”

“I know exactly where you mean. You run then, I’ll walk, we’ll meet there.”

“Yes, I’ll run—” I said, and did.

It was the worst possible circumstance to foster calm. I was giddy, and elated, and overwhelmed with astonishment at my good fortune. A private training session with Auri-Owan! What had I done to merit it? To think that my first chance to see him fight in person would be facing me over the beams of our lightsabers...And yes, I was still a little frightened as well. Frightened, but determined to do my best. And my best would, of course, require complete calm.



I reached my quarters in what seemed like an eyeblink; fortunately there was no one around, no doubt the celebrations still occupied most of the trainees. I opened my lock drawer and took out my lightsaber, sheathing it under my short cloak. I dashed out, down the hall as fast as I could without looking peculiar if anyone were to see me, trying at least to *look* calm.

In truth, I didn't even want to be calm. I asked myself if this hadn't been the most amazing evening of my life. My Jedi training told me no occasion was exempt from being lived with as much clarity and serenity as possible, but I had never been fond of that teaching and certainly had no use for it at the moment. Brenan Auri-Owan attended me in the south courtyard! Could it be happening?

I didn't believe it truly until I arrived, breathless, in the moonlit stretch beyond the orleander grove...and there found the man leaning motionless against the nearest tree.

"I hurried," I said, panting.

"So I see," he replied, and his smile was bright even in darkness. "Catch your breath, Aeli. Let me see your saber."

I handed it over and watched him ignite the beam and test the weapon's weight. "You could handle a little more, I'd say. Just because you're a woman doesn't mean the beam should run short." Brandishing my lightsaber, he ran through the five positions. His grace was breathtaking. He extinguished the beam and passed the weapon to me. "Do you need more time?"

"Truthfully? I could use another year or two. But now seems to be the moment the Force has chosen." I laughed, a little nervously. At that moment, my preference would have been simply to watch him fight.

"Syzac's Drill?" he asked, taking up his own lightsaber.

For purposes of preserving the life and limb of trainees, lightsaber practice was choreographed. There was a whole range of classic drills one learned by rote. Trainees always practiced against Knights or Masters, and each opponent had his own required movements. Just as in a dance, one led and one followed; the "Master's part" led and it was his role to set the tempo, while the "Padawan's part" was to match his better's pace and lead. Syzac's was an extremely popular drill of moderate difficulty, although up tempo it became quite challenging, and was often used as a high difficulty drill by being executed double-time.

"I could do it double if you like," I offered.

"Standard to warm up. You have plenty of time to impress me, soon-to-be Padawan. Take as long as you need to, when I see your eyes open I'll know you're ready."

We faced off and ignited our lightsabers. "Prepare," said Brenan. I closed my eyes and did the Three Routines. To my relief, years of exercising thus on a daily basis had paid off; even under these most stimulating of circumstances, I managed to get decent focus. I opened my eyes.

What I saw astounded me. Brenan had so completely stilled himself it was palpable. He was not blank or emotionless: on the contrary, if anything his presence had grown more intense. But it was a perfectly centered presence, he expended no energy of any kind as he anticipated engagement. This was so different from his normal mode of being that it unsettled me. And I

could feel no emanation from him as I had before. That, more than anything, threw off my concentration completely.

So I stared at him with my jaw hanging, totally undone.

“What is it?” he said.

And that quickly, he was back. Brennan was completely himself again. I even felt the sensation return, the warm silent murmur. “I’m so sorry,” I said. “It was just that you were—so different—it threw me off.” I hung my head. “That’s no excuse.”

He extinguished his saber and lowered it. “You need a moment,” he told me. That was the understatement of the year. I likewise turned off my lightsaber and took a deep sigh. I closed my eyes to try again, but his voice stopped me. “No, come here a minute.”

We each took a step toward each other and then he took a second one. His hand took me by the chin and raised my face. I looked him in the eyes...

...and fell in. Or dove in. It seemed more the latter, or rather that I was pulled. Yes, that was it, I was drawn in...and what appeared silver in the dim light grew more and more blue the deeper I went, more blue and clearer and simpler. “Just be quiet,” he instructed, in a low voice. That was all he had to say. I needed to know no more than his will. All the noise passed out of me.

The Knight released my chin, stepped back, keeping his eyes steady on mine. “Prepare,” he said. I nodded, unblinking. “Engage.” Our sabers raised and their beams touched, his gold against my green. He took the first move and the drill was on.

If I had ever done Syzac’s at standard pace so well, I could certainly not recall it. Of course it wasn’t me, it was Brennan. His moves were so even, his timing so perfect, it was hard not to get caught up in the steady flow. I had done Syzac’s with our instructor at the Temple, Master Wed’azon, and thought him quite accomplished. There was no comparison. I had never before noticed the balance in the way the drill was arranged, the crescendo of energy which built and then resolved in the final moves, like a concerto. Now it was so obvious. When we completed the final sweep, from tail position to upper, I almost felt an echo through the courtyard like the dying notes of an orchestra.

“Very good,” said Brennan, his face illuminated golden from his saber beam. “Double then?”

I nodded, not wanting to speak and break the spell of my own quietness.

“Prepare,” he said.

I closed my eyes briefly just to be sure I was still clear, then opened them.

“Engage.”

How clever of Master Syzac...of course, the drill was meant to be run at double pace. At this speed, in each move one created the energy for the next one. I felt a spark of giddiness but quelled it at once with the echo of his voice in my mind: “Just be quiet.” My concentration focused all the more. I noticed then how Auri-Owan was adjusting his motion to accommodate my size and weight, something Master Wed’azon rarely did, much less with such complete consistency. He anticipated my every position with perfect accuracy. The force of each blow was measured to match the force of mine, to keep our mutual balance perfect. I knew that were this real battle, he would have used the same skills to overpower me in moments, knowing how

to destroy my balance as much as to augment it. I wondered if he couldn't simply overpower me with a look, in fact.

The final sweep came too soon, I wanted it to go on and on.

"Excellent," said Brennan warmly. "You have much talent, in fact I think there's more to be seen." He smiled, and reached over to clasp me on the shoulder.

"To be truthful, you make me feel like I could do anything. I suppose you have that effect on any training partner."

"That's what I should do, but it doesn't always work quite so well. Do you know Celanarian's Drill?"

My breath caught. "Yes, I've chosen it for my final this year."

"Do you have it ready, then?"

My heart was pounding. "I know my part, but I haven't been able to practice with a partner. No one here knows Celanarian's except Master Wed'azon."

"Well then, it's a good thing I showed up. By the end of the week you'll be able to do it backwards."

I can't even describe the thrill these words brought me. Apparently my expression revealed some of it, because Brennan said, "Prepare. And take an extra moment this time."

I did as I was told. I found great motivation in the fact that I loved Celanarian's and had been simply dying for the Master to find time to practice with me. Just getting to perform the drill at last was wonderful enough. And doing Syzac's had shown me what possibilities there were with the right partner...

...and I had never had a partner like this one.

*Just be quiet.* It was amazing how well that worked. I opened my eyes.

"Engage," he said.

He took it at a slowish pace, but I was glad. There was much adjusting to be done when the Master's moves were added. When our beams engaged and his force repelled mine so perfectly, I found again I could use the energy in the next motion, so it was less work and I had to diminish my effort to keep proper balance. It didn't take long to make the correction, so only the first minute of the drill was a bit rough.

The coup de gras of Celanarian's was in the closing moves, when the Padawan took a full arm right swing at the Master's head while he ducked, then the Padawan switched momentum and took a full arm left slice at the Master's calves while he jumped. It was still a training drill, that was why the blows were directed at the Master, who would most certainly have the skill to avoid injury, assuming the Padawan was at the level required to attempt Celanarian's. Secretly, though, I wondered if Master Wed'azon's constant delaying of meeting me for practice wasn't in part due to some fear of these final moves.

As we passed through the moves of the middle portion of the drill, I pushed all thoughts from my mind about the denouement. I had practiced it 500 times, there was no contact involved to throw

me off, and I had always envisioned the drill against Master Wed'azon who was of similar height to Brenan. One move at a time, and the best I could do at each, that was how I proceeded.

And as difficult as the last stretch of Celanarian's was, I felt no worry. It was almost as if each time my beam connected with Brenan's, meeting in the perfectly planned spot in mid-air, my confidence increased. I thrust, I spun, I swung the lightsaber in an even arc to meet the swing of his in perfectly balanced force. Before I knew it the moment was upon us.

He ducked and I cleared his golden head by an easy ten inches. I switched momentum effortlessly, the beam over my head and then down, and it whisked under his boots and back up. I spun with the inertia and came back to connect with his raised beam, which stopped me motionless.

We stood still, me breathing hard, staring at each other. Brenan broke into a broad grin, then started to laugh. I joined him, my laughter ragged as I tried to catch my breath. "I didn't...kill you!" I exclaimed.

"You wouldn't dare," he replied brightly.

"Oh by all the gods, that was incredible!"

"Backwards it will be even more impressive."

I looked at him quizzically.

"I'm kidding!" he cried. "Celanarian would come back and haunt us if we abused his drill like that. Him and that freakish braided beard of his."

At this I burst out laughing again. The energy of the drill—the grace of Brenan's execution—had permeated me head to toe. I wanted to dance, to sing, I put out my arms and suddenly we were embracing, he was laughing at my laughter and I felt it all over, both physically and in that other, strange way.

Holding me by the shoulders, he pushed me out to arm's length and said, "Give me five days, I'll have you at least three-quarters faster." Then he added mischievously, "And I dare say your lightsaber Master couldn't match a faster tempo anyway."

I gave him a cheerful and conspiratorial nod. "No possible way." I burst into a fit of giggling.

"You are in a wild mood now, aren't you?" he said with a smile.

"I'm prone to wild moods, sir," I said, stifling myself a little.

"A girl after my own heart. Well, it looks like you won't be able to sleep anytime soon. How about we share an ale or two so you can wind down? I used to frequent Meri-Borx Tavern when I was here, and I've heard it's still open."

"It is, but I've never been there."

"Well, it's the perfect place to go on a night like this if you are the only woman ever to do Celanarian's Drill with Auri-Owan. Come with me."

So I walked by his side, wondering if he would ever give me a command I wouldn't want to obey.

The walk to the Borx was nearly a mile, but I hardly noticed. I was, to put it bluntly, glorying in my triumph. The first woman to do Celanarian's with Brenan Auri-Owan! It was stunning to contemplate.

"I can't get over the way it felt doing the overhead momentum switch at the end," I told Brenan excitedly as we walked. "Almost effortless. I swear that's the best I've ever done it."

"You have my approval. No criticism there."

I quickened my pace to keep up with his long strides. "Shouldn't you be instructing me right about now to have some humility?"

Still looking straight ahead, he smiled. "Oh no, I'm not going to be the one to rain on your parade. Enjoy the moment all you want. This is your reward for all those hours in the training rooms."

This hardly seemed like Jedi philosophy to me, but I certainly liked hearing it. "I don't know, I feel like I ought to be taken down a peg or two."

"Don't worry," he said, giving me a stern look. "Over the next days I'll take you down three or four, believe me."

Just as I started to worry about his reproving tone, he cracked a smile; I wondered if the man was ever not joking. My elation flooded back. "You're really going to train me..." I actually skipped as I said this.

"I'm really going to train you."

"I still can't believe it. How can I repay you?"

As swiftly as if he had been expecting the question, he replied, "Do a demonstration with me tomorrow morning."

I almost tripped. "A demonstration?"

"I thought your execution of Syzac's doubled was really fine." I stared at him, speechless. He ignored my incredulity and continued, "Although bear in mind I will have criticism, which of course I'll share with all your fellows, regardless of any humiliation it might cause."

"I dare say I'll have a worse problem with everyone being jealous and hating me."

"Too bad, it'll simply be your task to deal with that."

In my giddiness I slapped his arm for this comment. He burst out laughing. I wanted to hug him but I still had a little mastery of myself, and refrained. "All right, all right...I thank you for asking me, I'd be honored of course. Do you want me to try to make some mistakes so you actually have something to criticize?"

"Ahhh..." he said, turning to me with an approving smile. "Very amusing. I'm making a mental note to take you down five or six pegs, soon-to-be Padawan."

We came upon the Borx and he opened the door for me. It was dark, warm, and lively inside, but not so crowded that I was intimidated. "My old table!" cried Brenan, and led me to a corner where a very old table indeed stood, flanked by three padded, worn out chairs. We took two of them and Brenan called over the steward and ordered two cups of ale.

"I've been away too long," he said nostalgically as we settled in.

"How often do you come back to the Temple?" I asked.

"Only when the Council has business with me, maybe twice a year at most."

This news stung, but then it came as no surprise. He was a Knight, he had business all over the galaxy, it wasn't as if Coruscant would see much of him. But I wasn't going to think about this now, not when the prospect of five days training with him loomed ahead.

"About the training," I said, "how is your schedule? I mean, they must have you busy most of the time."

"My schedule gives me two hours each afternoon at three, for meditation. That's standard operating procedure."

"But you can sacrifice that?"

"Hmm...meditation or lightsaber training, which would I choose?"

I laughed. "Well, I've got those two hours free, and if I didn't, I would make them so." Our cups were delivered to the table; we both drank. Then I said, "Tell me though, what did you think was my greatest weakness?"

Brenan set down his cup, smiling. "You had a bit of a problem with emotional control, but then I think you know that."

"Yes, I do," I said, feeling myself blush. "It's chronic. It's not that I'm not aware, it's not that I don't try to do better...I know I can't become a Knight without beating it. And I knew full well I had to get a grip before I could fight you." It came back to me then, the feeling of falling/being pulled into his eyes, the quieting blueness of it, and I shivered. "But then," I said cautiously, "you fixed that."

He looked back at me steadily. "So it seemed."

I squinted at him. "How did you do that?"

He paused. "It's not something that's actually happened before," he said, all seriousness now.

"It hasn't?"

"Describe it to me," Brennan said, fixing me with strangely compelling gaze.

"You took me in your eyes," I told him, unhesitatingly. "It was so calming, irresistibly calming. I lost myself. No, that's not it, I was still there, I was almost *more* there...but all the rushing in my head stopped. Oh gods..." Something amazing had just occurred to me. "That's it!"

"What?"

"The key to the Third Routine. Now I see it..."

A half smile came over his face. He knew what I meant.

I went on excitedly. "I doubt I could do it on my own, but at least I think I see it now. I was truly more there, and yet—no passion—"

Brenan looked most amused. "There's hope for you yet," he said gently.

His hand was curled around his cup, and I reached over and folded mine over it, urgently. “Only if you teach me,” I told him. “No one else has, and believe me, they’ve tried.”

“You’re that intractable?” he laughed.

“No really, I am, I’m completely intractable!” I pulled back my hand.

“Imagine me, a teacher.”

“You’re a natural...how else could you have—?...but you said this never happened before?”

The mirth left his eyes. We stared at each other for a long moment. The emanation I felt from him waxed more intense, there was a new aspect to it, half agitation and half elation.

“It never happened before,” he said.

“What’s happening to me, Brenan?” I asked him. “Can you feel it too?”

He took a swallow of ale to buy himself a moment. Then he said, “I heard you. When you came up to me at the banquet.”

“You... ‘heard me’?”

“Not audibly. Telepathically.”

“What did I say?”

He set down his cup and looked at me. “You said, ‘I’m so scared.’”

My stomach dropped out of me.

He went on, “I could feel it too, your fear and this intense confusion, almost panic. I wanted so much to reassure you, to make your fear go away, but of course we hadn’t even spoken yet.”

I grabbed his hand again. “But I heard you!” He stared back at me quizzically. “I heard you say ‘Don’t be scared,’ and all my fear left me. I heard you say it.”

“I’ll be damned,” he said, in a whisper.

“What is this?” I asked him, pleading. “There was another time, too—”

“When I first came in the hall.”

“Yes, that’s it. What happened when you first came in the hall?”

His eyes glazed over a little as he recalled it. “I walked in the room, and I felt something. Something very unfamiliar. Like a life-force, only...only it was...the only word I can think of is magical. It felt this peculiar, magical way. I looked for the source of it. I reached out to find it, I used the Force. Then I found you. When I looked at you, across the room, I forgot what I was doing, because you were so agitated. I could feel you, exuding...how can I describe it?... something like awe.”

“Yes.”

“Directed towards me. It was all focused on me.”

“What did I say to you?”

His stare had become so intense I started trembling. "You said..." He blinked slowly and forced it out. "You said, 'Why do I love you so?'"

I swallowed hard. Then I said hoarsely, "That must have been quite frightening."

"It wasn't," he replied at once. "Which I agree is odd, in and of itself."

"And how did you answer?"

He looked at me long and hard. Then he said, "Aeli, you tell me."

I didn't hesitate. "You said, 'Our destiny.'"

He blinked, silent.

"Brenan, there was great certainty in it. You know what's happening to us, don't you?"

He sighed. He looked down at the table with fierce concentration. I let him think, I watched him think and I felt it, I felt it as a wrestling, a struggle between caution and euphoria. Finally he looked up and me and said, "Yes, I think I know. But I'm not certain. And I can't tell you until I know for sure."

"When will you know for sure?"

He leaned forward. "There's something I have to do first. Once I've done it, I'll know. And I promise I'll tell you then."

My reaction to this surprised even me. I wanted this opportunity to trust him. I wanted my patience and faith to be tested. I wanted to experience him keeping a promise to me.

"All right," I said.

"Thank you," he replied.

It wasn't until then that I realized all this while I had been holding his hand, clinging to his large, strong fingers with a veritable death grip. I pulled back my hand. We both leaned back and took deep breaths. Well, I thought, even a Knight can become agitated and distraught. Rather than amusing me, this thought only increased my alarm. So then I said, by way of changing the subject, "Tell me a story, a good one."

He smiled slightly. "What kind of story?"

"Tell me about the most terrible foe you beat in battle."

"You weren't frightened enough by the story of the geddotubers?"

I laughed. "No, I want something even more horrific. If you can decide what was the worst."

He raised his cup to drink. "No problem there." A long swallow, and he began, "Do you remember two years ago, that terrible problem the Republic was addressing with heaven's chain trafficking?"

"The drug cartel on Naboo? Of course. That was shut down, I remember it was big news."

"That was me," he said softly.

"It was?" I leaned forward. "Tell me."

"Swear you won't tell anyone else."



“I swear.”

“And it’s a grim story. How much detail do you want?”

“If a Knight had to endure it, then I might someday. Whatever you want to tell me.”

“All right, and I pray you won’t.” He leaned forward too and spoke more quietly. “I can’t believe I’m going to tell this. Oh well... His name was Quel-zil, the cartel made him a guardian, their most important guardian, and not because he was any great mind or strong fighter. He was just mad beyond all comprehension. They put him in charge of their hoard of heaven’s chain. Nobody knew how much they had in there, in this cave in the Regoine Mountains, but there was no doubt as to the importance of the stash. Our spies found the location, learned about Quel-zil, or something of him at least. I had to go in alone, it was the nature of the mission.”

“Alone? Why you?”

“My Master made that choice.”

“Yoda,” I said, knowing that Brennan had served as Padawan under the great Jedi Master. “Not much arguing there.”

“And I had to go alone because of the entrance to the lair. It was a long, narrow tunnel, maybe a quarter of a mile, in places barely big enough for me to pass. Some of the turns were so sharp, I had to lay on my back to have the angle to get my body through them.”

I pictured this, the experience of crawling in pitch darkness through this dreadful maze, and shuddered.

“There were sections half deep in water...or I hope it was water...it smelled like orloo piss and was icy cold too. Sometimes I swore I’d come up against a blockage, but it was only another tight bend in the tunnel. And in some places there were sharp rocks—crystals embedded in the stone, it felt like, which protruded. I cut my forearm on one and it hurt like hell. But that wasn’t the worst of it—”

I swallowed. “What was the worst of it?”

“There were small things in there...at first I thought it was just loose stones, and I was knocking them around. But at one point I was stopped, with my hands on the rock in front of me, and they scurried over my hands.”

“Gods, what a horror! How did you bear it?”

“Three things enabled me to go on. One, I was following an order from my Master. You’d be surprised how hard it is to disobey the order of your Master.”

I thought I understood, and nodded.

“Two,” and at this he came the closest to smiling that he had yet, “the thought of retreating backwards was more horrible than going on. Three, I found a way to manage it. The Force. The Force, you see, extends in all directions, up, down, north-south-east-west. Nothing walls it, nothing limits it. It’s like a wide open plain, or a bright bare desert. I thought of myself as crossing that open desert, only I had to bear on this narrow path because Yoda bid it so. Still, if the worst happened, if I had to leave that narrow path, the Force would permit it if I needed to.”

“Ohhh...” I said, “and you could sustain your trust in this?”

“I can’t do everything, I’d be the first to tell you that. But this thing I could do well.”

I started trembling inside. I took a swallow of ale but it made no difference.

Brenan continued. “Finally I saw a lightness, and then the actual point of brightness that was the end of the passage. I said to myself, ‘Oh good, I am nearly to the fiend.’”

I laughed at this jest, but my trembling increased as well.

“When I looked out into the cavern, the first thing I saw was sacks upon sacks of chain. One wall, the one to my right, was stacked with sacks to the ceiling. And the ceiling was maybe 25 feet high. There were no open sacks I could see, but still, it was like the cave walls were coated with the chain dust, that orange color like fennira wings. It was illuminated by a single, painfully intense lantern, held in a bizarre cage that cast crazy shadows everywhere. And then I saw him. Quel-zil. Sitting under the lantern just staring at the opening of the passage, as if all he did day and night was watch it. Of course, it was me he saw just then.”

I put my hands over my mouth.

“I burst out and to my feet, the adrenaline hit me and I recovered from my long crawl in an instant. He was silhouetted against the light then, I could only see his outline at first as he came toward me. He was so wasted he wasn’t much more than bones, but he moved quickly nevertheless. There also seemed to be things wrong with him...his arms were too long, his knees were jointed at a freakish angle. He actually rushed past me, to put himself between me and the highest piles of sacks, and then the light fell on him. The flesh was coming off his nose. It didn’t look like recent decay either—I’m sure he had used chain for years and that was the result of it. There was a flap of skin that had fallen down over the tip of his nose, it flapped when he moved, which he did constantly.”

“Gods, Brenan,” I breathed.

“If only that was the worst of it,” he said, and I noticed then that the narration seemed to be wearing on him. Still he went on. “The monster drew his lightsaber, and that alerted me. He had Sith training. I drew my saber too and discovered in an instant that my Jedi training was little use to me. As I said, the creature was insane. His dementia was so extreme, I could get no sense of his presence, no bearing even on myself. It filled the room like a noxious stench, mingled with the smell of the chain. Then he cried out to me, in this voice that was high and raspy and infernal, ‘Jedi, the weedins in the passage have crawled into your head!’ You may laugh at me, but that scared me more than anything else. I don’t know why. But I couldn’t find him with the Force, and I wondered if something really was wrong with my head. Quel-zil gave me this hideous grin, his nose flapping, and cried, ‘Weedins in your head, and up your ass, Jedi!’”

Brenan stared at me, waves of horror coming off him which only made the story more terrifying, capped by what I was certain was an excellent imitation of Quel-zil’s hideous voice. I pushed his cup at him and ordered, “Drink.”

“It’s gone,” he replied.

I held my hand up for him to be silent until I had ordered the steward to bring another. We didn’t speak for the minute or two until a full cup stood before him. He took a long drink, then smiled at himself.

“Why am I telling you this? I’ve never told anyone all this, not even Master Yoda.”

“Perhaps, once you’ve done this thing you have to do, you’ll know why,” I replied.

He gave me a long pensive look. “You’re probably right,” he said. “But now the finish. We fought, for how long I couldn’t say, but I had nothing on my side but my physical skill, and somehow that maniac matched it. He was wearing me down, and I figured his madness would sustain him as long as it took. Finally he managed to slash my upper arm, the full length, a good quarter-inch deep, a half in places. I felt myself bleeding and when that happens, you know it’s time to make the kill or maybe you never will.”

He paused to take another drink, then slid the cup over and leaned closer to me. “I called on my Master then. Nothing else to do. And he said this to me: ‘Guilty make him. Punish himself he will.’ I caught Yoda’s meaning right away, thank the gods. For all the confusion Quel-zil shot at me, it was clear his psyche was sustained by one driving force: protecting the chain. So I led him over to that big wall of sacks, I backed up and backed up, hoping he would have enough logic in him to be greedy for the opportunity, I feigned weakness and then...I lowered my lightsaber.”

I waited breathlessly.

“He dove for me, lifted his saber to full height and brought it down, but at the last moment I leaped to the side. His momentum carried him forward...he sliced open a dozen sacks of chain. Better still, there was a chemical reaction from the saber beam, and they caught on fire.”

For the first time, Brennan did smile, albeit grimly. “And I said to that bastard, ‘Quel-zil, weedins in your head and up your ass. You’ve destroyed the chain, you fool!’” That was a message he could understand. He stepped back in horror from the sacks—horror and self-loathing. He was lucid enough then, and therefore for a moment so was I, so I blasted him with all the guilt the Force could muster through me. And then—” He paused, lowered his voice. “Have you ever seen somebody kill himself with a lightsaber?”

I shook my head.

Brennan mimed taking the handle from his belt, holding it up to the side of his head, and pressing the activation panel.

We stared at each other.

Then he said, “His skull was weak and rotted enough anyway...it split and his face fell onto his chest, then to the floor, and he dropped right after.”

I bit my lips, unable to breathe.

“But you see, that cave was on fire. Now that there was an actual chance I might not die hideously in there, I had no desire either to perish in a haze of chain-induced bliss. I sheathed my saber and hit the tunnel at full speed, weedins be damned. The smoke was heavy in a minute, and there was only one thing that saved me of dying of it: the fact that the fire created a backdraft and that drew fresh air in the tunnel in front of me. Now that Quel-zil was dead, I could call on my full powers again, I got control of myself and held my bleeding, and finally got myself out of that maze from hell.”

Only then did I realize how tense my back had been. I tried to relax a little. “I never heard a word,” my voice squeaked, “not a word that some Jedi destroyed the chain hoard.”

“It was a big hit to the cartel, but the Council knew they weren’t going to leave Naboo altogether because of it. I did well enough on the assignment that the Council didn’t wish to see me with a contract on my head. There’s no official record that the Jedi had anything to do with that fire. The assumption has always been that Quel-zil did it, but no one knows why.”

“Brenan,” I said, exhausted.

“Still want to be a Jedi?” he asked. The old sparkle returned to his eyes.

“Only if my Master orders me to,” I replied. That made him laugh.

And we both finished the rest of our ale.

Needless to say, the walk home was subdued. I got more tired with every step, tired from excitement, physical exercise, emotional intensity, fear, confusion, anticipation. Brennan was not tireless either; he didn’t speak much. That didn’t matter, though...I could feel him there, and even fatigued he was steady. As we walked in silence under the street lamps my soul reached out to that steadiness. *Imagine sleeping with that steadiness next to you*, I asked myself, then balked a bit at the thought. But it was innocent enough, it sprung in fact from an almost infantile desire to feel safe. Then a second thought came to me, *imagine fighting with that steadiness next to you*.

Our goodnight was swift but sweet. We embraced with fervor that belied in every respect the duration of our acquaintance. And Brennan’s scent stayed in my head even until it hit the pillow.

Ironically, that night I both slept and fought next to his steadiness.

Slept, yes, because this first day’s exposure to him left such a psychic impression with me that it felt like he was still there. Sometimes I even thought I felt him pull on the blanket, and it would wake me into half-consciousness.

Fought, yes, because I had a terribly vivid nightmare that we were together, battling Quel-zil in the cave. We fought to the point of agonized exhaustion. I could feel myself slipping away, but worse still, I could feel Brennan fading. The weakening of his life-force first grieved me to the point of agony, then sparked in me a protectiveness unmatched by any female animal in the galaxy. Finally the monster cornered us, he drew back his lightsaber to run my Master through, and without hesitation I threw my body in the beam’s path.

It stopped dead.

The beam of a lightsaber never stops dead. Quel-zil stared at me, his horrible eyes bulging in disbelief. Pinned against the beam, I stood firm. But stood as what, I’m not sure, because as much of an obstacle as I was to Quel-zil’s saber, I was completely insubstantial to Brennan behind me. His beam passed through me harmlessly, flashing high to behead our enemy, switching direction, then swiping low to cut off his feet.

Auri-Owan killed the fiend with the closing moves of Celanarian’s Drill.

I awoke panting and in a fever, drenched with sweat. I flung off the blankets and stared open-eyed around me at the room, trying to drive away the image of Quel-zil falling off his severed

feet. I panted, coming back to reality, until my body cooled and the chill of my sweat drove me to take up the covers again.

I curled up in a ball. Then I thought, as horrific as the ending of the dream had been, Brennan still lived. My body stopped the stroke of death. Nothing else mattered. *If he lives I am content*, I said to myself. The fierceness of this newborn loyalty frightened me.

And it was only then that I recalled, in the dream I'd called him my Master. In the dream he had been my Master.

And that eventuality, I knew very well, was utterly impossible.

\* \* \*

“Aeli, wake up, you’ll be late!”

One of my chambermates, Ordis, was shaking me gently. My eyes popped open and my first thought was that I had to appear before all my fellows and fight the best swordsman in the galaxy.

Ordis didn’t know this, but she sensed my panic and got out of the way. I leapt from bed and ran to wash, calculating the time—I would have to skip breakfast—and trying to establish some sort of calm in preparation for what was to come.

In spite of the weird events of the previous evening, and my vivid and intense dream, I found I had lost much of the bizarre psychic connection I had felt for Auri-Owan. In fact, with the new day I felt quite ordinary again, and it was more than a little relief. I was used to being a simple Jedi trainee (a fact which ironically used to seem extraordinary enough), accustomed to the mounting excitement that soon I might be chosen someone’s Padawan, content with my typical daily struggles with emotional control, the Third Routine, and memorizing this or that fact of the Republic’s history. I had lived nearly all my life with the sense of ever-impending adventure that comes with being chosen to be a Jedi, and right now that seemed plenty exciting enough.

I thought about Brennan as I dressed, donning my standard lightsaber training uniform. I was surprised how calm I stayed when thinking of him. I began to wonder if perhaps the sensations of the night before had been enhanced all out of proportion by the excitement of meeting a celebrity, and by my tendency to feel so intensely. This was not to say we didn’t have some sort of connection: it would be foolish and unrealistic to deny that. But probably it could be managed, and with enough mental discipline, tamed to the point I might even be able to ignore it.

I wanted to be able to ignore it. The complications of being so...so passionate about a renowned Jedi Knight were too numerous to list. Down that road lay any number of problems, not the least of which was heartbreak of one kind or another for me. For the problem looming the most imminently was the fact that Brennan would step out of my life in five days, and the requirement therefore to terminate feelings like I had experienced the night before was not a happy prospect.

Besides, I thought as I holstered my lightsaber under the tunic, I had better places to direct my energy these days. I wanted to be a Padawan—the desire mounted every day. I felt in myself an ever-growing calling to serve the Force, I knew I had gifts which the right Master could mold to benefit the Republic and the cause of good. I needed to be finished, I needed to be ready when that man or woman came to find me. That was when the true excitement would begin.

I needed to be ready for my Master, and it wasn't going to be Brenan Auri-Owan.

The Master/Padawan relationship was the most important human connection in the world of the Jedi. Important enough that Mace Windu himself taught us trainees the principles thereof. It had been a year since I had been in his class, and it made such a huge impression upon me that the subject was a regular topic for my meditation ever since.

For the Padawan, the keys to this relationship were loyalty, dedication and obedience. The Padawan's commitment to his Master had to be pure and total and unquestioning. I believed myself perfectly capable of this. However, the aspects of the task which daunted me were, as usual, related to my excess of passion. The Padawan's devotion was to be unemotional, a rational and spiritual commitment that would not be confused by extreme feelings.

Mace Windu explained this to us patiently, knowing that to many of us it would seem a little unnatural. A Padawan's loyalty was to be based on his alliance with the Force, not a personal affinity for his Master. The dedication was to spring from a commitment to Jedi beliefs and to the cause of good; the obedience was from a rational trust in the Master's superior experience and wisdom. These things were not to be expressions of devotion for the Master. Friendship, even love might grow from the Master/Padawan relationship over time, but these were emotions to be managed carefully. If not, there would surely be pitfalls for both, not the least of which was the extremity of passion that was always a potential foothold for the Dark Side.

So it was beyond obvious that I could never take such a man as Auri-Owan for my Master. Not someone who as a total stranger could draw such complete rampant adoration from me. Being the person I was, it would be enough of a challenge to manage my feelings for my eventual Master; I could just imagine the impossibility of attempting this with Brenan. Although it was not a Padawan's calling to elect his Master, I still believed in my heart I would know when I encountered that man or woman at last.

Well, I thought, at least he or she will find me pretty good at the lightsaber. Good enough for what I was about to do, or so I hoped...

When I got to the training room, the Temple's largest, nearly all the seats were taken, but Cal had saved me a place. I slipped breathlessly next to him.

"You overslept on a day like this?" he asked, incredulous.

"Late night. Long story," I said, not wanting to be secretive but too nervous to talk much. Where was Brenan? In the middle of the floor, several of the Masters were milling about, surveying the trainees, and so on. I turned back to Cal. "I'll tell you all about it at lunchtime, I promise. I'm a bit discombobulated at the moment. At least I made it before the start."

"Something's obviously bothering you," commented Cal, "and after last night I can't believe you're nervous about working with Auri-Owan." But before I could determine a reply to this, my world returned to chaos.

Brenan was in the room. I couldn't see him yet but I knew he was there. My whole being ignited with a raging desire to find him, to be at his side, to hear his voice. Half of me fought against it: I called myself an idiot, I chided myself for my emotionalism, I threatened myself with imagined punishments like never being worthy of being a Padawan. It did no good, for the other half of me sung like a harp at the fact that in a moment I would see him again.

A crazy thought rose to the forefront of my mind: I should have gotten up earlier and meditated and I wouldn't be so out of control. And how was I to fight in this condition?

The noise of the gathered trainees increased and I dared turn to look at the floor. Indeed, the Knight had arrived, he was conversing with Master Wed'azon. If he were aware of the pandemonium he was causing in my soul, he made no indication of it. The two men talked calmly, no doubt exchanging final ideas concerning the seminar. The conversation concluded, Brenan stepped away a little from the Master, and folded his arms over his chest. It was then he looked at me. He didn't look *for* me, didn't scan the crowd for my face; he just very deliberately turned his head and looked right at me. And smiled.

I smiled back. I had to admit, it was a pretty neat trick. Oh well, if my existence was going to be fraught with magic these days, I might as well try to have a sense of humor about it.

Master Wed'azon motioned for quiet and we complied quickly. He spoke: "We are honored today to have with us a man who I know has inspired many of you in your ambitions to master the lightsaber. He has asked me to begin the lesson today by letting him demonstrate his favorite drill. Attend closely, Jedi trainees, I'm certain we will all enjoy this very much."

Both men ignited their sabers. My heart was pounding, as I'm sure were those of all my fellows in the room. "Prepare," said the Master, and I watched Brenan and felt him go blank. "Engage," said Master Wed'azon.

It was, naturally, Celanarian's. But how interesting to watch Auri-Owan take the Padawan's part, which of course he had to, being of lesser rank than our lightsaber Master. The tempo was perhaps half again what we had done the night before, really quite breathtaking to watch. I tried to notice the little details which could be perceived in person so much better than in a hologram: like the way Brenan held his elbows in high position, how it helped smooth out the transition to ox. When he took a level left-to-right swing, I could practically feel the transference of his weight and how it added force to the blow. But he controlled the inertia so well, it never interfered with a transition or a pivot.

"Wow," I heard Cal say next to me, a barely audible whisper. I smiled with a pride that while inappropriate, I simply couldn't stifle.

At this speed the drill was ending before we knew it. I noticed something very interesting in the denouement: Brenan marked out loud the last two strokes. He did them almost preternaturally fast, the strength and balance required for it was amazing, and had he not marked them audibly, Master Wed'azon might well have lost a foot. But as it was, the conclusion was perfect.

The room broke out in uproarious applause. I turned to Cal, who looked stupefied, and gave him a smile. The two Jedi extinguished their sabers and shook hands; our Master looked quite breathless. Brenan leaned to him and said something, they both laughed. As we quieted again, Master Wed'azon said, "I happily turn the room over to the better swordsman. Brenan, my students are yours."

I realized that despite his age and experience and superior rank, our lightsaber Master probably idolized our guest as much as we did. So, someone else was honored to do Celanarian's Drill with the great Auri-Owan.

Brenan circled and looked us over, not speaking yet. Then he smiled to himself, and his first words seemed directed inwards as much as anything. “I always wanted to try a hand at teaching, scary how you sometimes get your wish.”

This drew quiet laughter. He looked up at us again, still pacing, and said, “So, it’s time for me to say something profound and impressive. Here it is, profound and impressive and also disappointing: The Force is no substitute for practice.”

He paused, looking down. “Hours of endless practice, the five positions, the 14 transitions, the Three Routines if you subscribe to them, and every drill you can learn and snare a partner into doing with you.” He looked up. “It would be nice if you could instead have some psychic breakthrough, tap into the Force in some spectacular way, but having been born lazy and tried that for three years, I can tell you we’re not that lucky.”

Then he stood regarding us, arms folded over his chest. “I wanted to say that first because it’s the worst news. It all gets better from here. But my fellow Jedi, I want you to remember it—the Force is no substitute for practice—because I’m not going to tell you again. It’s too boring to tell again.”

The laughter was louder this time. When we quieted, Brennan said, “For my next important point, I’m going to do a little demonstration. I have it on good authority that one of you trainees, Aeli Camil, has a high tolerance for boredom and has this practice thing down pretty well.”

I had a reputation in this regard...my fellows laughed, I turned crimson, and Cal elbowed me. Worse yet, I expected this was my cue. “Aeli?” said Brennan, so I rose and walked across the floor to him, drawing my lightsaber.

I had taken one thing for granted in agreeing to this, and that was that Brennan would help me out a little. I trusted his capability for calming me and was sure he would perform that function in this nerve-wracking circumstance.

I was wrong.

Not only was there no soothing emanation to quiet me, he gave off nothing at all. He took his stance and nodded at me to take mine. He activated his lightsaber. I began to panic, but raised my beam nonetheless. He looked me in the eye and said, “Engage.”

What? But he was going to start, there was no time to hesitate or question. I went on instinct, but Syzac’s doubled was too difficult to do by instinct, regardless of one’s skill. Brennan didn’t do anything to throw me off; just as the night before, he was careful and steady and met my force and weight evenly. But it was undeniably sloppy, my balance was badly off, at one point I almost fell over during a pivot.

My agony seemed to last forever, but finally we reached the end, which was greeted by the echoing and awkward silence of my peers.

Brennan did not pause long enough to see my look of confusion, and I dare say, acute unhappiness.

“Now what was I saying?” he asked the audience. “Oh yes: Practice is no substitute for the Force. I made a very grave error in this drill, can anyone tell me what it was?”



Engil Foward, who had probably gotten into the seminar by virtue of his tremendous book knowledge of the subject of lightsaber technique, raised his hand tentatively. At Brennan's nod he said, "You forgot 'Prepare.'"

"Exactly," replied the Knight. "I didn't give the learned and talented Aeli the cue to prepare, much less any opportunity to do so, although certainly she expected it. She would tell you as would I, Syzac's doubled is too hard to attempt without the Force behind you. It requires excellent focus and a superb sense of your opponent's balance."

I stood there, mouth agape, and only then realized that his emanation had returned. Any ill feeling I'd harbored toward him the moment before dissolved. Brennan looked me in the eyes while he spoke: "If she's willing to forgive me, I'd like to try that again." He raised his brows and actually looked quite contrite.

I wasn't quite over the embarrassment and confusion of the experience. In fact, I felt like it would take me a good five minutes to settle enough to get my focus back. I squinted a little at Brennan. I had an idea. I focused in my mind one single thought, one clear sentiment: *Help me.*

He blinked at me once, slowly, smiling so faintly no one else but me could see it. Then...

...ah, how could his eyes be so beautiful? If I never looked at anything else again, would I care?

Then complete serenity came over me, my emotions were gone and in their place a perfect and complete sense of the placement of every cell in my body, every pulse of energy I possessed.

"Prepare," said Brennan.

Then in turn I found every cell in his body, the expectation of every movement in his limbs. I found his perfectly calm joy at what we were about to do.

"Engage."

If last night's Syzac's had been wonderful, this one was heaven itself. I absolutely couldn't tell which one of us was controlling our motion, or if either of us was. Our centers never wavered, and they were linked in perfect balance, so every stroke we made was flawlessly graceful, every transition was clean, every movement pure. I moved as Auri-Owan; what could be better than that?

It passed in moments, more natural than breathing. The final sweep, from tail to upper, and it was complete.

I heard the sudden burst of noise—a gasp of wonder followed by applause—and only then noted how perfectly silent the room had been apart from the sounds of our lightsabers. It was not like waking from a dream, for if anything, I became less alert, more tossed about in action and emotion. I looked into Brennan's face and to my surprise found a certain amount of unconcealed amazement.

So apparently this, too, had never happened before.

We made nothing of it at the time, he proceeded with the rest of the seminar undaunted, and I likewise managed to carry on and stay rational enough to learn more than a few things. The second half of the morning we got out on the floor and practiced, and Brennan made the rounds giving everyone a comment or two. I found him an excellent teacher, and at lunch, Cal said the same.

“He should teach lightsaber here all the time,” my friend declared over his bowl of stew. “Except for the fact that the Council wouldn’t want to waste a warrior like that.”

“Besides,” I said, swallowing a bite of bread, “I’m sure battle suits him a lot better than choreography.”

“No doubt,” agreed Cal fervently. “Sometimes I prefer practice sabers, at least it’s more like fighting and less like ballet. Competition rather than cooperation.”

“The best of all,” I said pensively, “would be competition that required cooperation.” My dream of the night before came back to me. “You know, working with your fellows to conquer your mutual foe.”

Cal stared at me a minute. “Yes, I’d like to see you and Brennan backing me up, that’s for sure.”

I set down my bread. “That was an incredibly flattering thing to say, Cal.”

“There’s something going on when you two fight, I’m not stupid. Okay, Syzac’s isn’t as hard as Celanarian’s, but your drill with Auri-Owan was even more impressive than when he fought the Master. I’ve never seen anything quite like it, even in a hologram.”

“You should see him do the *Master’s* part in Celanarian’s,” I said wistfully.

Cal frowned. “Okay, when did you see that?”

“We did it last night, after the banquet. In the south courtyard. That’s when he asked me to do that demonstration this morning.”

My friend stared in some consternation. Finally he exclaimed, “Well, I’m glad you didn’t cut his head off!”

I laughed.

“Seriously, Aeli, have you given any thought to how little sense this all makes? The galaxy’s best lightsaberman comes to Coruscant and takes this trainee under his wing?”

I decided it would be best to keep secret the fact that I’d be training every afternoon that week with Brennan. “Yes, I know it makes no sense,” I agreed. “That’s why I’ve been so distracted.”

Cal sat for a moment deep in thought, then said, “You’ve been weird about Brennan from the moment you laid eyes on him. Has he said anything to you about any of this?”

I wasn’t sure how much I should reveal on that subject. “I’ll probably talk to him about it,” I said, and left it at that.

“You should discuss it, something’s definitely going on. You should have seen yourself in that drill.”

In point of fact, feeling it had been even stranger.

\* \* \*

My training with Brennan over those five days provided no shortage of strangeness. Practice was strange, conversation was strange, it was a constant challenge to deal with the familiarity and intimacy which came unbidden.

I loved to hear him tell stories from his past, and the experience was made even more interesting because in the process he would clarify some impression of his character I already possessed psychically, without yet having a basis in fact. For example, he told me of how he resolved his differences with one of the other Knights while on an assignment to Azzipa. The other Jedi, by the name of Puer Xis, was determined to capture a local murderer alive. The criminal was hiding out in a dangerous part of the city with a number of his associates, and they were well armed. Brennan was leading the mission and in charge of making the call as to the level of violence the action would require once it was underway. But he had a good idea Xis wouldn't necessarily follow his lead when they were under fire.

Xis was unruly, but there was one arena in which he played by the rules: Azzipan dice. He was a high roller but never cheated, and took great pride in his honorable reputation for the game. Brennan challenged him to a round, but instead of betting money, he pledged control of the mission. It was risky, since he really didn't have the authority to hand the reigns to Xis. It was also risky because Brennan admitted to me his telekinesis skills were very poor and he was going to have to win fair and square.

It was at this point in the story where my déjà vu kicked in: That is, my weird psychic connection to Brennan had already revealed to me his ability to creatively find his way out of any situation. Consequently, before he even told me, I knew he was going to lose the game, but have his way with Puer Xis anyway.

"I can't say I was happy when I rolled those evens," said Brennan, as he wiped the sweat off his brow with a towel—we were taking a break. "But Puer certainly was pleased. I'll never forget the look on his face, like he just opened some big present he'd always wanted. Xis didn't care about what he was winning, he just liked winning."

"Well, how exactly did you get out of that one?" I asked, smiling.

"Salesmanship, of course. Some impressive line of orloo manure about my determination to convince the rest of our party that Puer was in charge."

"Orloo manure, eh?" I asked, skeptical. I knew this was bluster.

"Well, all right, at the time I was actually sincere. After all, a bet's a bet, it was my stupidity to try it. And ironically, it was my sincerity that got through to him. That was the kind of thing that impressed the man, being honorable to your word. The fact that I was willing to put him in charge because I lost the game gave him some weird respect for me. We ordered a few more ales...quite a few...and by the end of the evening he was swearing allegiance to me and the Force and the Republic with passion and tears."

"What happened with the mission then?"

Brennan leaned forward, a light in his eyes. "Here's where the story gets really good. He saved my life. During the skirmish the murderer we were after got me cornered without my weapon. Puer Xis had to kill him to save me. He wasn't happy about it but he also knew it had to be. There are times he makes me want to punch him, but I'd be glad to have him with me in any fight, he's a good man."

Yes, it was truly an odd feeling to be getting to know someone, and rather than learning new things about them, to be constantly experiencing confirmation of what you already knew before.

But even more unnerving was when it happened in reverse. Another time, while we were getting ready to start practice, I was telling Brennan the story of how I met Calnor.

"We were both fourteen, and we were partnered together for a wilderness exercise in the Roughlands," I began. "We hit it off right away, and at the time I was really searching for a good friend. The exercise was going very well, and the better I got to know Cal, the more I liked him. I already had it in my head we were going to be best friends. But the last night things didn't go so well..."

"How so?" asked Brennan.

"We were doing a night hike, we were supposed to locate this particular rock formation, and we stopped in this creek bed. The stars were unbelievable. I was staring up at the sky, admittedly for a pretty long time, and I guess Cal just decided it was time to get going again. Only I didn't notice. When I looked around he was just gone."

"This is not a good thing," said Brennan, and I could tell from his tone he understood without my saying further word. What might have been mildly alarming to a normal child was, to me, terrifying and grief-inducing. There were few I could make fully understand how I felt about abandonment—Mace Windu might have been the only one—but here was Brennan comprehending without a word of explanation from me.

"At first I couldn't believe it," I continued. "I figured if I went even a little way on the path I'd spot him again. It made no sense that he had left without me. But after a couple minutes I still hadn't found him. At that point I started to cry a little...very bad, since back then I was still struggling a lot with feeling inferior to my friends because I was a girl..."

"It's hard in the early stages when everything is about the physical, when you're not spiritually advanced enough to even the playing field."

"Exactly," I agreed. "So I was crying, and first I was angry that he left me, but that quickly changed to feeling like it was all my fault for staring up at the stars like that. I wanted to kick myself for being so stupid, for losing Cal like that."

Brennan smiled at me affectionately, trying sincerely not to find this youthful tale amusing. But in spite of his expression, I could still perceive he sympathized. It made me wish he would have been around to talk to when I was fourteen.

"I remember wandering down that trail for what seemed like hours, and I was less scared of the capanids in the bushes than of the mere fact that I was alone and my friend had actually left me behind. I cried harder and harder, and then I was afraid I actually would find Cal and he would make fun of me for crying."

"Sad to say, I don't blame you...if I'd been Cal I would have done just that I'm sure."

I gave him a look but realized he was teasing me again. "Okay, so I ended up giving up on Cal and decided I was going to find that damn rock formation myself or die trying. Well, turned out that I did, sometime a few hours before dawn, and meanwhile Cal got himself hopelessly lost and the Master had to retrieve him."

"That'll teach him."

"We've been friends ever since."

“A classic Jedi friendship.”

Meanwhile, my friendship with Brenan was anything but classic. Our conversations always had these bizarre elements, and it was no better when we worked on the lessons. Uncanny things never failed to happen. The most unsettling aspect proved to be when we fought with practice sabers, which was impromptu because they couldn't hurt you too much, unless you were struck inappropriately hard. When Brenan and I fought with practice sabers, when we actually tried to compete rather than cooperate, it didn't work. After a minute or two it was always the same: we would slip into this state of connection. It was seductive, really; there was such exhilaration at being able to feel the other person's moves, anticipate every action, that it made one want to be as much in sync as possible. The element of surprise was out of the question. So our sessions might as well have been choreographed.

On the fourth day, frustrated by the drought of competition, Brenan told me, “We need to challenge someone to a doubles fight.”

“What a good idea,” I said wickedly.

We looked at each other and I sensed in him the same feeling I possessed myself: an intoxicating urge of competitiveness.

By this time there was no point in our attempting to keep secret what we had been up to with the training all week. On the one hand, Brenan had gotten proper authorization from my Masters; on the other, the rumor of it was all over the trainees' quarters by the second day. So the doubles fight—Brenan recruited Master Wed'azon and I coerced a reluctant Cal—could hardly be kept private. We scheduled it for late afternoon in the main training room.

Practice saber fighting was an art in and of itself. It was even done in formal competition, during which the combatants wore special suits made of fabric that gave off a glow when struck. Thus it could be declared that the loser “gave up an arm,” “took a mortal to the belly,” or “was beheaded.”

After three minutes Brenan and I were victorious. My best friend took a mortal to the heart from Brenan while I kept my lightsaber Master occupied. Wed'azon was not much more of a challenge, even though by the rules Cal was allowed to keep fighting after his “injury.” Brenan sensed I was getting an upper hand on my Master, so he kept Cal out of the way until I had dealt the death blow. It was only the presence of Auri-Owan on the floor that would save face for Master Wed'azon, after he was beheaded by the practice saber of a trainee.

Brenan leaned to me as the crowd applauded us. “We should have challenged three,” he said quietly.

“Damn straight,” I agreed.

It was likewise great fun each day when we practiced Celanarian's: perfecting the details, upping the tempo, to the point that I knew I would do wonderfully well when I did it for my final. However, training with Auri-Owan was not all glory and amusement. He was obsessed with repetition, and ran me through drills until I wanted to kill him. I was dreaming the five positions all night long, something I hadn't done since I was a novice. Nevertheless, I found the more I went through what seemed like meaningless exercises, the more instinctual the physical became,

thus freeing me to focus on the spiritual. And I knew I needed to. I wouldn't always have Brennan there as a crutch when it came to doing the Third Focus.

"You're not taking enough time," he told me firmly on the fifth afternoon. "Don't rush yourself."

"In a real situation, I won't have *any* time," I replied, frustrated and testy.

"By the time you're in a real situation, you won't need any time. But only if you listen to me now."

We were standing on the floor of our training room, saber-less, working on the Third. *Again* working on the Third, and I knew I was getting mad because of my awareness that if he helped me, there was nothing to it. But of course, he wouldn't help me.

"Why can't I do it without you?" I cried, barely restraining myself from stomping my foot like a spoiled child.

Brenan sighed. "Because you're young, because it's hard. Believe me, it's only because you're rushing. You have to tell yourself you have all the time in the world, you have hours, you can take hours if you want to. Now try it again, but make it take hours."

I thought this was crazy. I stared at him, not exactly defiantly, but I knew he knew I thought it was crazy.

His eyes narrowed then. I got a sudden feeling that I had been grabbed and lifted and was dangling in mid-air, only it was my mind and not my body that had been seized. His hard glare held me pinned, frozen, and in a way I had never felt before, terrified.

"*Obey me,*" ordered Brennan.

Had I ever experienced authority before that moment? What authority could provoke such a sense of urgency that I felt just then? I felt like if I didn't do what he said, even a minute ago before he had uttered it, I would simply perish. I think I said "forgive me," or perhaps "yes sir," but at any rate there was no thought in my head but this one: "Make it take hours."

My mind rushed back to the first time I had read "A Treatise on Physical and Spiritual Preparation for Lightsaber Battle, in Three Parts" by Brennan Auri-Owan, to the passage on the Third Focus, and I read it again. I read it again, all four pages, over and over, perhaps ten times. As I read it, I superimposed over it the times I had accomplished Third Focus under his imposition. It all made sense, it made perfect sense...

But that was the wrong way to look at it. In the final analysis, it didn't matter if the Third Routine made sense. Sense was completely irrelevant. It was really about...about trust... After all, he had told me how, he had showed me how, what more did I need to have faith in the Force?

It started to come over me, but I didn't rush it. If I rushed, it wouldn't take hours. And he had ordered me to make it take hours. So I slowed it down, I let the tranquility trickle down like slow beads of glycerin through my nervous system. It established itself over me in the tiniest of increments, but as slow as it was, it was thorough and complete. I crystallized, only softly, flexibly. I could feel myself, and Brennan, and we were both so still we didn't need to breathe to sustain our life.

I opened my eyes.

“You’re there,” Brenan said. “I only counted to three.”

I blinked slowly, registering no amazement, although I knew it would be very appropriate. “I read your treatise ten times, Brenan.”

“Did you really think time matters to the Force?” he asked me. The question resonated through my body. I wondered if I would ever forget it.

\* \* \*

Perhaps time didn’t matter to the Force, but that didn’t change the fact that our two-hour sessions passed much too quickly, as did the five days. I changed over that time in ways it would take me weeks to comprehend. That my lightsaber skills improved was undeniable, but that was the least of it. My connection to Brenan seemed to evolve on a daily basis, and me with it. At first it was a combination of exhilarating and uncomfortable, a thrill that was as stressful as it was exciting. But as the days passed, while I didn’t exactly get used to it, it became more a part of daily existence and therefore easier to accept. Experiencing emotions that came from a source other than my own heart awakened me to the larger world beyond my five senses, and that in turn helped me greatly to trust the Force. Meanwhile, understanding this other person so effortlessly only emphasized to me how shallow were my bonds with the other people in my life. I resolved, for example, to get to know Calnor better. No doubt he would find my efforts peculiar, but I didn’t care. All in all, these seemed like positive developments to me.

However, I became more and more apprehensive about Brenan’s departure. The last couple days I was no longer successful at holding off my dread. Being left behind was hard enough for me, how would I deal with the world without his presence? For as the week wore on, we became more and more sensitive to each other, until I found I could always establish his general location and was frequented often by little whispers of his emotional state. The question was, just how far away could he go before I lost touch? He hadn’t specifically told me his destination when he took the transport off of Coruscant, but I had a good idea it wasn’t anywhere close. I could only pray that physical distance might make no difference.

It wouldn’t have been so hard either if it weren’t for the quality of his presence in my life. Of course from the first moment he had been positively inclined toward me, but the establishment of a “real” friendship which occurred over those days only enhanced this. He developed a fatherly protectiveness towards me which sometimes belied his habitual teasing in the most interesting way. He might be badgering me and grinning at my miffed reaction, but all the while I felt from him a tender affection that was as palpable as a warm blanket on a chill night. He was an extremely independent soul, used to a lifetime of being on his own, but I also sensed him reluctantly allowing a thread of reliance upon me to form. What he relied on me for, I couldn’t fathom. But I felt it nevertheless.

I genuinely feared the strength of the bond between us. Or rather, feared the pain that would come if it broke. And since our future held no possibility of the same path, what other outcome could there be?

If Brenan were bothered by such concerns, I couldn’t tell it. The link was not that specific. However, it was clear that something was disturbing him, something which seemed not to involve me, because his agitation increased when he was away from me. I didn’t know what he did with his time outside our sessions; I knew there were meetings occurring, both with Master

Yoda and with the Council, but the subject of these was a mystery. Something severe must have occurred mid-week, for I experienced second-hand turmoil much of that day. I kept my ear to the ground for news of trouble in the Republic, but heard nothing. I felt guilty for being bothered by my own foolish problems when there might be something dire afoot in the larger world.

Whatever these difficulties might have been, Brennan set them aside on our last day. He even made himself available for us to go to supper at the Meri-Borx. Full of their renowned geddotuber pie—what more appropriate dish might we have shared?—and imbibing more than a few ales, we had a joyful meal in spite of our impending separation.

“A full stomach seems to bring you great contentment, Brennan,” I told him as the steward took away our empty plates.

“From a time I didn’t always enjoy the privilege,” he replied, “but tell me, when will it cease being so unnerving to have you read my moods?” His stern look was in jest, but I knew there was a certain earnestness to the question.

“Sorry. Are you getting used to it at all?”

“No offense...it’s just that I’ve never been one to wear my heart on my sleeve. I don’t like the exposure. Between this and your knack at getting me to tell you everything...”

“You don’t tell me everything. I don’t know where you’re going tomorrow, or why.”

He studied my face a moment. “There are things I don’t tell you because they’re more than a trainee should have to bear. I’m not secretive just to be mysterious. More ale?”

“One more, although I shouldn’t.” I was in a curious mood, and maybe it was the ale...in the warm lamplight of the Borx, my friend looked suddenly so good to me, such a face that made me rejoice just to look at it, such a form that made me wish never a day had to pass without my laying eyes upon it. The moment of happiness gave way immediately to pain, and in spite of myself I said, “Bren, where are you going?”

He signaled for the steward, holding up two fingers, then turned back to me and sighed.

“Hopefully, where I should be. I’m needed somewhere else right now, I should be changing my plans, but something holds me to them. I just hope I’m doing the right thing.”

I was at a loss how to respond to this mysterious statement, so I held silent. Our ales arrived and we drank. Then Brennan said, “I’m going to Aleyra, to study under Master Teg.”

Aleyra was far, very far. “Why?” I asked simply.

“Because I need to be advanced to Master, and I never will unless Teg can help me.”

“He’s the one with the...”

“—the psychic skill. Master Yoda tells me if anyone can help me, it’s him.”

I could perceive Brennan was not comfortable discussing this. The whole matter puzzled me.

“You can’t be saying you’re weak in this area...then how do you explain—?”

“It’s you. It’s just with you. I told you, when I played dice against Puer Xis I didn’t stand a chance if it came to telekinesis. I don’t know what it is, I just can’t apply the Force that way. In a fight it’s easy. If I need to deal with some challenge, rise to some occasion, no problem. I learned to hold my bleeding when I was eighteen. But thought control...the mind trick?”



Nothing. And I couldn't lift this ring two inches off the table," he finished, brandishing his right hand, which wore a gold band on the first finger.

"I don't believe it," I said. "You've been in my head all week. I thought you—"

"It's the only reason I'm not a Master yet, Aeli. And I need to be one, soon."

He took a long drink, as if to indicate there would be no further elaboration on that point.

"Try the ring," I told him. He looked a little disgusted, but took it off and set it on the table between us. I could sense how little he liked having to demonstrate an inadequacy. "A wise man once taught me not to rush these things," I added.

He gave me a quirky smile. "The same wise man may have taught you to be a bit of a smartass," he said. I laughed.

Brenan turned his eyes to the ring. It floated five inches into the air.

"By the gods," he said, aghast.

"Told you," I said, although I was as shocked as he was.

"Did you do that?" Brennan asked me.

"Absolutely not." I held my index finger up. "Here, put it on my finger."

He shook his head, flabbergasted, and we watched the ring rise, travel the distance to my hand, and settle easily and gently down the length of my finger. The weight of it came to rest. I stared at the ring on my hand, a wide gold one engraved with suns around the band at the four compass points.

"It's very pretty," I said matter-of-factly.

Brenan replied, as if in a dream, "It's been in my family for five generations. If I lost it, I would be disowned."

"I suppose you'll have to ask Master Teg about this, when you ask him about everything else."

"I suppose I will."

Then Brennan snapped out of his baffled reverie. "I want to try something else," he said. "Go outside once, just outside the door. Out of my line of sight, but leave the door ajar."

"If you're going to move it across the room, keep it high so no one snatches it..."

"Or low," he said. "Now go."

There was no disobeying when he took that tone, so I went. I dodged through the crowded tavern and slipped out the door, leaving it open a couple of inches, and trying to look nonchalant all the while. I stood there, holding out my hand with the fingers spread, and kept my eye on the opening in the door, scanning both high and low for the ring's emergence. Fortunately no one came or went for the next minute, and then at last I saw the glint of the ring scooting low through the opening. It floated up, finding my index finger easily. I closed my hand into a fist around it. I wanted to shout with glee.

I flung open the door and scampered back to the table, sitting down and holding out my hand to Brennan triumphantly. He simply shook his head. At last he said, "Well, at least now I know I've chosen the right thing to do next."

"Do you know now?" I asked, gladdened to the core to hear this.

"Without a doubt."

I made a move to pull off the ring, but he covered my hand in his.

"No, keep it for now," he said.

I stared at him, astonished.

"If you lose it, I'll be disowned!" he admonished me.

"Why are you doing this?" was all I could manage to say.

Brenan looked at me, trying to conceal the emotions I could easily feel anyway. "It's the kind of thing that means something to you, isn't it? Having it until I come back?"

"Yes," I said, feeling the sting of tears starting. I squeezed the ring with the fingertips of my left hand, feeling the little suns.

"I don't know how long I'll be gone," said Brennan. "I'd tell you if I knew, but I don't."

I nodded, and turned the ring around my finger. It was much too big, I would have to put it on a chain.

"You'll be all right," he told me firmly.

I sighed deeply, trying to believe him but not at all convinced.

We didn't speak about it on the walk back to the Temple. Instead he told me stories about the ring, times it had been lost and found again, the various men who had worn it and their histories, for they had all been interesting and eccentric gentlemen. Brennan's father had been a Jedi too, killed in battle while Brennan was yet unborn, but he knew so many stories about the man that they seemed to have a strong connection even without knowing each other.

If Brennan Auri-Owan was anything, he was a master storyteller. I forgot to be sad, I didn't notice the buildings passing us, until we came to the entrance to the trainees' quarters.

It was then that my dread and sorrow got the better of me. I could no longer keep the emotions at bay, though I tried with all the self-discipline my Jedi training had taught me. I stood before Brennan, feeling small and already lost, absolutely unable to find my voice to bid him farewell.

When I looked up into his face I found a most remarkable sight: the reflection of all the weight that bore down upon my heart. The next moment was even more amazing. I thought he had put his arms around me, but in fact they were still at his sides. Something enveloped me, something sweet and warm and comforting. My head tipped to the side involuntarily, as if resting against the presence which was not actually physically there. It was a moment's relief, enough to strengthen me for saying goodbye.

Brenan took a step closer, took me by the shoulders, and kissed me on the forehead. "I have one more word of instruction for you, soon-to-be Padawan," he said soberly.

"Yes?" I whispered.

“Don’t cry. I have to come back for that ring, so don’t cry.”

That night in my bed, I discovered it was possible for me to disobey him.

## PART TWO

The sad side effect of my strange bond with Brennan was that it made his absence more sorely felt than any separation I had ever experienced. And yes, he was truly and totally gone. Whether this was a result of his being on a planet so extremely far away, or from some deliberate barrier he—or perhaps Master Teg—contrived, I could not find any trace of him no matter how hard I tried.

Two things served as my only comforts at first: the knowledge that the Force connects all living beings, and the fact that I had the ring. Auri-Owan had indeed been wise in giving it to me; it was remarkable how the weight of it, hanging from a chain on my breast, gave me confidence that I would see him again. I had to rely on the most basic human methods to soothe my grief, like slipping my finger into the band and thinking of how his hand had worn it, worn it during all the stories he told me: when he killed Quel-zil in the cave, when Puer Xis saved his life, even when he was a young Padawan learning from Master Yoda. If he were to wear it again, it would only be after seeing me.

It was hard at first to go back to lightsaber practice with Brennan gone. Too much of that pursuit brought back fresh memories to me. But I took this as a challenge and set aside my emotions so I could work, since that was of course what he would tell me to do.

The following month I performed Celanarian's Drill for my lightsaber final. I was told it was one of the finest performances by a trainee which the Temple had ever seen. Glad as I was to hear this, it pained me not to be able to share it with the one who deserved the credit. Still, it was good to have fulfilled all the requirements for lightsaber training, so that I could focus on the other areas of my development which still needed a little improvement: hand fighting, piloting, and mechanics, for example. Interestingly, I took new interest in meditation and matters of the Force. My breakthrough in learning the Third Routine from Brennan had done wonders for me in this regard. As the weeks passed, I realized I truly was trembling on the brink of being selected a Padawan, largely due to the renown I had achieved in the lightsaber.

In bed at night I distracted myself from missing Brennan by fantasizing about the adventures I might soon experience. My favorite was one in which I prevailed in a life and death struggle with the Sith Apprentice, whoever he might be, eventually beheading him with a perfectly executed move. Typical trainee daydreams...

...I certainly didn't anticipate the different path my life was about to take.

Life continued at the Temple as it had gone for all my years there, with one exception: there was a strange tension in the air. The Masters were oddly humorless, the Council huddled with even more secretiveness than usual, but there was not a whisper of a rumor about what was the reason. This last was the most disturbing of all, for it meant that whatever was going on was so dire, the Jedi Council had decreed absolute secrecy. We would be told when we were supposed to be, and not a day before.

And one day it was time. First thing in the morning, our Masters announced to us we were all to go to the Great Hall at once, that Master Windu would be addressing all the trainees. I found Cal on the way and he looked as stricken as I felt: we both knew that the big secret was about to be

revealed and it wasn't going to be good news. I clutched at Cal's arm as we hurried to the Hall; there was real fear in the air around us.

Everyone sat in awful quiet, with the Council seated in their tall chairs at the head of the Hall, looking grim. Finally, with a nod from Yoda, Master Windu rose and spoke:

"My fellow Jedi, it is imperative at this time that the Council share with you some developments that pose a serious danger. The fact that this danger now threatens you personally has persuaded us that we must take all possible care, including telling all we know about the threat."

I had never seen Mace Windu look so concerned. I started trembling and absently placed my hand on my chest where Brennan's ring hung on its chain.

He went on. "Six months ago there was an incident on Naboo. A Padawan by the name of Dhold Ortemar, apprentice to Master Laijak, was lost. He disappeared from his bed at night in a situation which should have posed no danger. His body has not been found, nor has there been any trace of him throughout the regions we patrol. Our spies have no clue as to the reason why he was taken. His Master has lost all link to him, a fact which mystifies us most of all."

Master Windu took a deep breath and continued darkly. "As troubling as this incident was, it grieves me to tell you that five weeks later, a similar one occurred, also on Naboo. Another Padawan disappeared, this time while out on an errand for her Master. Once again, we exhausted all means of locating her, once again, we failed. And since that time, there have been repeated occurrences of the same nature, three more on Naboo, and six on other planets less distant.

"The development which has made this situation too appalling to keep in secret any longer is this: Last week we lost a Jedi Knight in this fashion. The Knight, whose name is Puer Xis, was on a mission to deliver information to a far planet when his associates lost touch with his ship."

My heart skipped at this—did Brennan know of the loss of his friend?

"The ship was recovered abandoned, with no sign of struggle. Obviously it is very disturbing to us that a Jedi Knight has been taken without a trace. It is clear to us that no one is safe from this threat, least of all our young Jedi. Some of you will be chosen as Padawans soon, it's not right that you should go forth unprepared."

Master Windu walked around the table, to stand closer to us. "I wish I could tell you how to prepare! In all my years I have never had to face a danger which so shrouded itself in mystery, which eluded analysis to such an extent that we cannot even wisely advise you what precautions to take. I can only say, be strong in the Force, be wary for any sign of unusual activity, guard yourselves constantly against the Dark Side, for certainly it is that evil which could accomplish these acts so undetected. Watch out for each other, stay armed when you are out in the city.

"If we learn of anything that could enlighten you as to how to guard against this threat, you will be informed at once. In the meantime, direct your questions to your Masters, who have been fully briefed with all we know."

Master Windu looked us over with his eyes brimming with concern. Then he said, "You may be excused. May the Force be with all of you."

Cal and I looked at each other wordlessly. Something of our world had been undone, for we were used to the security of knowing the Council had the wisdom to face any challenge, the skill

to fight any evil that threatened us. We felt exposed, confused, at a loss as to what was to be done.

There was really nothing to be done but carry on as before, burdened now with an uneasy wariness that never quite left us. I was doubly worried because my friend Brennan was far away, and I had no way of knowing if any harm came to him. At least there was comfort in the fact that he was in the company of Master Teg, for I trusted no one to be more sensitive to the presence of evil than a Master as strong in the Force as he.

\* \* \*

These trials bore on me, and so I decided to use my tried and true technique for coping with worry: more activity. I signed up for Volunteer Assignment, a duty that would also serve to broaden my trainee experience a bit.

The VA duty I drew would change the course of my life.

Master Nago Dree had come to Coruscant on a most fascinating mission. A slightly eccentric but well liked and respected Jedi Master, Nago was currently working on an unusual project that had gained the Council's attention: psychic communication with beasts native to Tatooine, called dewbacks. He had raised a herd on Tatooine with which his experiments had been quite successful. Master Nago had brought two of his dewbacks to Coruscant to show the Council his successes and discuss how they could be employed by the Jedi. During his stay on the planet, he needed an assistant to help care for the beasts. The assistant was as much a guard as well, for the two dewbacks were of course very valuable to the Council.

I assumed it was the guarding aspect of the assignment which had brought it to me, since I had no experience whatsoever with animal husbandry and had never been to Tatooine. I had read about dewbacks but was unprepared for their size—or the number of teeth they possessed.

"They're omnivores," said Master Nago as he opened the gate to the dewbacks' pen, which had been set up in a little used part of the Temple grounds. "Here Yzzel, come meet Aeli."

The two huge lizards, broad in the shoulders and with sharply clawed feet, were quite menacing in body. However, their blunt heads and bright, lively eyes made them almost look friendly. The female dewback, smaller and more green than her mate, Bo, rose to her feet and came to us.

"She likes her nose scratched," said Nago. "Believe me, she won't bite you."

I put my hand on the smooth scales of Yzzel's broad nose. Her small eye turned to me and seemed to be examining me carefully.

"She's a little wary," said the Master. "Bo will be quicker to like you."

The brown male dewback had also risen to his feet and was standing behind his mate, shifting from side to side with what struck me comically as impatience.

"Yes, yes, Bo," said Nago to Bo, "come on over here."

Bo nosed his way in and Yzzel yielded to him. He opened his mouth a little at my touch and almost seemed to be smiling.

I liked him.

“All right,” said Master Nago, to whom I wasn’t sure. Then, “Aeli, I thought it would be best if you learned to ride Yzzel first, she’s not quite so...exuberant...but Bo won’t hear of it. If you keep telling him to slow down, he will. He’s very obedient, that’s not the problem. He just gets excited. And for a dewback he’s very fast.” Nago chuckled.

“I don’t mind speed,” I said.

“Good, we’ll do a riding lesson tomorrow. But right now I want to show you why it’s important for you to help me protect these two friends of mine. Help me with these baskets.”

We stacked up a pile of baskets in the middle of the pen.

“Now,” said Master Nago, “Imagine that you were out innocently riding Bo, and you were ambushed by Tusken Raiders.”

“All right,” I agreed, smiling.

“Here’s your Raider, he’s got his gaderffii held to your heart, and you’re helpless. But behind the villain stands your trusty dewback. I’ll stand here next to Bo so you can watch us both, Aeli. You want to stop the Raider without his even knowing what hit him?”

My eyes cast back and forth between them. Nago stood stock still, not even blinking, when suddenly Bo extended his neck and swung his huge head into the baskets, sending them flying.

I jumped. “Amazing!” I said. “You told him to do that, didn’t you?”

“That I did. He can do it with his tail, too. He can hear me from miles off and come find me in minutes. He can growl menacingly...”

Nago paused, silent, and then Bo let out a low growl that was quite alarming even to me.

“I think you get the idea,” said Master Nago. “But tell me, Aeli, do you have much experience with telepathy?”

Not until recently, I thought, but replied instead, “A little, Master.”

“Bo and Yzzel are bred and trained for it. A dewback has a very simple mind, no ability to block thoughts really, anyone with Jedi training should be able to connect with a dewback like these two, if they try. See what you can do. Here, I’ll speak out loud what I’m saying to Bo, so you can follow. You just don’t block him, you’ll hear him clearly enough. Bo? Say Aeli’s name, Bo.”

*Ae...li...*

“Oh!” I gasped.

*Lick Aeli?*

“Yes, Bo, lick Aeli.”

I withdrew a little, expecting that huge tongue to come at me, but Bo only looked at me with his closest eye and that expression so like a smile.

Master Nago was quick to explain: “He’s not literally going to lick you, not that he doesn’t want to—he’s trained not to do that to humans, it’s a bit overwhelming. It’s just the dewback act of bonding. He was asking me if he should bond with you.”

“Oh...” I found this very endearing, and patted Bo’s nose. I thought to him, *Lick Bo?* He cast his eye at Nago, as if to indicate I should get the Master’s permission if I wanted to bond in return. Nago nodded firmly in Bo’s direction and he looked back at me again.

*Yes, Aeli, small human.*

Yzzel accepted me contentedly, but it was Bo’s enthusiastic affection which finally brought me out of my pining for my lost friend Brennan. Even Yzzel seemed to find Bo’s devotion to me amusing, and Master Nago certainly delighted over it. In the following days I spent all my spare time with the three, feeding the dewbacks, cleaning their pen, doing telepathy exercises and training with them. Mostly my task was helping them adapt to the urban environment on Coruscant, which included daily exercise in the Roughlands, the only natural preserve on the planet large enough to serve the purpose. Bo was an enthusiastic steed all right, but he seemed to have great respect for my “smallness” and was sensitive to what I could handle.

Master Nago told me fascinating stories of his work with the dewback herd on Tatooine: raising the babies, learning more and more about dewback society, seeking out the most telepathically aware among them and training them. Nago had a dream of employing these dewbacks in Jedi service all over the galaxy. His audience with the Council was the next step in making that a reality.

“I never anticipated this life for myself,” said Master Nago, as we settled down under a tree in the Roughlands, letting the dewbacks graze after an invigorating ride. “I did a fair amount of fighting as a Knight, a lot of enforcement, even a little espionage. Raising animals? Not this one. City life for me, not farming.”

I plucked at the bed of moss between the tree roots. “So how did this remarkable twist of fate come about, Master?” I asked him.

“I was doing desert patrol on Tatooine. Pretty boring, in fact. No one for company but your dewback, but that fortunate fact changed everything. My usual mount was Bo’s sire, called Frakt. One afternoon I was so bored that I tried talking to Frakt. After all, legends say the Tusken Raiders are telepathically linked to their banthas. Well, Frakt heard me. In fact, he had been hearing me for some time, and picked up the meaning of basic commands immediately. Far more impressive than anything that’s been said about banthas. Quite an amazing animal, Bo’s very like him.”

“You’ve mentioned Frakt before...”

“Yes, he’s alpha male of my herd,” replied Nago. “He’s sired fifteen...an astounding feat, since until this breakthrough, no one was able to breed dewbacks in captivity. So, to continue: one day I had to break up a tavern fight, it was really quite a brawl, there were maybe 50 people in the place and they were all throwing punches. One fellow who was more crazy than drunk pulled out a blaster. I managed to talk him outside, but he wouldn’t surrender the weapon. It occurred to me to enlist Frakt’s help. I called him over telepathically, and he did basically what you saw Bo do to the baskets your first day. I realized then that what had been not much but a friendship to stave off boredom could become a great boon to the Republic.”

“It’s a wonderful idea,” I said enthusiastically.



Master Nago looked at me pensively. "It's funny," he said, "how the path your life takes can wander into territories you never imagined visiting. How about you, Aeli, how do you picture your future?"

Just then Bo wandered over and settled down next to me with a thud, his immense head resting so the tip of his nose was against my knee. I laughed and patted him; he gave a happy sigh and closed his eyes. "I'm not sure," I said. "Of course I have the same daydreams all Jedi trainees do: great battles to the death to save the Republic, being the best at the lightsaber and striking fear into the hearts of your enemies." I laughed.

"In your case, I have no doubt it could be true," said Nago earnestly.

I had never been sure whether he knew anything much about me, but apparently he did. I gave him a quizzical look.

"I've spoken to Mace Windu about you," he explained. "He tells me you are truly amazing with a saber."

"I have been blessed with excellent training," I replied.

"It's a skill that will serve you well in any pursuit," said Nago.

*He wants to keep you.*

This from Bo, drowsing at my side. Of course Nago would have heard it as well, so I looked from Bo to the Master, trying to discern the truth.

"Bo is quick to draw conclusions," said Nago, reddening slightly. "What I would like is for you to join me in returning the dewbacks to Tatooine. I have asked permission of Master Windu; it would serve as a short internship for you. I think you would benefit greatly from seeing the whole herd, and if things go well tomorrow at the Council demonstration...well, there will be much work to be done. I will want to move the whole herd to a permanent ranch set up here in the Roughlands, and that will require a lot of preparation."

Travel to Tatooine! Now that had some appeal to one such as myself who loved the few pockets of nature on my own planet and longed to visit a less urban world. And as for meeting the rest of Bo and Yzzel's clan, that was a truly exciting prospect.

"You can see dewbacks everywhere on Tatooine," said Master Nago in a tempting tone.

"What did Master Windu say?"

"He is hesitant...with things as they are currently, the Council is very protective of its young Jedi. But there has been no trouble yet on Tatooine, and of course it's not like we can stop all our work because of these threats. And I need someone who is an excellent fighter. So far I've kept my work secret, but it won't be anymore, and there are plenty of unsavory types on Tatooine, people eager to get their hands on Bo and his kin."

Bo was not quite sleeping. His mind was not sophisticated enough to translate what Nago had said into a message of danger, but he did hear enough to know that the discussion was about me going to Tatooine. He lifted his head slightly and I felt him push my knee with his nose. *Come Aeli, see my brothers.* It was a plaintive little plea and my heart melted. "I would very much like to go," I told Master Nago.

\* \* \*

Only one thing disturbed me, and that was that I would be traveling even further away from Brennan. But there was nothing binding me to stay on Coruscant, I didn't even know when he would return. It was foolish to make decisions based upon their impact on that relationship, when I didn't even know what that relationship was. He had already been gone for ten weeks and it was quite difficult to remember the feeling of being in his presence.

I wondered what was happening to him, if Master Teg was finding a way to augment his psychic skills, and most of all, if the mystery of our connection was somehow being solved. It had been awhile since I had allowed myself to contemplate these concerns, and when I did, they filled me with an agitated passion I hadn't felt in weeks. To my rational mind this was backsliding, but I found it hard to quell.

I decided some serious meditation was in order, so I asked Master Nago to let me stay behind in the Roughlands with Bo for the night. I had my saber and Bo to protect me, and Nago deemed it would be a good exercise for me to be on my own with the dewback overnight. So after we ate the supper we had packed, the Master and Yzzel took the last transport back to the city and left Bo and I to our solitude.

Having napped in the afternoon, Bo was in a mood for an evening ride. I was certain we were in the vicinity of my childhood adventure with Calnor, so I set out to locate the rock formation. We found it just as dusk settled and the first stars appeared. I dismounted and set up a little camp for us, and instructed Bo to rest so I could meditate.

There was much to contemplate, feeling as I was at a crossroads in my life. It seemed wise to go to Tatooine, to investigate further this possible road, but I felt a strange pull in the contrary direction that I couldn't shake. I quieted myself and opened to the Force, hoping for some guidance. But my concentration wasn't completely pure; my thoughts of Brennan had reawakened in me a desire to find him somehow, and mostly that was what I sought through the Force. If only I could just know that he was well and safe, that would be enough. But there was nothing.

I fell asleep quite early, listening to the sound of Bo breathing near me. I slept, and when it was the dead of night, I dreamt.

In the dream I felt warmth, and my nose filled with a familiar scent. It was Brennan. I opened my eyes and he was lying with me, my head was cradled on his arm. I was concerned being so close to him, it wasn't fitting—but I was so glad to see him that the worry fled in a moment.

"Brenan!" I cried.

He looked long and hard at me, his eyes searching deep. "Aeli," he said warmly, "our minds have touched so many times...but there are other kinds of closeness I want to know with you."

His words cut me to the quick. I drew away in alarm, but his hand reached for my face. His fingers brushed the hair back from my cheek. A calming feeling came over me with the touch, and I submitted to it at once. It was like sinking into a bath. How could I fear him? He always wanted the best for me. I gazed into his face and it was so good to look upon him again. I

couldn't quite remember what he had said that had frightened me so, so I let it go. My own hand floated up to touch him, his golden hair was unbound so I stroked it and almost gasped at the softness. He leaned closer and I relished the increased warmth I could feel from his body.

"I missed you so much," I told him.

"Hush, I'm here now," he replied. He held my head steady. Suddenly another little lash of fear rose up in me...what did he mean to do? But then his eyelids began to close and mine did likewise, I was caught up in his will like a fly in a spider web. I felt his mouth on mine and the caress was so sweet I didn't want him to stop, I sunk my fingers in his hair and held to him. His grip on me tightened; in my mind's eye I could see us, my breasts pressed into his broad chest, those strong arms enfolding me. His delicious fragrance filled my head, flowed in my blood. And his kiss...the softness of his nose, the roughness of his chin, his lips so firm and tender and lovely—Brenan's kiss, the taste of his desire for me. Heat kindled my body and spread, a flash fire which met no resistance in me anywhere...

...anywhere except the corner that was a Jedi.

This could not happen, he was my Master and I wouldn't allow it, there could be nothing that made me anything but his Padawan.

I heard his voice then, felt his breath in my ear, tender and fervent, "Let me be your lover instead, give me your body instead..."

How I wished to, for he was so overwhelmingly exciting. I could feel the aggression that fueled his lightsaber in battle, the blood lust he called upon when duty required him to fight to the death. I could feel the power of his authority, the overpowering sway I had tasted that day in the training room. I knew he could take me whether I wished it or not...I knew he could make me wish it. All these things swept over me like a tidal wave, a massive dark power that could not be resisted...

Suddenly something very strong was shaking me loose from the ecstasy of Brennan's embrace. I hung on, but it was stronger than I was. I felt Brennan fading, leaving me aching in the hunger his flesh had quickened in me, and I reached for him, I almost grasped him...but then my whole body was crushed in a heavy, rough weight that forced the dream away.

It was Bo's tongue. *Stop dreaming, Aeli. Talk to Bo.*

For a moment I was actually angry at the dewback for what he had done. Then I came to myself.

"Oh Bo," I said, reaching for his head to stop the licking. "Thank you, Bo."

It had been the Dark Side. I was certain of it. I could not deny that I felt physical desire for Brennan from time to time—he was a man, I was a woman, and I loved him. But it had never been like this. The man in the dream had looked like Brennan, and so reminded me of him. But it was not his soul at all. The intensity of the feeling...it had not been a normal dream either.

And then I thought of Mace Windu's warning.

Perhaps I really did feel these things for Brennan, perhaps I underestimated my own weakness. If the Dark Side could use this against me...then it was all the more reason why I had to keep my distance. If there really was lust for him in my soul, it was the perfect tool...and I could be the next to disappear!

No, I would go to Tatooine. Bo had sensed the danger and helped me, I would go to his family and pursue my future.

How ironic that once again in the dream I had called Brennan Auri-Owan my Master! I wouldn't let the Dark Side use my own desires against me.

I wanted to return to the Temple immediately, but there was of course no transport till the morning and no other way to get Bo back. Then I realized I was as safe there with the dewback by my side as I was going to be anywhere. He had proven that. So I curled up against the curve of his muscular neck, before long the dampness his tongue had left in my clothes dried, and at last I went back to sleep.

\* \* \*

And so it happened that I left Coruscant long-term for the first time in my memory, to travel with Master Nago Dree to Tatooine. My Masters declared my official Temple training to be complete, and while this was to be an internship rather than a true apprenticeship, my final conference with Mace Windu left me with the distinct impression that I was eligible to be chosen a Padawan at any time.

The journey aboard the transport was a joyful one, for the Council had been very impressed with our two dewbacks, and there were even several Jedi who wished to acquire psychically-trained dewbacks as soon as possible. Bo and Yzzel had done so well on Coruscant that Master Nago had determined his best course was indeed to move the entire herd to that planet, where they would be substantially safer than on Tatooine. He had kept his work secret up till now, but there was no doubt word of the value of the animals would spread rapidly. According to Nago, the beasts would be prey for theft or kidnapping by any of the several nefarious races of the area: the Jawas, the Hutts and the Tusken Raiders. So our focus was going to be to prepare the dewbacks for transport as soon as their new ranch was completed in the Roughlands, a project that was expected to take no more than a couple of months.

I enjoyed my time on the transport, alternately tending to Bo and Yzzel's needs and making conversation with Master Nago. I found his company very pleasant: While he certainly had my respect, being a man of great intelligence and experience, he did not intimidate me in any way and I always felt at ease with him. He was a lifelong student of the subject of telepathy, and during our discussions of the topic I was more than once very tempted to share with him my experiences with Brennan. If not for my unpleasant dream, I might have; however, I didn't want to broach the subject unless I could tell him everything (largely because his superior rank to me required that I answer any questions posed to me in full), and I was honestly too embarrassed to speak of the dark desire I had felt for the Jedi Knight in my dream.

So I kept such ruminations to myself, and guarded my thoughts carefully. I disciplined myself not to think of Brennan at all, to focus rather on the new course my life was taking. My first major distraction was Tatooine itself. Spending most of my life on Coruscant had left me completely unprepared for a world which was in many ways its opposite: Tatooine was largely uninhabited, with vast expanses of raw desert. Its twin suns baked the surface by day, a dry and fearsome heat which required Jedi discipline to accept at times. By night it could be quite chill, but I loved the night because for the first time I was on a world where the stars could clearly be seen. I cultivated a sort of grim admiration for the unconquered nature of Tatooine. Meanwhile, the rough personalities of most of the inhabitants also tested my mettle. I was determined to

remember I was a Jedi, well equipped for any challenges and smart enough to know not to bring them upon myself unnecessarily. Master Nago was good company, and he had a number of human friends among the moisture farmers in the area. As the weeks passed, although I didn't feel exactly at home, I felt more and more capable of managing my new environment.

Working with the dewbacks was a true joy. It took little coaxing from Bo and Yzzel to convince the rest of the herd that I was bond-worthy. I tried to get to know each of the 23 beasts, from the wise and sedate Frakt to the young twins he had most recently sired. Bo and Yzzel were certainly the most adept of the bunch, but all of them showed great promise and most would serve well as companion to a Jedi Knight.

Thus occupied, I found the time passed quickly. We heard word that the ranch construction was going well and its completion would probably coincide nicely with the time when the twins would be old enough to travel. Nothing much marred our happy work except the occasional news that another Jedi had gone missing. Every time I heard of another incident, I experienced a wave of fear concerning Brenan... followed, I am shamed to admit, by a wave of fear concerning myself. But no further ill visions came to haunt me, and I gave little thought to the other possible dangers of which I should be wary.

Many years earlier, Master Yoda had told us trainees something which always stuck with me. He said that every now and then a day comes along which can disrupt your life, when forces come together, tidal waves tossing you like a small boat. Towards the end of my sixth week on Tatooine, I had such a day.

It began ordinarily enough. I put in an especially hard day, training the twins as well as helping repair one of the shelters. The combination of difficult mental and physical labor left me quite taxed. Come evening, Master Nago said he would stand watch over the herd and I could take a break however I saw fit, to recollect myself. I chose to go on a little ride with Bo, but I decided to make the rest more edifying by taking some good reading with me.

Master Nago's library was quite impressive. He had holograms and scrolls and books on every possible subject of interest to a Jedi. I scanned the shelves, not quite sure what I was looking for, when my eye came to rest on a small book called *The Three Dreams of Teg of Aleyra*.

Naturally my heart skipped a beat at the sight of the author's name. I knew little of Teg beyond his reputation as a great seer and telepathist, a Master of unknown age and great power. But I was eager to know more about the one in whom Brenan Auri-Owan had placed so much trust.

I took the book from the shelf, and scampered to find Bo.

We didn't ride far, for once night fell it would get cold and Bo would have little interest in walking anywhere. The twin suns were slowly headed toward setting when I stopped in a hollow between two dunes. Bo settled down to rest and I leaned against his smooth side and opened my book. I read:

There are as many futures as there are stars. A man cannot precisely choose his future, but he can choose to sweep many of the stars away. To sweep away the evil futures is the calling of every Jedi. To this I am called, to this I hope to be true.

These are the three dreams of Teg of Aleyra.

*Dream the First.*

I saw a Golden Knight, a man of youth who was nevertheless already full in his powers. He was wise, and strong, and mighty, and great in the Force. There was nothing to hinder him from becoming a Master, and so it was done.

I saw too a Padawan, a young man of great gifts, full worthy of such a Master. And so they were pledged. They complimented each other well, and served the Republic with full heart and strong hand.

But they were not the Golden Pair, and it was not yet the fullness of time.

So when the Great Evil came, these two fought valiantly, but they could not prevail. The Evil was triumphant, and terrible darkness came over all the world.

I awoke from this dream full of dread and sorrow. This future should not be. Surely there was another that could take its place, should the choices be made to sweep the proper stars. So I returned to my sleep.

*Dream the Second.*

I saw a Golden Padawan, a young man true of heart and mighty in battle. He had a special gift, a blessing bestowed upon him by the Force, but his one great error was that he did not recognize this gift. The Padawan struggled with the Force, entreating that he might be freed of it. Long and hard he struggled, until at last he drove it from him. No one understood the tragedy of this, not even the wise Jedi who knew him.

I saw too a Master, wise and gentle and mighty in the Force, who chose this Padawan to learn from him. It was a fine match, and the two achieved great things together.

But they were not the Golden Pair, and the fullness of time had already passed.

So when the Great Evil came, these two fought valiantly, but again they could not prevail. The Evil was triumphant, and terrible darkness came over all the world.

When I awoke my heart was grieved within me. Could nothing be done to avert the errors that would bring about this future? Could not the Force guide me to what I must do? Again I lay myself down to sleep.

*Dream the Third.*

I saw the Golden Knight, and I knew the time was not yet full for his advancement. And so I cursed him, I blinded his inner eye so that he might have one flaw that could not be denied. This curse I could lift from him, but not until the time was right.

And I saw the Golden Padawan, and he had not yet cast his gift from him. So I cursed him too, so that he might have no power over it. This curse could never be lifted, for the Force made clear that it was always to be so.

In my dream time passed, and I watched with open eyes until the paths of these two crossed. Then I lifted the curse from the Golden Knight, that he might be raised to Master. This was all the work there was for me to do, for these two were the Golden Pair, and once brought together, there would be no parting them.

By my labors were many stars swept from the sky. Those that remained I prayed were futures where good would conquer evil. The dream did not reveal this to me, but when I awoke I was satisfied.

These are the three dreams of Teg of Aleyra, and to the task the Force has given to me, may I be most faithful.

I can barely describe my reaction to these words. It could not be coincidence that Brenan sought the guidance of Teg, not when this description fit him so well. Why, he had even told me that the meaning of Auri-Owan was “Golden One.”

As for the identity of the Padawan, I did not know what to think. Perhaps he too had been brought to Aleyra, it being the fullness of time. It was possible they were already pledged. Certainly there was terrible evil afoot in the galaxy, certainly it was a good time for a “Golden Pair” to arise and seek a way to stop it.

I was almost glad then that I had had the dreadful dream, for I knew that apart from it, I would surely be trying to find a way to interpret myself as the Golden Padawan. It would explain everything that had happened between Brenan and me, that was certain. I imagined too that this was why Brenan had told me that—“our destiny”—he had suspected it too. But he was wrong of course...for one thing, the Padawan was a male. And for another, I would never be worthy. The dream had made that clear. Even if I could be sure I felt nothing sexual for Auri-Owan, my love for him was still too intense, too unmanageable.

Still, the words I had read had a powerful effect on me. They unleashed too many thoughts I had kept locked away for weeks. As dusk fell and the first stars appeared overhead, I wondered if one of them shone upon the soil of Aleyra, if even now one of them cast its light upon the golden head of my beloved friend. Was he a Master now? Did another stand by his side, preparing to fight the invisible threat to the Jedi? Could it be possible that he still thought of me?

I pressed my hand to my shirt, felt the shape of Brenan’s ring under my fingers. He shouldn’t have given it to me, it wasn’t my right. I would have to find him again and return it.

Bo stirred behind my back and I came to myself. It was getting late, it would already be a bit of a challenge to get the animal up. “Bo,” I said, aloud, “we have to get back.”

He ignored me, although I knew he understood.

“Silly thing, you can’t sleep here all night. Bo, get up.”

The dewback deigned to open his nearest eye halfway and regard me. *Time to rest*, he said.

I had been foolish, that was clear. I was mustering a more urgent tone, when suddenly Bo’s head shot up. His eye opened wide. He looked at me and said, *Go to family!*

I stared at him a moment, puzzled by the sudden mood change. Bo swung his head and practically knocked me over. *Nago calls! Go to family!*

Then I understood. In a moment I took up the book and leapt on Bo's back, and we were off across the dunes at quite an amazing pace. I could feel Bo's adrenaline rush and it was infectious. Something indeed terrible was going on at the ranch, and I feared for the dewbacks I had come to love and even more for Master Nago. A maternal rage seized me at first, but as we hurdled over the sand, the details emerging from Bo's mind changed my mood. Two of them frightened me to the core: *Nago sleeps. Raiders.* I instinctively felt for my lightsaber at my belt.

There was a high ridge just to the south of the ranch, and I stopped Bo when we arrived there. It was possible from this vantage point to get a good look at what was going on, before we were actually seen by the perpetrators. I hopped off Bo and crawled to the top of a dune to peek over.

There were several banthas—I counted three with saddle gear—which meant there were three Tusken Raiders as well. Apparently they had somehow stunned or subdued some of the dewbacks, and were loading them onto carts which were drawn by other banthas. I couldn't see Nago anywhere. Just then I heard a bellow that was unmistakably that of Frakt. By the light of the torches I spotted a Raider dispatching the large beast with some sort of stunning device.

*Frakt!* cried Bo in heart-wrenching dismay.

*You can help me save him,* I replied, as soothingly as I could.

In point of fact I was terrified. How were I and my dewback supposed to fight three Raiders?

*We should have challenged three.*

This was the voice not of Bo, but my memory of Brenan. What was I so afraid of? I was a Jedi, I had a lightsaber, I was in the company of a telepathic dewback, if there were three Tusken Raiders then they would simply be made to wish they had brought a fourth. I smiled at this thought, and recognized an attitude woven by many stories at the Meri-Borx and in the training room. You may not be my Master, I thought to myself, but Auri-Owan, you were good for me.

I took a moment to perform the Routines. In that moment I had at least an hour to develop my plan. I knew I was well prepared in spirit because I was calm in spite of the fact that I had sensed clearly these Raiders intended to kill anyone who came upon them.

I told Bo to be calm and trust me, and he proved his training by obeying at once, in spite of his alarm. Then I mounted him and we descended the ridge to the ranch at a completely normal pace.

The Raiders saw us coming and left off their labors to gather for our approach. They drew their gaderffii in preparation. They were not completely stupid; they had sedated or penned up all the other dewbacks so we could recruit none to our aid. Of course, the docile banthas were no use to their side either.

*Threaten them, Bo, but not so close to get hurt by their gaderffii,* I instructed him as we drew near. He growled menacingly, showing all his teeth. The Raiders, if they felt fear, did not show it. I was still merely a woman on a beast and they no doubt saw me as easy prey.

When we got close enough I leapt off Bo and landed a few feet from the nearest Raider, who brandished his weapon. As I leapt, I drew mine.

Clearly they had not expected a Jedi.



In one stroke I severed the gaderffii in two, and with the backstroke I beheaded its owner.

It was my first kill, and it's difficult for me to say if I reacted to it properly or not. The way I reacted was a flush of bloodlust, which I quickly quelled, diverting its energy instead to augmenting my strength and quickness. I turned to the next Raider. He was readying to swing his weapon at me when Bo emitted a well-timed roar. The diversion of attention was long enough for me to strike the Raider, and having discerned he was already badly frightened, I chose merely to deal him a bad injury to his weapon arm.

The third was left understandably beside himself with terror. It is impossible to see the face of a Tusken Raider, but I didn't need to. Fear came off him in waves. I rose to my full height with my lightsaber lifted high. "Tell your brothers no one is allowed to touch these dewbacks. Take the body with you and go."

With amazing speed the two loaded the corpse on a bantha, unhitched the carts laden with dewbacks, and rode off over the dunes. One intact gaderffii was left behind in the sand, and I made a mental note to retrieve it later, as some proof that it all had really happened. Then I sought Master Nago.

It took some searching, but I found him concealed half under one of Bo's brothers, the largest beast in the herd. He had apparently been there when the dewback himself was sedated, and was simultaneously knocked unconscious without the Raiders even seeing him there. This no doubt saved Nago's life. I was unable to rouse him, but I drew him out, put a blanket over him and left Bo by his side. I checked on the other animals, freed the penned ones, made sure the sleeping ones were merely unconscious, and did my best to calm everyone.

Once everything was in order, I went back and retrieved the Tusken weapon. I carried it back to where Bo stood over Master Nago, and waited.

*You are very strong, Aeli,* said Bo.

"No," I replied out loud. "You are strong, Bo, I'm a Jedi. You did very well. You saved your family."

*We saved our family,* Bo corrected me.

We sat quietly for a few moments. It seemed like the calm in the middle of a storm. I knew when the sedated beasts awoke there would be no little amount of turmoil to deal with, but how long that would take I couldn't say. The stars grew brighter, even with the torches lit I could see many of them.

I had killed a sentient being. I wondered if there might have been another way, but somehow I knew I had done what I had to. A Jedi Knight was an instrument of justice, and sometimes this was what justice did. A Jedi Knight. Perhaps someday I would be one after all. At least now I knew I could use my lightsaber for something other than drills.

Just then my reverie was interrupted. I felt a presence standing over me, with a familiarity it took me only an instant to place.

I had felt it months ago in the Great Hall.

I looked up and saw Brennan. How interesting...he had grown a short beard in the time he was away. It was quite becoming.

“It’s time to come to me, Aeli,” he said with a warm smile.

I was completely unprepared for the feelings rushing in me. I had been so serene for so long, serene even while fighting the Raiders, I had no tolerance for these emotions. It was like a novice drinking ale for the first time. I took such pleasure just from the sight of him, from that smile which radiated warmth and joy, from those eyes, from every feature of his dear face, from the tactile presence of his strong body. I wanted to throw myself into his arms but something held me back. All I could do was whisper, “Brenan, I missed you so.”

Bo stirred behind me, I could feel him raise his head. *Aeli, you speak to the air?* he asked.

I realized Brenan did not see Bo, nor vice versa. I stood up and took a step closer to him.

“Where are you?” I asked him.

“I wait for you on Coruscant. Bring back the ring.” At this he very nearly laughed.

I smiled, it felt like my whole body smiled. “Are you a Master yet?” I asked playfully.

He lowered his chin and looked at me deeply. Still, there was a trace of mirth in the question he posed to me then: “Can’t you tell?”

A shudder went through me. Indeed, I could. Behind the familiar, beloved form which stood before me, I felt contained such a wealth of power that it very nearly terrified me. I could make no answer, nor did I need to.

“Come to me now,” he said.

I felt the strangest sensation then. It was like his hand passed through my chest and closed around my heart. It was gentle, but so firm and immovable that I held stock still for fear it would kill me. Then I forgot about my heart, for my entire soul was seized with such a hunger that permitted no other emotion, no other thought. A hunger to be with him.

“Don’t let anything prevent it,” said Master Auri-Owan.

I gathered all my strength, all my resolve, and I cast myself back into my terrible dream. The Dark Side wanted me to seek him, who knew why, perhaps to distract or tempt him, but surely to bring some evil upon him. He didn’t realize what I felt for him, what I was capable of wanting from him. If he knew, he would never ask...

Another twinge of desperate longing seized me. Oh, to be by his side again, to fight with him, to learn from him, to spend my life augmenting his somehow, and letting him bring me to my full worth. Nothing sweeter, nothing richer...

What was I to do?

It came then, surprisingly gentle, destroying every obstruction in its path. “Obey me, Aeli.”

I succumbed. And Brenan vanished.

Bo was bumping against my back with his nose. *Aeli, stop talking to the air. Nago awakes.*

Indeed, Master Nago was coming to consciousness. I rushed to kneel next to him. He blinked at me groggily and said, “Well, I don’t seem to be dead...should I take it that this is your doing?”

“Bo helped, he’s a hero,” I said absently, “but are you all right?”

“I have a headache. The herd?”

“All here, some sleeping, but all fine.”

“Then soon we’ll have dewbacks with headaches to deal with. What happened to the Raiders?”

“One dead, another injured—so two of the three fled home with a warning from me.”

Nago tried to sit up. “Bless you. You’re a wonder. And I’m a wonder for thinking to bring you here. Thank the gods we’ll be getting these animals out of danger soon. I imagine the whole planet has designs on them by now.”

“Master, there’s something else...I know this is no time to tell you, but I must. I have to go back to Coruscant.”

Nago grunted, rubbing his eyes, then looked at me. “Yes, I know. I got the dispatch from the Council while you were gone. Mace Windu wants you on the next transport.” He carefully rose to his feet. “Ow. Well, what a day this has been!”

As Master Yoda taught us, some days are like that.

It took Master Nago and I quite awhile to restore order among the dewbacks, and it was the small hours of the night before we were able to retire. I fell into my bed with my clothes still on, and for awhile slept the sleep of the dead. But only for awhile.

I awoke suddenly, sensing warmth in the bed with me. I opened my eyes and in the dim light I saw Brennan’s face near mine. He spoke at once: “I know how difficult this is for you. But I also know you can be strong enough.”

I was confused, uncertain, so I lay very still trying to determine if this were dream or vision, good or evil. I felt Brennan’s arm slide under the blanket, around my waist and up my back. He was wonderfully warm. Would it hurt to let him hold me, after such a long separation?

He spoke again, in low and comforting tones. “You just need to prove to yourself you can resist it, Aeli.” His hand caressed the small of my back, a touch that I felt up and down my spine and then also in my loins. “I know you can resist it, you can be this close and not want me...”

Oh but I did want him. I sought my Jedi discipline and found nothing. He leaned his face to me until his nose brushed mine, the softest touch, and I closed my eyes. “Fight it,” he said, and I felt his breath sweet upon my cheek. My chin raised involuntarily, my hand reached for his face and found the coarseness of his new beard, an amazingly lovely sensation.

He kissed me. It was beyond bliss. His arm pulled me closer until I could feel the whole length of his warm, powerful body. His hand moved to my breast then and covered it possessively; I shuddered with pleasure. I was not strong enough, I was helpless. He had only just kissed me and already I ached with desire, already my body betrayed me by readying itself to be taken. I longed desperately to feel his weight on me, I wished for nothing but to open to him, to give myself over to his will.

There was no Bo nearby to save me this time, but there was another. “This temptation will cease now,” echoed a voice which seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at once. The voice of Master Auri-Owan. Brennan vanished from my bed.

“You see? You see?” I cried out to the voice, tears of shame springing in my eyes. “I can’t do this. It’s hopeless, Brennan. Forgive me.”

“Leave this to me,” he said, and the authority in his tone drove fear and shame from me instantly. “There are forces that would keep you from me, but they will not win. If you weren’t strong they wouldn’t bother with you.”

It was impossible not to believe him. “All right,” I said faintly.

“Come as soon as you can. Let nothing prevent it,” he said firmly. Then his voice softened and he said, “Now sleep, there will be no more evil dreams to torment you. I promise.”

In a certain way then he came to my bed, but it was not like the dream that came before. He was not there physically, but my sense of him was acute. I felt him guarding my mind, a completely silent presence, clear and strong like lucidity personified. With him watching, all confusion left me, and I felt utterly safe for the first time in weeks. I fell into an unbroken sleep until daybreak.

\* \* \*

The next day a ride was arranged for me to Mos Eisley. I packed quickly and bid hasty goodbyes to the dewbacks, assuring them that we would see each other soon on Coruscant. I was sorry to leave Master Nago alone after our skirmish with the Tusken Raiders, but he had recruited temporary help from the neighboring farms and told me not to worry. “A directive from Mace Windu is not to be ignored,” he told me with a smile.

Neither was a directive from Brenan Auri-Owan. If his command was not enough, then there was also the fact that the hunger to reach him still burned in my soul. At times I felt as light as air, anticipating our reunion; at other times I almost felt ill from the potency of the yearning. I marveled at his power to do this from such a distance. He had indeed become great under the guidance of Master Teg.

I spent one night in Mos Eisley, at an inn whose host was a friend of Nago. As promised, my sleep was untroubled, and I rose before dawn to make the early transport to Coruscant.

And so it happened that in three days I found myself back at the Jedi Temple. It truly seemed like a dream. I barely had time to change clothes before I was summoned to one of the lesser Council rooms.

My heart pounded violently as I hurried to answer the summons. It was no small thing for a trainee to be called upon by Mace Windu, and though I knew this had something to do with Brenan, there was still enough mystery about it that I was very unsettled. There was actually a guard posted in the anteroom; he asked me to wait there, and these proved to be the most difficult minutes of all...

...for I knew that Auri-Owan was within. My longing to see him was at fever pitch, although I couldn’t discern in the least how much of it sprang from the command under which he had put me, and how much was natural. Finally, bidden by some unheard instruction, the guard opened the door to permit my entrance and closed it behind me.

The first person I saw was Master Yoda, which only increased my alarm. Master Windu motioned for me to come to the far end of the table, where the two sat. Brenan stood next to them. Here he was in the flesh, the beard was real, and if anything he looked younger and certainly stronger. There was a change in his bearing that could not be denied.

He did not acknowledge me by word or action, but the hunger I had felt for three days suddenly abated, leaving deep peace in its wake. The peace lasted only a moment however, for then my own joy kicked in and it was all I could do not to run and embrace him. I quickly got ahold of myself; this was a solemn occasion, perhaps the most solemn of my life to date.

“Master Windu, Master Yoda, I come according to your summons,” I said. And added softly, “Master Auri-Owan, it is good to see you again.”

Brenan nodded, and it was then that I felt how he was holding back his happiness. A smile threatened to break through his somber demeanor, but only I noticed it.

Master Windu spoke. “Aelida Camil, we have called you to discuss a matter which may have tremendous ramifications for all of the Republic. We need to investigate certain claims which have been made by Master Auri-Owan, in which you are involved. Master Yoda and I will bear witness to what happens here today. We may ask you never to speak of it again.”

“Yes, Master Windu,” I said.

“Tell me, Aeli, do you have any knowledge of the Golden Pair?”

So it had already come to this. “Yes, Master, I have read of it.”

“*The Three Dreams of Teg* have you read?” asked Master Yoda.

“Yes, Master, I have.” My eyes glanced over to Brennan, and I could perceive his surprise.

Master Windu pulled towards him a small box that was sitting on the table. “In the time since Teg wrote, there have been occasional claims to the title, and it has fallen to Master Yoda to judge their verity. Obviously up until now, none have passed the test. We do not doubt the sincerity and good faith of Master Auri-Owan, but Master Yoda was given the charge from Teg himself.”

“*The Three Dreams* say not, but a key he wrote,” said Yoda. “Signs he gave that the Golden Pair would bear. This key to me he gave, long ago.”

“And I am the second witness,” said Master Windu. “No one alive but us and Master Teg know the key, the signs of the Golden Pair. If you prove false, your memories of this meeting will be erased. Now, hear the key.”

He opened the box and drew from it a scroll, which he carefully unrolled. “Brenan Auri-Owan, do you swear you have no prior knowledge of the key?”

“By the Force I swear it,” Brennan answered.

I felt nothing but calm confidence coming from him. I was confident too; there was almost no doubt in my mind that he was the Golden Knight.

Master Windu read from the scroll: “I, Teg of Aleyra, here write the signs revealed to me in my dreams of the Golden Pair. The Golden Knight shall be known by this: He shall carry on his body the marks of four golden suns.”

The ring! But I had the ring, it wasn't fair! He should never have given it to me... I opened my mouth to speak, but in my head I heard him clearly: *Hush*. I quieted myself and waited.

And as I waited, Brennan undid his upper garments enough to peel back the fabric over his chest. There, on the ivory skin over his heart, was a column of four small suns, rendered somehow in his flesh in gold.

Master Windu looked astonished, but Yoda gave a slight smile and nodded. Of course he had known for years, being Brennan's master—he had known, but never breathed a word to anyone including his Padawan. Brennan calmly explained, "The sun is the mark of my house. I am the fourth Auri-Owan to be a Jedi, so I bear four suns. I have had these since I was chosen in childhood. But I never knew they held any other meaning."

Mace Windu recovered himself enough to turn then to me. "Aelida Camil, do you swear you have no prior knowledge of the key?"

"By the Force I swear it," I replied weakly. I was truly undone, by the simple fact that an ancient prophesy was being fulfilled in my dear friend. I couldn't keep from trembling.

Master Windu read again from the scroll: "'And the Golden Padawan shall be known by this: He shall likewise carry over his heart these four golden suns, come to him as a gift.'"

He raised his eyes to look at me. Master Yoda, too, waited expectantly. Then I looked at Brennan. He radiated some amused astonishment—he had clearly never suspected the significance of the act of giving me his ring. *Our destiny*, he said in my head, and allowed himself to smile.

I reached inside my tunic and grasped the chain. I pulled it out so the ring fell upon my chest. I moved closer to Master Windu, and he took up the ring and examined it. He turned to Yoda, who got to his feet and came to see it too.

Master Yoda paused a long moment, sighed, and then said to Mace Windu, "The Golden Pair they are. Of this truth, witness we bear."

Brennan took a step closer and spoke in a firm, authoritative voice, "Then I renew my request to take this Jedi as my Padawan."

I cannot deny how I rejoiced to hear these words. I didn't understand, it all seemed impossible according to any means I used to judge reality, but it was all I had ever wanted, perhaps since I had been born.

Master Windu stood as well. "As you choose, Master Auri-Owan."

"As you choose," agreed Yoda solemnly.

"The pledging shall be tomorrow then," said Windu, "At high noon in the Great Hall. It will be published immediately. Until then, prepare yourselves well. What you are about to undertake, you have every right to fear. Nevertheless, the Force is with you both, and in abundance. It is a happy day for the Jedi."

"A long wait have I known," said Yoda, nodding agreement, and I thought I saw a sparkle in his eyes.

"But do not speak, now or ever, to anyone of the Golden Pair. That is for your own safety. Now we will leave you two...you may have the room and the guard as long as you need to. I expect the Padawan-Elect has many questions, and there is no one better to answer them than you, Brennan Auri-Owan."

The two Masters left us, taking Teg's box with them and shutting the door behind them.

"Soon-to-be Padawan," said Brennan, "if you wished to embrace me, I see no reason to wait longer."

I went to him and his arms came around me. He smelled the same. I buried my head in his neck, and clung to him as if any hearty breeze that came along might blow him away from me.

"So," I said, raising my face to look at his, "it will be awhile before we are separated for so long again."

"Quite awhile, I should think."

"The only reason I'm sure this is right is because you believe it."

"And why do you have such strong doubts?"

"You were in my head on Tatooine, I think you know."

He pulled back, but kept a good grip on my shoulders in his two hands. "The lust was not your doing. As for the desire, you will have to learn to live with that. It is part of the Golden Padawan's Gift, after all."

"That's part of the Gift?"

"So Master Teg told me."

"What else did Master Teg tell you?"

Brennan drew out two chairs for us and motioned for me to sit. We sat knee to knee, leaning towards each other, and at once I was so engaged that the rest of the room seemed to withdraw.

Brennan began, "As the book says, he cursed me, long ago in my youth. Master Teg blinded my mind, blocked my powers. That was why I couldn't levitate, why I had no telepathy or mind power to speak of before I met you. He watched me all the time, watched both of us. When I met you it was time for him to stop...to lift the curse, as it were."

"How ironic that you planned to study under him anyway."

"But you see, that was no coincidence. As you learned, Teg and Yoda have been friends for many of our lifetimes. To think that all this time my Master knew that I would be the Golden Knight...now I see this is why he chose me as his Padawan. But he couldn't interfere, he could say nothing until all the pieces fell into place. And so he sent me then to Teg—and indeed I needed to work with him. My power was great once it was freed...it was no time for me to be without guidance. We worked very hard together—once again, nothing ever comes easy, even with the Force." I saw him exhibit a bit of his patented sparkle at this, and it warmed my heart.

"How long ago did you learn about the Golden Pair?"

"I don't even remember. Years ago. I never thought about it until the strange things started happening between us. Something reminded me about the curse put on the Golden Knight, and the possibility occurred to me. If we were the Golden Pair, it certainly explained the bond we both felt from the outset."

"So when you spoke to Teg of it, did he explain right away?"

“No...I think he feared I would take off immediately to find you if he did, so he refused to answer my suspicions. He worked and tested me. ‘Golden Knight, if you be he,’ he would say, mocking me, ‘how do you intend to save the galaxy when you cannot hold back the flow of this tiny river?’”

I laughed into my hand. I could not be as bold about it as I once had; even when mocking himself, Master Brennan somehow commanded authority.

But he smiled at me and went on. “I think he was wise, since it has only been four days since I knew for sure, and here we are.”

“Four days?” I leaned forward in astonishment.

“The Force wanted us together. Do you think you were the only one it compelled?”

“I thought you were compelling me.”

“Only with the power from the Force.”

“I’m sorry I fought you...”

“Don’t apologize. It will be a hard burden for you, the emotions you feel for me. Master Teg spoke much of this to me. He told me to tell you not to fear your passion, it’s there for a reason. In the fullness of time you will understand.”

“And the dreams...?”

“The dreams happened to make you fear being with me. There are those who would do anything to keep us apart, to prevent what you and I will do.”

“Why didn’t they just...kill us?”

“Because they don’t know who we are, or where we are. This is why no one must know we are the Golden Pair. They see us dimly, by the power of the Dark Side. They can reach our minds but for now that is their only weapon. All the detail of your dream was unclear to them...so if you uttered my name, or heard yours, it was all within your own imagination. All the evil ones knew was that because you are the Golden Padawan, your passion for me is your weakness as well as your gift. So they used lust to deceive you.”

I stared into space a moment, overwhelmed, then said, “I only wanted to be an ordinary Padawan.”

Brennan took my hand. “For now that is all you will be. Don’t take on more of the burden than is your share, Aeli. Remember, I’m the Master. For now the responsibility falls almost fully on me.”

This was reassuring, but still I asked him, “Tell me one thing, though...doesn’t Teg’s writing say the Golden Padawan is a man?”

“The Aleyran tongue has no genders, Teg’s text doesn’t indicate anything about the sex of the Padawan. It’s a fault of the translation. The version you read must have been old...the newer ones include the ambivalent gender.”

“Oh...well, that more or less removes the last of my possible excuses.”



Brenan patted my knee. "You are stuck with Auri-Owan, I'm afraid. And now, to add insult to injury, I must ask for my ring back."

"Oh, of course!" I reached back to undo the chain, and freed the ring.

"Tomorrow I will replace it with a new gift, so take heart," he said with a smile.

"Really? I expect nothing, Brenan...Master...after all, if we're together now, the ring has served its purpose."

I held it in my fingers, this great ring of honor and prophecy. It didn't seem fitting to simply hand it to him, so I took hold of his right hand and unfolded his first finger. I smiled to myself at the surge of love I felt even for just Brenan's right hand. Strong and beautiful and masterful with the lightsaber, it was also warm and soft and reassuring. I slipped the ring back in its place, then folded his hand closed again.

When I looked up I found Brenan staring at me. "I'm a stoic man," he said, his voice strangely tender, "a Jedi in the most classic sense. I will never pretend to understand what you feel for me, the Golden Padawan's Gift. Nevertheless I'm not made of stone. If there were no prophecy I would still seek to become your Master." His fingers caught at mine before I could withdraw them. "To have the trust and respect of another Jedi, the dependency of a Padawan, is not a charge I take lightly. To have you entrusted to me...I swear as long as I draw breath no harm will come to you."

"Don't swear that," I whispered, "you may be called upon to let harm come to me."

"I think not, for it is both of us together who threaten to destroy the evil. And for all the power the Force has given me, I don't think I could do it."

I stared into his eyes, unable to speak.

"And that is the last time I will admit any weakness to you, soon-to-be my Padawan."

At this Brenan released my fingers and took hold of my face with his two hands. They were so warm, and gentler than I would have thought such a man could be. He lowered my head and kissed me on the forehead, and the tender touch of his lips was echoed in the warm emotion I felt from him. This innocent gesture far surpassed the power of either of my sinister dreams...it abounded in pure loyalty, abiding affection, a bond that passed understanding. I said nothing, did nothing in response, yet I knew he could perceive how I felt...I knew he could sense the swelling adoration of my heart, the overwhelming power of the Gift.

The pledging would be the next day, but in truth, that was the moment when Brenan Auri-Owan became my Master.

\* \* \*

Since my return to Coruscant, I hadn't had any time to see my friends again, not even Calnor. The publication regarding the Padawan ceremony went out immediately, as Master Windu had promised. This was an additional hindrance, for traditionally on the eve of a pledging, everyone leaves the Padawan-elect to himself, to prepare for the event. So the rest of the day that was what I did. There was little point in unpacking much, for I knew I would be leaving the trainees housing as soon as could be arranged; therefore I engaged myself in a few activities I thought were most suitable.

I started by spending a couple of hours in one of the lightsaber training rooms. I saw three of my friends there, and in spite of their solemn demeanor when they offered congratulations, I could see how happy and excited they were for me. I worked alone then, on the most elementary exercises and drills and especially the Three Routines. How peculiar it was to be back in a school setting, having used my saber to defend Master Nago and the dewbacks on Tatooine. This only reminded me how ill prepared I felt for the duties ahead. Whenever I contemplated the future, my mind fell into such a whirl that I determined simply not to think about it. There were but three facts of which I was certain: I would face great peril, I would do it for a hugely important reason, and I would do it with Auri-Owan at my side. Perhaps there was also a fourth fact, although I found it hard to trust: the Force had chosen me for this task so therefore I must be worthy of it.

With so much troubling my mind, I didn't mind being solitary. It was traditional to fast before the pledging, so I didn't even have an opportunity to talk to people in the dining hall, not that much would have been said to me anyway. Instead I went to the Room of a Thousand Fountains to meditate. On such an occasion, it was most fitting to ponder one's calling and prepare one's soul for answering it. I did not know the Golden Padawan's calling, so I sought somehow to find clarification of the mystery.

I was not too surprised when Brenan's voice came into my mind. *Aeli my Padawan, you struggle too hard. You don't need to know everything at once, otherwise the Council could declare you a Knight tomorrow, couldn't they?*

"But Brenan," I replied, "I won't be a normal Padawan. You know the challenges will begin at once..."

*Yes, because I will be a hard Master. You may rue the day you wished for this...* He was laughing, but I also knew he laughed when he had to face his own fears.

"Are you afraid, Master Brenan?" I asked him.

I felt him wax somber in my mind. *I am. I prefer to face my fears while safe in the Jedi Temple, so I can leave them aside when I find myself in my enemy's house.*

"Will you teach me to be courageous?"

*Were you afraid of the Tusken Raiders?*

"Yes...and no."

*A good answer. But yes, I will teach you all I know.*

It was amazing how much better I felt when I wasn't alone. Perhaps the true and only challenge I needed to take upon myself right then was trust. I remembered how Brenan had survived the tunnels into Quel-zil's cave by trusting Yoda and the Force.

*That's my wise friend Aeli...exactly. If you trust me perfectly, you take all that I am into yourself as your own wisdom and strength. Trust will be enough, and I think you have that in abundance. And over time, your trust in the Force will grow as well.*

I smiled. "Then I will meditate on trust, and that will be sufficient." I sensed satisfaction in Brenan, and also some urgency. "My Master, you have your own preparations to make?"

*That I do. Another evening we will talk, over a fine Borx ale perhaps, but tonight I have my own spirit to get in order. But I will be with you, especially when you sleep.*

“But you will sleep too?”

*That merited a quiet chuckle. Yes, I'll sleep too. Goodnight, Aeli. If it's possible to say goodnight, things being as they are in our pair of heads...well, I will be only a little apart from you, but goodnight.*

“Goodnight, my Master, sleep well.”

That night I feared a great struggle might take place over me, since it was the eve of the pledging, but the Dark Side seemed far away both from myself and Brennan. Perhaps it was too late, perhaps evil had given up on the project of keeping us apart. In that hope I went to sleep.

I rose with my chambermates, who went off soberly to their classes after greeting me with large and amazed eyes. It had been awhile since a female was raised to Padawan, so the occasion would have been an exciting one for them even if it weren't the very pledging of a woman who had shared quarters with them for so long. I dressed, for the time being, in my regular clothes. I knew the Council would send an emissary soon to assist me in preparing myself.

In fact, it was my dear friend Calnor who knocked upon the door mid-morning. I admitted him, along with several boxes of varying sizes that he carried. Once the door was closed, I allowed myself to embrace him fervently, boxes and all.

“Cal, I've wanted to see you so badly!”

“The Council wasted no time, Aeli—here I thought I might be the one to break the news to you of Auri-Owan's being raised to Master, and before I can even find you, it's announced that you're to be his Padawan!” He set the boxes on my bed and then hugged me more effectively.

“The Council assigned me as emissary, probably because they knew how badly I wanted a private moment with you. But how was Tatooine, is it true you had to fight Tusken Raiders?”

As usual, gossip had preceded me, but nothing of course to make Cal suspect the full wonder of what was happening—he had no idea that Brennan and I were anything beyond the usual pledging pair, although he was quite astonished enough at that. We talked fast and furiously, for there was not much time for conversation and a great deal to be shared. On Cal's side, the most interesting piece of news was that he was to take my place assisting Master Nago when he returned to Coruscant with the dewbacks. I was very pleased to have my dear animals fall under the care of someone I loved and respected.

“Well,” said Cal at last, “we have no more time to talk, you have to get ready. Let's see what the tailor has sent here.”

We opened the larger boxes and they contained my formal Padawan uniform, everything from boots to cloak, all in light brown as was the custom. There was even a new swordbelt, which puzzled me since it seemed my old one would do just as well. There was a smaller box in the collection, but this one Cal held back. “Get dressed first,” he said, and turned his face away to give me privacy.

I can't deny the joy and pride that swelled in me when I put on those clothes. As much as in a sense I was born a Jedi, and although I had even killed in duty as a Jedi, I had never felt the calling was fully mine until then.

Everything fit wonderfully well, so I told Cal to turn around. He looked me up and down sternly, then said, "I still can't believe you're pledging before I do." I laughed, and he did too. "And to none other than Auri-Owan. I tell you, there's something about you two..."

I made no response, but stood there silent in my new clothes.

"All right, sit down, I'm your escort so I have to do your braid." Cal sat next to me on the bed, parted out a lock of my hair, and set to doing my Padawan's braid. "Doesn't this all seem surreal?" he asked me as his fingers worked.

"Beyond surreal."

"Well, if anyone's ready, you are."

I held still but eyed him. "Do you think so?"

"I never told you this, Aeli, but I suppose if there were ever a time to say it, this is it. There's always been something special about you. Didn't you ever wonder that the Temple's best trainee at the lightsaber in years would be female? I'm not sure what you have exactly, I just know it's different. I wasn't at all surprised that Master Brennan chose you."

I couldn't turn my head so I put my hand on his knee instead. "Thank you, Cal."

"Nevertheless, I'd better be next."

We laughed, then sat silent until he had finished the braid. I stood up to go to my lockdrawer for my lightsaber, since I would need it for the ceremony.

"There's one more box," said Cal, and proffered it.

I knew at once what was in it. In fact, the first thing that crossed my mind was that it was interesting how Brennan could conceal from me whatever he chose. I knew the contents not because he had let me see his mind, but because I knew him so well.

I took the box from Cal and opened it. Inside was a gray velvet pouch, which I lifted out and opened. Wrapped inside was a lightsaber, fashioned of burnished gold, of an amazingly simple and elegant design. I raised it before my eyes. Stylized vines wound up the shaft; I recognized the style as a popular one from Brennan's home world, Delois. On the end of the shaft was engraved the Auri-Owan sun symbol, the same as on the ring and over his heart.

"It's amazing," breathed Cal.

It was light but substantial in my hand, easy to grip and balance. I saw the activation panel and said to Cal, "Stand back." I pressed the button.

The beam was pure gold, longer than that of my former lightsaber. I could also tell the force was substantially stronger, although I had no trouble managing it. Brennan had worked with me enough to know exactly what I could handle. There was no room to run through the 14 transitions or any other such movements, and I longed to dash to the training rooms and try it out. Oh well, that would have to wait, we were due very soon in the Great Hall. What an incredible weapon: it seemed like an extension of my spirit, and yet there was so much of Brennan in it...

Cal interrupted my wandering, amazed thoughts. “You have a saber made by Brenan Auri-Owan,” he said, awe-struck.

I looked at Cal and smiled. I would allow myself one little moment of unabashed pride. “He’s my Master,” I said quietly. And wherever Brenan was at that time, I had the distinct feeling he was well aware of my gratitude.

As Cal escorted me to the private room where I was to meet Mace Windu, I couldn’t help but notice the air of anticipation in the Temple. Everyone seemed to be headed where we were, but people let us pass, deferring to the Padawan-Elect and her emissary.

Cal delivered me to Master Windu, and his duties were done. After we all exchanged greetings, I turned to Cal. I couldn’t help but feel like I was leaving my friend for good, even though I had no idea where I would be the next day. I held out my arms to him and we embraced. “Thank you for everything,” I told him.

Cal squeezed me hard. “You’ve forgiven me for losing you in the Roughlands then?”

That brought tears to my eyes. “It was my fault,” I said.

“Whoever’s fault it was, I think we’re wiser now. May the Force be with you, Aeli.”

“May the Force be with you, Cal.”

Then he released me, gave a little bow to Master Windu, and left us.

I turned. Mace Windu, much to my surprise, also held out his arms to embrace me. Then he held me by the shoulders at arms’ length and said, “Are you ready, Aeli?”

“Forgive me, Master, but how could I be?” I smiled.

He returned the smile and released me. “All will be well, both Master Yoda and I are confident of that. And you are fortunate indeed to be pledged to such a Master as Brenan Auri-Owan. Yoda has known him nearly all his life, and he was remarkable even as a child. What he can accomplish now—and with you—only time will tell.”

“Yes, Master. I can hardly believe my good fortune. It’s very humbling.”

“Well, you’re a bit remarkable yourself, Aelida Camil. I could tell that your first day here, and I know it beyond a doubt now. What a pair you two should be...but enough dallying. Wait here just a moment until I make sure everything is ready.”

I sat in a side chair and tried to prepare. I reviewed in my mind the steps and vows of the ceremony, which were taught to us in class and I had seen with my own eyes many times. Beyond that I simply couldn’t concentrate. My thoughts were in such a whirl I hardly noticed the time from when Mace Windu left until he returned. I felt his hand on my shoulder and I stood up at once.

“It’s time,” he said simply, and led me to the door. We passed down a deserted hallway and in the entrance to the Great Hall that was known as the Lesser Door. It faced the Great Door, and as we entered, across the Hall from us through that door passed Master Yoda, followed by Brenan. To my right, at the head of the Hall, the Council was seated in their tall chairs. To my left was the assembly, just about every member of the Temple. But all this was a blur to me, for over the diminutive Yoda I could see Brenan, dressed in the Master’s formal ivory-colored robes. I told

myself I was only feeling the effects of the Golden Padawan's Gift, but he looked absolutely magnificent. The robes he wore were no more fancy than any Jedi clothing, but it seemed like he gave off a sort of luminescence. I had to force myself to breathe.

*Your new attire also suits you well*, he told me. I felt myself blush that of course he had perceived my reaction to him. But as we met in the center of the floor and turned to face the Council, he gave me a deeply pleased, encouraging smile and I forgot my embarrassment.

Our elder Masters stepped up onto the dais and turned to face us. Master Windu addressed the company: "My fellow Jedi, the Ceremony of Pledging has been our custom for many centuries, and the passing of knowledge from Master to Padawan is the very lifeblood that sustains the Order. We are joyful today to witness this ceremony yet again. These two Jedi begin by coming before us to renew their vows of faithfulness to the Order."

Then Master Yoda spoke: "Master Brenan Auri-Owan, your right hand extend, and your Jedi vow restate."

Brenan held out his arm, palm downward, his hand relaxed. The ring sparkled on his index finger and I shivered a little. Brenan said, "Master Yoda, I rededicate myself to the Jedi Order, to the cause of good, to the benefit of all. May the Force guide my heart and my hand and always keep me true to this vow." He lowered his hand.

Then Master Windu spoke to me: "Aelida Camil, extend your right hand, and restate your Jedi vow."

I did as bidden, and said, "Master Mace Windu, I rededicate myself to the Jedi Order, to the cause of good, to the benefit of all. May the Force guide my heart and my hand and always keep me true to this vow." I lowered my hand.

Master Windu continued: "This Master has brought before the Jedi Council his desire to take this Jedi as his Padawan. The Council has found this request in good order and given its approval. These two may now make their pledges."

As the ceremony required, Brenan and I turned to face each other and clasped our right hands. My hand looked so small in his, but didn't approach the smallness I felt in contrast to the great Jedi he was.

Then he gave my fingers a little squeeze and said, *Listen to my promise, Aeli...listen and trust*. And only a moment later I heard the voice outside of my head say, "I, Brenan Auri-Owan, Master of the Jedi Order, raise you, Aelida Camil, to the rank of Padawan. Your Masters and your fellows have prepared you for this day, by the power of the Force you have achieved this stature, and by its guidance I have selected you. I pledge myself to you as your Master, to impart to you my wisdom, to protect you with my strength, and to lead you as the Force empowers me, until that day when you are prepared to become a Jedi Knight. To this end, may the Force be with you."

I wasn't sure how I would be able to find voice after that. But I looked into his eyes and drew strength from him, and when I spoke it was clear and loud and fine, and seemed to fill the Hall with all confidence: "I, Aelida Camil, Padawan of the Jedi Order, humbly accept this title from you, my Master Brenan Auri-Owan. I pledge myself to you as your Padawan, to pay full heed to your instruction, to trust your guidance, and to submit to your leadership as the Force empowers

me, until that day you have fully prepared me to become a Jedi Knight. To this end, may the Force be with us both.”

Then Master Windu laid his hand over ours and said, “So you are pledged, so may you live. Master and Padawan, this Council adjures you to go forth and serve the Jedi Order in all accord and faithfulness, in the service of good, and by the power and guidance of the Force.”

We all three released our hands. Brennan and I turned to face the Council. First he drew his lightsaber and then I followed, and when the two so similar gold hilts were raised over our heads, I felt Brennan’s unspoken signal, we ignited our sabers and the golden beams sprang forth. There was an audible gasp from the assembly behind us. I could only imagine how impressive those two lightsabers looked, springing to life in unison. Their beams illuminated the faces of the Council with magical light. Brennan and I brought the hilts to our foreheads in salute, and then in perfect tandem lowered and extinguished the sabers.

Then Master Yoda stepped forward and touched us both on the arms, first me, and then Brennan. I could see the pride in his eyes as he smiled up at his former Padawan. Finally, he lifted his face to address the assembly and said, “Concluded is the pledging. May the Force be with all.”

There was a moment’s silence, then Brennan returned his saber to his belt and I followed suit. Behind us, clapping began and as we turned rose to loud applause. This was customary, but I was still surprised at my reaction to it. Rather than pride, I felt humility and a great debt to my fellows. For the first time, I understood fully what an honor it was to be chosen for this mission, to be the Jedi’s hope for the future. If I had to give my life in that cause, so be it. If Brennan had to give his...well, as for that, there was almost nothing I wouldn’t do to prevent it.

\* \* \*

*So, have you been keeping up your running, and your trainee’s workouts?*

Brennan was in the guest quarters, I was still in my old room; it was late and probably everyone else in the Temple was asleep. The afternoon and evening had been quite hectic, and whenever nothing else was happening, it seemed Brennan was in meetings with various important personages. However, his improved psychic skills meant that if he wished it, we could “talk” after we went to bed, like this. I snuggled down deeper into my blankets. In my head I replied, “On Tatooine I didn’t have to work out, the daily routine was exercise enough.”

*You should be doing some running. You’ll need the stamina.*

“You *are* a hard Master!” I chided him silently.

*I told you. But did you keep up your lightsaber practice on Tatooine?*

“Of course. I never neglect that. Well, maybe a little.”

*I think your abilities in that area are quite adequate, but there’s no sense in letting them slip now that you’ve achieved them. But I’m certain you need work in hand fighting.*

“I’m a woman...I hope I don’t have to do a lot of hand fighting.”

He didn’t have to reply in words, I could feel his disapproval of that statement.

“All right, you’re right...I’m adequate, but I could use improvement. Can you help me with that?”

*It would be my pleasure. But you know we have to leave here the day after tomorrow. We might be a little busy after that.*

“Might we?”

*I’m not about to make it even harder for you to sleep by telling you the details tonight. Patience, Padawan. Everything in the morning.*

I sent him a little wave of exasperation; the response was mirth. “Oh, I’ll never be able to sleep anyway,” I told him, flipping over in the bed and trying to resettle.

*Learning to fall asleep is as important as any Jedi discipline. No, Aeli, I’m completely serious! There have been times the only way I got sleep was grabbing it 20 minutes here or there. One time when I...but, no, it’s too late for stories.*

“Please, Brenan, you tell stories better than anyone!” My enthusiasm came out like childish begging, but of course there was no point in trying to conceal my attitude.

*We were talking about falling asleep, remember?*

“All right, I’ll try,” I agreed, contritely. I sighed and tried to relax. There was a pause of quiet from Brenan and I almost wondered if he had retreated. Then I felt a wash of warmth crash gently over my body. All the tension left my limbs. I was losing consciousness, in a most delicious way. “Are you...doing...that?” I managed, feeling the humming alpha waves overcome my brain.

*See you in the morning...*

His voice was the last thing in my mind, and then I fell asleep.



### PART THREE

The sun was fairly high by the time it woke me. I found I had a happy heart. “Get up, Padawan,” I told myself with pride and contentment, stretching and throwing off the covers. And it wasn’t but a moment later that my Master greeted me softly, more a wordless acknowledgment than any specific salutation. I sensed he was busy. Several minutes later he was more articulate, although brief:

*Good morning, Aeli.. Have some breakfast and then come to my chamber...there’s some work for us to do.*

Work to do! At last some of the mystery would be revealed. I quickly dressed in my Padawan uniform, holstered my lightsaber, and went to the dining hall. I tried to keep some semblance of humility as I took my meal among the trainees, while also allowing myself to enjoy the wonder of the moment: I was dressed for Jedi work, and Jedi work I was about to commence.

Soon I found myself being admitted to Brenan’s room in the guest quarters. To my surprise, Master Yoda himself was just leaving. We exchanged greetings, then he gave one final word to my Master: “Of your success give me word, Brenan. The promise I trust, all will be well.”

“I try to share your optimism, Master Yoda,” said Auri-Owan earnestly, and closed the door behind his old Master. I noticed he locked it.

“Good morning, my Master,” I said to him, my elation subsiding at his gravity.

“Good morning, come in. You’ve eaten?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I have no idea how long this will take. Have a seat.”

He directed me to a very small table at the window, flanked by two chairs. We sat. Brenan leaned forward and spoke in low tones. “You slept well?” was his mundane question.

This amused me; of course he asked out of politeness, he knew how well I had slept. I supposed he wanted to make at least a feeble effort to ease me into the weighty matter that was obviously on his mind.

“Yes, thanks to you.”

That got a slight smile. “Good. What we are about to attempt will take some energy, I think.”

“And what are we about to do, Master Brenan?”

He leaned back. “Where do I begin? First, what we speak of here must pass to no one. Only the Council knows of these things.”

I nodded.

“You’re aware of the disappearances, of course. And the mystery surrounding them. Well, in recent days it has no longer been true that we know nothing. Since I returned from Aleyra, my powers are much augmented as you know. My Master Yoda had confidence that they could be put to use in this matter, and he was right. I am...able to see things. Some things have become clear.”

I leaned to him. “What has become clear?”

“This is the work of the Sith Lord and his Apprentice, of that I have no doubt. I also know what is happening to the Jedi.” His face waxed stern. There was something in his eyes that suggested to me there had been some anguish involved in this discovery. He continued, “They are being taken to the Dark Side.”

“Turned?” I asked, aghast.

“Not turned, that is the only good news about it. They are in thrall against their will, but they are not corrupted. Still, the conversion is so complete, they serve the Dark Side unswervingly.”

I shuddered. “This is horrible. Why?”

“The Lord and his Apprentice are but two, and they no longer care to be served only by droids and rabble. They recognize they can only gain power by using the Force, and the Force can best be channeled through Jedi. So they plan to use us—as many of us as possible—against ourselves.”

“How?”

“That I can’t tell you—yet. The specifics of the plan have been hard to discern. There are suggestions...but they are careful.”

His hand rested on the table; I reached to cover it with mine. “Brenan, do they know who you are?”

“No. Not who, nor where, as yet. But believe me, they would very much like to know. Their hostility is...potent. Unfortunately, neither do I know who nor where they are. I know they seek me, but for now, they are more concerned that I don’t find them.”

“And all this happens...in your mind...”

“All this happens in the Force, my mind just travels it.”

I drew back and leaned against the back of the chair. “It’s amazing.”

“It must become more amazing in order for us to stop the Sith. That’s where you come in.”

“Me?”

“The Golden Padawan. Whatever must be done, you play a part in it. Yoda believes, and I don’t doubt him, that you need to play a part already in this.”

“I don’t know what to do, Master—will you tell me?”

“I’m counting on the Force to tell us both.”

He put out his hands on the table, palms up, and raised his eyes to me. I leaned forward and laid my hands in his. He gripped them and turned them over, palms up, so his hands covered mine. My fingertips rested against the inside of his wrists, I felt his pulse, and the weight of his hands, acutely. I stared down at them. I had no idea what to do, except that I didn’t need to ask any questions. I just sat, gazing at his hands, at the pearly moons of his fingernails. Conversation, I noted, had ceased. Brennan didn’t need to tell me he was...going...wherever it was he went.

And then I was distracted by all thoughts but one: I discovered I could feel the blood in the veins at his wrists. I could feel it passing by, in steady, even surges, pushed by his strong heart. It

seemed made up of billions of tiny stars, bright specks in black fluid, moving by over my fingertips. When I saw the small stars in his blood, I felt myself smile: I was entranced at the beauty of it. I wondered if it were possible to fall in, to be carried in his bloodstream. Anything could be possible...with the Golden Padawan's Gift.

I could sense he was moving...exploring...but I also felt him yearning for more power. His reach would not extend as far as he willed it. If he were aware of me, I couldn't discern it. Yet the connection was there...I felt it in my fingertips. I could reach all of him that way, I knew it. I felt an overwhelming hunger to fall into his blood, a strange hunger indeed except I was also completely certain that the Force was guiding me. How to fall in, that was the question.

The Force's instantaneous reply was so simple, so obvious: jump. I focused on that stream of dark, starry fluid passing over my fingertips, the rhythm of the flow, and I jumped.

What happened next took me by surprise. I did not find myself traveling about in Brennan's body, like some small boat on a network of rivers. Instead I began at once to dissolve and spread, to flow and intermingle, like wine in his blood. In moments I was, in fact, everywhere: his limbs, his heart, his mind. But my perception was not so much of him but of myself inside him; that is to say, I knew no more than before about where his soul was traveling at that moment, but I had a good idea of what I was doing to him. A part of my consciousness noticed his hands had tensed up and were gripping mine tightly...in fact, his wrists bore down hard on my fingertips as if he understood the connection. And I knew he was keenly aware of the flush of strength that had entered him. That seemed to be what I was now: strength like a fever, like a rush of adrenaline a hundred times over.

Something was leaving me as well, I was depleting. I feared suddenly that in a moment I would be tapped out and Brennan left abruptly unassisted. But again I felt the Force's urging, the unmistakable truth: it was my passion, of course, it was the Padawan's Gift. So I cleared my mind of every thought save the image of my Master, and all he inspired in me. For the first time I felt my passion not as a weakness but a strength. After all the times I had tried to fight the adulation he provoked in me, it was such a relief just to indulge without hesitation.

I thought of him doing Celanarian's with Master Wed'azon, in fact just one moment of it, in the final series when he switched momentum and swung down. I knew what it was like to do this move, and do it well, which made the impossible perfection of Brennan's execution all the more sublime. His strength, his control, his complete serene mastery of space, I dwelt on the magnificence of all these. It was a killing blow, but it would never kill unless he willed it, and he would never will it unless all other possibilities were exhausted. A fearful man would be different, but Brennan didn't fear. He acted, he acted in wisdom, with calm certainty ruling over the power he wielded.

There could be no folly nor wrongdoing in loving such a man. *And so I do*, I thought, intending for him somehow to hear me, *I do love you, my Master, with all my heart and spirit.*

I went richer in his blood then, richer and brighter, and to feel him draw upon it was exhilarating. After that I kept no other focus but to feed him. I spun about, floating freely in the star-filled darkness of his blood, warming and illuminating it, over and over, through and through. I was unaware of anything beyond the boundaries of his body, anything, that is, except the place where my fingertips pressed against his pulse...I was unaware of the passage of time...

He lifted his hands.

I opened my eyes.

Brenan's face was gilded with sweat, the strands of hair that brushed his temples clung together and curled with the moisture. His lids lifted halfway but all I could see was the whites of his eyes; he squeezed them shut again. I realized how wet my hands were with his sweat...wait, and mine as well, I could tell now that I was damp all over. Brennan's lids raised again and his eyes were still rolled up into his head, but then the irises drifted back down. He tried to focus, then he collapsed onto his arms on the table. He was breathing so hard it frightened me. Instinctively I put my hands on his head and stroked his hair.

"Master?" I called to him. I started to stand up, thinking I should go for help.

But then he lifted his head and looked at me coherently. A smile spread across his face.

"Aeli..." he said hoarsely. His hand reached and grabbed mine and squeezed it hard. I had never seen such emotion on his face before.

"Master?" I asked again, still concerned.

He took a deep breath and sat up, gathering his strength and wits again so swiftly.

"They're on Naboo," he said.

I stared at him in wonder. My next thought was, "Did they notice you?"

He almost laughed. "No." Then his face drained of mirth. "I saw it all, where they're living...I saw their prisoners...I saw Puer Xis."

"Is he—all right?"

"None of them are all right."

I noticed then that Brennan's hand still clung to mine. He caught my thought and looked at our hands, but still hung on. "What did you do? How did it happen?" he asked me.

"I can't describe it." But then, I didn't need to. Instead, I closed my eyes and pictured it all.

He observed through my mind, silent until I finished. Then he whispered, "Amazing. I had no idea how you would know what to do, but Yoda said the Force would lead you. So it did."

I nodded. "It seemed to help you," I said quietly.

He released my hand then, and did finally laugh. "Yes, it helped me! You have no idea."

"Can you show me?"

"I could, but you don't know what it was like before, so you won't appreciate the difference. Words might do better: Before, it was like watching a shadow play, you could guess the color and shape and location of the things that cast the shadows, but that was all. This was like looking at the real thing. Vivid, certain. I don't know the name of the place the Sith were hiding, but I saw enough detail that we should be able to figure it out."

"Did you learn more about the plan?"

"That wasn't my focus this time. When we try again, that will be our goal."

I believe it was when he said those words that we both realized our exhaustion. *Later*, I heard Brennan say, as if he were so weary now he didn't wish to speak. I felt the same—suddenly all I wanted to do was sleep.

"Take my bed," my Master said, finding voice after all. "I must report to Yoda."

"Brenan, you haven't the strength."

He gave me a half smile. "A Jedi Master always has the strength, Padawan."

I was starting to tremble, feeling chilled after the hard sweat. Brennan took my arm and pulled me up, then after a few steps I collapsed on his bed. He pulled the blanket over me. I could barely keep my eyes open.

"Just sleep, Aeli. That's my order, for I will need you again later."

I obeyed easily, and didn't wake for a couple of hours. When I opened my eyes I found no sign of my Master's return. I wanted to find him. I reached out to discern where he was, and determined it was with the Council. I wished to be with him, but I knew if the Council wanted me there, I would have been summoned. It was a time for patience.

I rose and discovered my energy quite recovered. I had a crazy idea to go to the training rooms and work with my new lightsaber. It was not, in fact, such a crazy idea: I did need to familiarize myself with the weapon.

As I practiced with a target droid, a thought returned to me from the morning's experiences. A Jedi learned many killing blows, but as I had realized when contemplating my Master, a Jedi rarely used them as such. It dawned on me that I might not have had to kill the Tusken Raider. My conscience was mostly clear; he had definitely intended to kill me and I was defending myself. However, I wondered now if there hadn't been other alternatives. Master Brennan would know this, and I would have to ask him soon.

But everything was happening so quickly. There was much I craved to learn from my new Master, but it would have to be largely in the line of duty. At that moment, duty seemed like it would be a pleasure, for I would have this amazing lightsaber by my side. It was unbelievable how well suited the weapon was to my size, my fighting style, even my psyche. I had been good at this before, but this saber augmented my skill tremendously.

"Good to see you using your time well. No one likes a lollygagging Padawan."

Brenan had managed to sneak up on me. Of course, with his current powers he could sneak whenever he wished, even in regard to me.

"This lightsaber is amazing, Brennan," I said, extinguishing the beam and turning to him.

"I'm glad it pleases you."

He held himself as strongly as usual, but there was weariness in his eyes, and spirit as well.

"It pleases me more than I can tell you," I said, "but right now what would please me most is if you would get some rest."

"I must, soon," he agreed.

He gave me a long look. It was not the sort of look he had given me before. His eyes hazed over slightly as he studied me. Then, in a low voice as if to himself he said, "Strange that someone so small should contain so much power..."

"Master...?"

His countenance focused again. "I'm going to rest now. Come to me tonight after supper, we'll tackle the next task. And you should be sure your things are packed, I know we'll be headed to Naboo very soon."

"Yes, I'll be ready," I told him. I said it calmly, but I confess my bowels knotted up with fear.

Brenan was not about to miss that. He put his hand on my arm. "We'll both be ready," he told me reassuringly.

That evening we again performed the link, and it was easier to initiate, even sweeter to experience, but left us more exhausted than the first time. My Master didn't seem to care; his eyes were afire once more at the success we achieved. "Their minds are open to me, and they don't even know I'm there," he told me. He had extracted much of the plan but wouldn't share it with me, which I didn't mind. He was determined to go at once to Yoda with his discoveries, but he could barely stand.

"Brenan, Master, can't it wait until morning?"

He made a valiant effort to appear capable of the task, but his spirit came to me as glowing low, like a dying fire. He didn't try to rise from his chair, but said with a weak smile, "Such an upstart Padawan."

"Perhaps, but I fear you won't even be capable of travel tomorrow unless you sleep at once."

He nodded, capitulating. He barely had the strength to drop himself in his bed, so I drew the blanket over him as he had done for me earlier. He didn't open his eyes; he was already unconscious.

How easy it would be for them to kill him now, I thought, if they knew who he was. Eventually they would know, and all of this would become much more terrible. Would we even sleep safely the next night? Who knew?

I sat down on the floor next to the bed, resting my hand on the hilt of my lightsaber, and meditated upon my guardianship of this man. Yes, I was afraid of what was to come, but I didn't want that fear to prevent me from keeping him safe. I had been taught how to deal with fear, but never in the context of facing genuine danger. But I applied what I knew, I sought the Force in its serene vastness and indeed it reassured me that we were stronger than I felt. After a time I was certain enough of that to rise, touch my sleeping Master's hand, and go wearily to my room for the night.

\* \* \*

It was on the transport to Naboo that I finally learned of the plan that had been made for our infiltration of the Sith compound. Brennan and I had been given a private cabin on an official Council transport so that he could prepare me for the mission.

We sat in two facing chairs at the window, and with the cabin lights dim, the passing stars cast a pale illumination over my Master's face. He regarded me with calm eyes. "First, you need to

know about our adversaries. Our spying yesterday gleaned much information in that regard, we knew practically nothing before except the identity of Darth Maul, the previous Apprentice who was killed by Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

“What did you discover?” I leaned forward, eager to start acquiring some knowledge—and therefore ammunition—against our foe.

“The Sith Lord calls himself Darth Sidious. The one thing he hides too well is his real identity—that I still can’t tell you. But he has indeed found himself a new Apprentice, or rather, Darth Lyrus found him and presented himself for consideration.”

“And won his favor.”

“Yes, easily,” nodded Brennan. “Lyrus is remarkably gifted. Unique. It’s a tragedy he’s not on our side, but there’s little hope of that. His ego rules him. In fact, it is his greatest flaw; were it not for that, I believe he could easily supplant his Master.”

“His powers are that great?”

“His powers begin with very human ones. He is completely charming, able to present himself in any persona according to the situation. A winning personality in the literal sense: he wins over the trust and sympathy of others with remarkable ease. But his unique skill lies in a strange gift: he is able to suppress people’s wills. I don’t believe he actually destroys them, but he weakens them into total dormancy. Stripped of their wills, the Jedi are left powerless to fight the influence of the Dark Side as Lyrus channels it.”

“Incredible. It’s hard to believe that’s possible, especially with Jedi. Especially with Jedi Knights!”

“Which is why their usual targets have been Padawans. The Knights that have been taken have not been our most accomplished. Not to speak ill of a friend, but Puer Xis was given more to ale and games than was always fitting. Duty came first, of course...but his commitment was not the strongest at all times. Nevertheless, Jedi of any kind are well trained and able to be used for the Sith Lord’s purposes.”

“Which are what, exactly?”

“Sidious has enough men and women in thrall now to begin sending them out on missions, attacking individual Jedi or small groups and killing them—or better yet, capturing them to be will-suppressed as well. The advantage they will have in such conflicts will be our unwillingness to kill our own people, regardless of who they fight for. So the Sith Lord depletes our ranks while filling his own, till eventually the balance of power turns.”

I sat back and pondered this scenario critically, rather than emotionally. “The weakness of their plan is that it appears destroying the head will release the body,” I told Brennan.

He nodded. “Very astute, my Padawan. And even the head is divided against itself: their loyalty to each other goes no deeper than to exploit the other’s usefulness. If Lord Sidious could do without Lyrus, he would certainly dispose of him—his ambitions are too threatening. And if the Apprentice were spiritually disciplined enough to execute the plan, he would do it without Sidious.”

“Nevertheless, it is quite a powerful body that protects the head. How do we propose to get past it, especially when we don’t want to kill it?”

My hands were resting on the table, fingers laced. Brennan put his right hand over them and said, “We will introduce a cancer.”

“A cancer?”

“A part of the body itself that is mutinous.”

I needed to hear no more. “You mean me.”

Brennan looked into my eyes and I could feel he was monitoring my reaction. “Yes. I have already put the suggestion into Darth Lyrus’s mind that he seek you out. As I said, his ego is his weakness. We made sure he is aware that the famous Auri-Owan and his new Padawan are coming to Naboo. To steal your loyalty from me would be quite a trophy. If he hadn’t thought of it himself, I made sure that he did.”

I huffed. “Stealing loyalty by such means is cowardly. I can’t see what pride he could take in it.”

“Nevertheless he is the sort who will, and you must convince him he has been successful.”

I eyed Brennan with concern. “Am I to let him be successful?”

“No, I will need you to remain quite on my side, Aeli. From within their compound, you will show me how I can gain entrance, where the weaknesses are. With your help I’ll be able to determine how to gain access to the head while preserving the body. When the time is right, I’ll come to you and the deed will be done.”

I nodded, silently. I knew better than to evaluate the possible chances of this scheme; logic was irrelevant where the Force was involved. I put such considerations out of my mind.

Brennan leaned back again. “All right, now for Darth Lyrus’s technique. He first approaches his victim under the pretext that he is a great admirer of the Jedi; then as the acquaintance progresses he reveals his supposed history. He claims to have proper blood to become a Jedi, but that his family refused to let him be considered. He says his father was so violently opposed to the idea that he swore to kill his son if he made any attempt to join the Jedi order.”

“Not too believable,” I commented.

“Coming from Lyrus, anything can be believable. Be sure not to underestimate him.”

I nodded silently.

Brennan went on, “That particular lie is designed to persuade the Jedi he should swear he will keep Lyrus’s secret. So now he has gained his victim’s sympathy and confidentiality. He wins a little more trust, a little more allegiance. Then he proposes to meet privately with the Jedi for a demonstration of his ‘raw abilities,’ purportedly to get advice on whether he should consider defying his father. It is during this psychic exercise that the unsuspecting Jedi is conquered.”

As Brennan spoke, I pictured myself in the victim’s place, already imagining how this step of the plan might play out. “But if I’m only faking...are you sure he won’t be able to tell?”

“He won’t be able to tell.”



There was clearly more to it than that, but I could be patient until my Master chose to reveal the details. “And then?” I asked.

“Once the victim is claimed, he or she is obviously completely cooperative. Some stealthy means is devised in each case to spirit the person away, and they end up at the Siths’ quarters.”

“And do you know now exactly where that is?”

“Mace Windu happens to be very familiar with the shadier districts of Theed. I gave him enough description that he identified the place as an old rooming house—more recently a brothel—that used to be quite well known by the local authorities. It was bought a couple of years ago by owners no one seems to know much about. Mace contacted some of our people in Theed and there’s been nothing suspicious associated with the building...in fact, it was assumed to be vacant.”

“With all that activity, someone would have noticed people going in and out...”

“People may well have noticed, and then...forgot.”

“Of course!” I said. “If this Lyrus is so good at suggestion.”

“Exactly.”

For a minute or two, I reviewed all Brennan had told me. Then I concluded, “So it will be us...pursuing two men with 50 ruthless Jedi bodyguards...”

To my surprise, my Master gave me his most brilliant grin. “I like the odds,” he said.

That smile had always been irresistible. Even now that he carried himself with the dignity of a Jedi Master, Brennan still possessed his cocky sense of humor. I grinned back.

“For now, one thing at a time,” he told me. “We must get you into Darth Lyrus’s hands without letting him into your head. There’s not much of a way to prepare, just rest and meditate.”

I nodded calmly. I was strangely unafraid.

“I have a good idea how we can do this,” said my Master, all earnestness now. “When the time comes, you will simply have to trust me.”

I returned his steady gaze. “I intend to,” I said.

\* \* \*

We took our lodging at an inn in Theed that was in a reputable neighborhood but within walking distance of the Sith headquarters. That first night we did our link and Brennan learned Darth Lyrus’s specific activities for the next day. I would be able to run into him “by accident” easily. It would be my task to make sure he knew where we were staying, to facilitate a future meeting.

In his mind Brennan showed me what our enemy looked like. I don’t know what I expected, but I was admittedly taken aback by Lyrus’s appearance. Not only was he handsome, but in an almost boyish, innocent-looking way. He had raven black hair, and dark eyes which held a childlike beauty. He was tall and slender, unimposing in physique. If I had met him unprepared, I would have liked him on sight.

And so, as it turned out, I did.

I met Lyrus in the marketplace the next morning. He had been occupied with exchanging money for information from a spy, some plans for the whereabouts of Jedi forces over the next weeks. I made sure I was along his return route, conspicuously wearing my Padawan browns. He noticed me right away and followed me for a few minutes before pretending to collide with me as I turned a corner.

“Oh pardon me, good Jedi!” he said graciously, steadying me with a light grip on both my shoulders. “Are you all right?”

I straightened myself. “All in one piece, sir—no problem.”

“A Padawan,” he said, beaming at me. “Are you pledged long, if I may ask?”

“Not long at all. I’m quite green, but hopefully the Force, and my good Master, will make something useful of me.”

“Typical Jedi modesty,” said Lyrus.

It was difficult indeed to believe this fellow was the Sith Apprentice. He had a cheerful, open face, an utterly disarming smile. These he turned on me now in full force and I found myself wondering if I had the right man.

“I’m Lyrus Mosté, humble citizen of Theed,” he said with a slight bow. “And you are?”

“Aelida Camil, late of Coruscant of course. Please, call me Aeli.”

“Ah, the Jedi Temple. I have always wanted to see it, with all my heart. But say...after that insulting collision, could I make it up to you with a refreshment? There’s a shop just up the street that has fresh colbia juice.”

“Oh, Lyrus, you don’t need to—”

“My motives are purely selfish. I’d love to hear about some of your experiences at the Temple, I’m always trying to learn more about the Jedi.”

He regarded me with raised eyebrows, a look of such hope and eagerness that I sincerely wanted to talk to him. So far playing my role had been quite easy. And Lyrus certainly had his down to a T.

Just for safety’s sake, I reached out inwardly to Brennan, who was at that moment back in his room at the inn. He replied wordlessly with vigilant reassurance.

Lyrus and I sat at an outside table and had cups of colbia juice, which he explained was a current craze in Theed. From such small talk we proceeded to a long conversation of my experiences as a trainee. Lyrus was careful: he didn’t probe too deeply into matters which a Jedi would hesitate to discuss; he conveyed great interest and enthusiasm without seeming fanatical. As for me, I appeared open and at my ease and let him know I was enjoying the conversation. And to be truthful, I was. He was funny, charming, attentive. And if he offered no other positive qualities, there was the plain fact that he was positively angelic to look at. I couldn’t help but wish circumstances were different, and he was simply what he pretended to be. All in all, it was a curious experience, reacting to Lyrus and observing these reactions with such care. I had to be wary, and yet act naturally.

Then the conversation turned to the subject of my new Master.

“*The Auri-Owan?*” Lyrus asked, awe-struck.

I nodded with a modest smile.

“Is he as great with a lightsaber as they say?”

“He is the best.”

Lyrus sat back, shaking his head and smiling. “What I wouldn’t give for a lesson...” he said absently, then caught himself and looked a little stricken.

I knew where he was going with this, and played along. “Oh, don’t be embarrassed. If I hadn’t been able to become a Jedi, I know I would still dream of being one.”

He looked at me with a dozen emotions running over his face. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it. He looked miserable, and I was amazed to feel sympathy in response. Then at last he spoke: “Aeli? I know we’ve just met, but I feel like I can trust you.”

“Of course you can, as a friend as well as a Jedi.”

“There’s something I wish I could tell you, but...I just can’t. Maybe sometime, but—”

I leaned across the table and touched his shoulder. “If and when you’re ready, say the word, Lyrus.”

“You say that as if you’ll see me again.” He brightened. “Will you see me again?”

“Master Auri-Owan is assigned here for at least two weeks, maybe longer. Of course I’ll see you again.”

We made plans to meet for supper at the inn the next night.

When Lyrus and I said our goodbyes, I returned at a leisurely pace to the inn, and the room of my Master.

“He’s quite a man,” I said, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“Sensing your reactions to him was interesting, to say the least,” commented Brennan with a slight smile.

I didn’t find this too amusing. “It’s just disturbing thinking what a good...*good* man he would make, if he could be turned back from the Dark Side.”

Brenan regarded me pensively for a moment. “Sensing Lyrus’s reactions was even more interesting,” he told me. “Without you here I couldn’t get the clarity, but I can tell you he’s quite agitated. I don’t imagine that came across.”

“Not in the least. It’s frightening what a good actor he is. Or is he really affecting me psychically?”

“He isn’t doing much of that yet, beyond just a weak suggestion that you feel an affinity for him, but believe it or not, I’m not letting that get through.” Brennan had to smile at this.

“You really are enjoying this, aren’t you?” I asked him pertly, and was quick to add, “With all due respect, Master Brennan.”

He laughed. “I’m enjoying it now because I know it will become very unpleasant very soon. It’s all right, we don’t want you to hate or fear him now. He is not particularly precogniscent, but he

might pick up on that. Believe me, soon enough it will take all your Jedi discipline for you to master your hate and fear of this Lyrus.”

We decided it might be a good idea for Brennan to meet Lyrus face to face at dinner the following night, and I got to use my Jedi discipline to master my nervousness. Lyrus and I had taken a table and were awaiting our food when Brennan stopped by, ostensibly on his way to a meeting. Lyrus seemed overwhelmed, his typical charm overcome by awe. He shook hands warmly with my Master and exchanged some nervous comments of admiration before Brennan excused himself graciously.

Lyrus resumed his seat. “I feel so privileged. I can’t imagine what it’s like to be Padawan to such a man.”

“He is a great man, but his demeanor is anything but off-putting. He’s always made me feel very comfortable.”

“But it must be hard for you to contain your admiration. And the Jedi believe too much emotion can interfere with discipline, do they not?”

It unnerved me a little that he had come to this point so quickly, but I continued to play it calm. “I admit, there are times he amazes me so much...it is hard not to be a bit awe-struck.”

Lyrus regarded me with a smile. “I think you’re fonder of him than you admit, friend Aeli,” he laughed.

I suddenly had a thought that almost succeeded in shattering my façade. No doubt this was the very man who had imposed upon me the lascivious dreams I had had of Brennan. And yet, he didn’t know it was the Golden Padawan who sat before him.

*Be careful*, warned Brennan in my head. I knew my face had already revealed some disturbance, so I had better account for it quickly.

“I’m a Jedi and must be honest with you, Lyrus,” I said. “I sometimes do feel a greater affection for Master Auri-Owan than a well-disciplined Padawan should. But as you have seen, he is unique. I try not to be too hard on myself.”

“At least he needn’t fear any unfaithfulness from you,” said Lyrus.

That was the first time I saw through him.

It was not in his tone of voice, or his demeanor. I saw it only in his eyes. Up till then they had struck me only as deep and innocent and beautiful, but for an instant I saw a coldness in them that was unmistakable. For the moment I did not let this ruffle me—I had a job to do.

“Never. There could be nothing more unthinkable for me than turning from my Master. I know every Padawan says that, but Lyrus, I think you can see how much I mean when I say the words. It’s a foolish thing to try to turn a Padawan from his Master, and in my case, beyond foolish.”

“Of course. He is, as you say, unique.”

The coldness got still colder, then Lyrus seemed to catch himself. His eyes warmed almost too much.

The rest of the conversation went as we had expected. In hushed tones Lyrus told me his “story,” I vowed secrecy, he feigned great confusion as to what to do next, and I urged him to look further

into whether there were any way for him to pursue being a Jedi. He expressed agitation at talking more about it, I suggested we could talk privately the next evening in my room, and he agreed.

We said goodnight with much affection—Lyrus embraced me fervently. As he withdrew, his hair brushed my cheek lightly. He looked long into my eyes and again I regretted that he could not be turned back to good. It was a natural thought, considering I felt such a growing fondness...

...And then I realized I did genuinely feel such a fondness, and it was all I could do to keep my composure until I had returned to Brennan's room.

Of course he knew I was coming, and met me in the open doorway. He shut and locked the door behind me. I simply looked at him for the first moment.

"Yes, that was not quite so easy," he said.

"I see what he's doing, then I fail to see it. How hard is he working to influence me?"

"Hard enough, but it could be much harder. That we will see tomorrow night."

"But Brennan, this time I saw a little of the real Lyrus peek through."

"I know. You have managed nicely to fan the flames. He hates me more than ever now." He said this with that twinkle with which he always teased me.

But I could not be so lighthearted. "I thought I was supposed to...work on his desire to take me."

Brenan put his hand on my shoulder. "Aeli, you did just what you were supposed to. It seems I'll never be cured of my enjoyment of goading you."

"You truly don't seem to mind that the Sith Apprentice loathes you to the point of wanting to turn your Padawan to the Dark Side and killing you as soon as possible." I said this not with bitterness, but rather sincere admiration for his serenity.

"I mind it very much, which is why I'm so inclined tonight to be poke fun. Of course you're right, there are a few matters we should discuss to prepare you, but there will be time enough for that tomorrow during the day. Tonight the best thing we could do might be to enjoy each other's company. So, are you tired?"

"Physically, not in the least. Mentally, quite."

"I promised to coach you a little in hand fighting. We've the time now, if you want to."

At first I looked at him like he was crazy. But in the next moment the idea appealed very much.

And so we spent a good two hours, right there in his room, working on hand fighting moves. Fortunately we were right above the pub so no one could hear the noise we made occasionally falling to the floor and crashing into furniture.

I found that competing with him in such a context was quite wonderful. When we were cooperating—such as when he showed me a new technique—of course it was agreeable. But when we actually fought, it was even more fun. When he bested me, I found great enjoyment in watching him try to conceal his natural male competitiveness in Jedi modesty and grace. If I pulled off a move, I got to be a little smug and watch his pleasure at my success. Either way it was delightful. And in the process, I actually learned a great deal.

Of course that had not been my Master's only objective. For one thing, by the time we were done I was exhausted and quite ready for a sound sleep. And his primary goal had also been achieved...

Sitting on the floor, panting, I looked up at him. "You know I'm even fonder of you now," I told him.

Brenan took my hand and pulled me to my feet. "That was the general idea. Tomorrow at this time you will need to be as fond of me as possible."

Warmed by the activity, he gave off that wonderful, comforting scent of his. Even when he was sweaty, like now, I loved that smell. "If I weren't the Golden Padawan," I told him, "you would have a lot of work to do with me to rid me of this so-called Gift."

Brenan embraced me, damp and warm. "Keep the Gift. Now sleep well, and don't be trying to talk to me when we're in bed." He released me. I nodded obediently and took my leave.

On the eve of who knew what horrors, I retired with my heart full of mirth and contentment. I nestled into the bed and gave a great sigh of relaxation. I could hear the murmur of voices in the pub below. Outside the window a street lamp burned warmly.

"Brenan?" I ventured.

*I knew you wouldn't be able to help yourself.* Smiling.

"Thank you," I said.

*Tomorrow night we will sleep just this close. Remember that.*

"Yes, Master...I'll remember it."

\* \* \*

The next morning we breakfasted together and then took to Brennan's room to make the link one last time. My Master wanted to make clear contact with the Sith once more to be certain their plans were the same and they had no suspicions of us.

"I wonder if we could do this if we were physically apart," I mused, placing my hands on the table.

"Maybe we could learn to, but in any case I wouldn't want to take that much of your energy and attention while you're with the Sith. Besides, I'll see and hear well enough via your eyes and ears."

I nodded agreement. He placed his hands over mine. I looked down at them and felt residual affection from the night before rise up in me. "I love your hands," I said very softly, before I had a chance to hold back the words. I looked up to meet his eyes, feeling suddenly very shy. He looked back for a long moment and I felt a wave of silent acceptance, approval of a kind. Then: *You know it's all right.*

"Yes, Master."

Out loud: "We'll speak of this when we're finished."

I nodded and pressed my fingertips to his wrists. I was glad to go in, I wanted to. In an instant I was drifting in the flow of stars, rushing, whirling. How wondrous his body seemed to me just then, possessing a physical strength I could never achieve, the powerful limbs, the great chest and broad shoulders, the heart and lungs so marvelously efficient it was like poetry. All these I spread through, spread my light and heat, and through his mind I poured clarity and vigor. I saturated him quickly but was not nearly spent, I felt too much love for him that day to even begin to be taxed. I sought some corner of him I might have missed, I traveled to every edge, and then...

...and then beyond the edge...

...from the stars in his blood to the stars in the heavens.

Oh gods, what a wondrous thing was this! I had found my way across the border of Brennan's spirit to the rest of the Force. I turned and crossed back to make sure I could, and discovered there really was no border, it was all one vast field of stars.

In that one experience I came to understand more about the beliefs of the Jedi than all I had been taught before.

I understood then what made Brennan so marvelous: it was simply that the Force could be so easily perceived through him. The connection was so smooth and perfect. I circled him close, then returned, full of joy and amazement. His blood was hot now, like a lovely steaming bath, and I drifted and spread through him, feeling a happy languor. *Brenan, my Master, I love you so, I always will love you, this much and even more.*

I made another circle, like flying, leaving a trail of gold behind me in his dark blood, and then he lifted his hands.

I opened my eyes. Brennan's head was already down on the table. I leaned forward and put my hands on his head, which was damp and feverish. I nearly swooned then and had to put my own head down, but I kept my hands in his hair as I waited to regain myself. I could hear him breathing fast and hard.

*Aeli, what did you do this time?*

He was too weak to speak aloud. I responded: *When our strength returns I will show you.*

*Your spirit is very weak. I can hardly hear you.*

I felt him stir under my hands so I lifted my head as well. I saw how he looked and could imagine my own condition. *Aeli, we'll pass out soon...better you should be in bed when it happens.* He struggled to stand and helped me to make the few steps to the bed.

*You too, Master.*

He realized the wisdom of this surpassed all concerns over propriety. He fell down next to me but I felt no more, I was unconscious at once.

I awoke some time later, not yet recovered but shivering cold from the sweat of my body drying off. I managed to sit up and reach the blanket, and when I pulled it over me I realized Brennan was there. I covered my Master as well. Once we were tucked in, I could begin to feel his body heat collecting under the blanket and soaking into me. My trembling subsided. He was

breathing slowly and very deeply. His ivory skin seemed even paler, but there was a slight flush of pink at his cheeks which hinted his vitality would soon return.

He had a small scar under one eye which beckoned to my hand. I reached over and lightly traced over it with my fingertip. I wanted to do more, I wanted to touch his nose, his cheek, but I pulled back my hand. The Golden Padawan's Gift was one thing, but I still had to exercise some restraint.

Brenan gave a little shudder and I realized he was trembling. One of his hands lay on the bedclothes between us; I felt it and it was stone cold.

May I be forgiven for this, I thought, I can't do anything else. And I moved as close to him as I could. I lifted his limp arm and crawled under it, I draped my own arm over him and up his back, I tucked my head under his chin. He was dead to the world and made no response, but after a couple of minutes he stopped trembling.

In a few hours I would be in the gravest danger I had ever known, but at that moment it didn't matter to me. I was almost beyond emotion, the wonder of this was so great. Funny, I mused; I have been to every corner of his spirit but nothing could be like this, falling asleep with him warming in my arms, his heartbeat against my breast and his fragrance everywhere, in every breath I drew.

And then I slept, a black and profound sleep.

I was awakened by the soft brushing of his beard against my forehead. "My Padawan," he murmured, "look where we've found you."

He wasn't angry. In fact, I sensed a tranquil warmth. "You felt so cold, Master." I tipped my head to look up at him, but I didn't draw away just yet.

He smiled puckishly. "I thank you for your concern for me."

I tried to think of some witty retort for this, I truly wanted to say something of that sort. But then I was overwhelmed by his nearness and instead the words I uttered were, "Forgive me, Master, I find it hard to leave."

His face grew suddenly grave. "I remember now what happened. It was incredible this time...the things I saw, the depth I could achieve in their minds. I learned much that will help us. Tremendous things. Aeli, what did you do?"

"It's beyond words," I told him. I found his hand and lifted it to my cheek. "I'll show you," I said, pressing his hand close.

I replayed my recollection of the linking. I heard Brennan gasp when I broke out to the Force. When I had showed him everything I opened my eyes to read his. He was shaking his head in abject amazement. Finally he said, "Do you know you're a miracle?"

I laughed but he was completely serious. "Am I, Master?" I asked gravely.

"Yes." He tried then to sit up a little but collapsed back onto the bed. "Oh, this one is certainly hard to recover from."

"How long have we slept?"

"Only about two hours. It's barely noon. You seem stronger, though."



“I think I’m well. It’s not for lack of energy that I want to stay here. But I am your Padawan, let me get up and you rest awhile yet. I could get us some lunch.”

“A Jedi Master always...but in this case, I’ll take you up on that.”

I went down to the inn and ordered some small lunches of fruit, cheese and bread. It took a little while to prepare, but when I returned to Brennan’s room he was still sleeping. I wanted most to kneel beside the bed and watch him, but instead I sat in one of the chairs and meditated. I found the flow of the Force so easily now, now that I had seen its face so clearly and intensely. I let it take me and found deep serenity, and there I stayed until I heard my Master stirring.

We ate eagerly, our bodies needing to restore fuel after our intense exercise. And then it was time to prepare for the task ahead.

Brenan cleared the plates from our little table and resumed his seat across from me. “I told you we would speak of this later. Today, my Padawan, you do well to love me. Have no regret about that.”

“You said I’ll need it.”

“You’ll shortly understand why. Now tonight, you must focus all your discipline not to fear Lyrus or show any apprehension of what he’s going to do. You are curious, intrigued, but you have no reason not to trust him.”

“I think I can do that.”

“I have planted in his mind a strong predisposition to believe you trust him and suspect nothing. So it should go well.”

“It’s too bad you can’t plant in his mind a strong predisposition to just surrender to us,” I said.

“Yes...well, unfortunately, I don’t have the power to convince the Sith to do anything they are strongly opposed to. In certain instances, in fact, we’ll have to depend upon Darth Sidious’s authority over Lyrus, since I could only prevail over the former in getting what I want.”

Brenan looked troubled over this and I was about to question what specifically he meant, but I picked up that he wished to say no more about it. Instead I asked him, “One thing concerns me though...how exactly should I act to convince him my will has been taken? And the greater question: how do I keep from letting it happen?”

“That part will be easy for you. You won’t have to do anything.”

“Master?”

“Your will *is* going to be taken. I will take it.”

I stared at him, speechless.

“I will seen to it that Lyrus will believe he has done it. But in fact it will be me.”

“Can you do that?”

“Not the way Lyrus does. He saps all the strength from the will until it shrivels to nearly nothing. Like taking the air from a balloon. That’s not what I’ll do, I couldn’t even if I wanted to.”

“Then how—?”

“I’ll supplant your will with my own. Then I’ll be able to direct Lyrus’s commands to you as if he were doing it himself. It will convince him he has you. But I won’t allow you to harm yourself or anyone else, and when the time is right, I’ll return you to yourself.”

“You have a frightening amount of power, Master Brennan.” I shook my head.

He reached over to take my hand. “No, I don’t. I couldn’t do this with anyone but you. You have to permit it.”

I pondered this a moment. “I have to surrender,” I said.

“Exactly.”

“This is why I need to love you, and trust you, so much today.”

“Yes.”

My mind could not quite grasp all the ramifications of what we were discussing. But there were some things about it I would simply have to do without understanding for now. Finally I said, “We’re the Golden Pair, Brennan.”

“That we are.” He squeezed my hand and released it.

The rest of the afternoon we talked through everything, Brennan told me a great deal of what he had learned during the link: the layout of the Sith lair, the state the captives were in, the defenses to the building. In addition to the poisoned Jedi, the Sith Lord and his Apprentice were well defended by an array of battle droids. Meanwhile, time was of the essence; I was the last Jedi they planned to take before they commenced sending envoys to ambush our people.

It was an exhausting conversation but I finally felt fully prepared. I didn’t feel like eating but Brennan said it might be awhile before I was fed again, so he took me out for dinner. There was a pub a half mile away that was renowned for shaak stew and their own colbia wine. Once the meal was in front of me I found myself hungry after all, and the wine settled my nerves. My meditation of the afternoon had helped immensely, but I was still apprehensive. Brennan told me stories all during dinner, and by the time we returned to the inn, I was as ready as I could have been.

When Brennan took leave of me in my room, he said little. He just put his arms around me for a long moment and said, “Goodnight. I’m not leaving you.”

I gave him a smile. “I think tonight you will, if anything, do the opposite.”

“Hold that thought,” he said, returning the smile. Nevertheless, he couldn’t conceal his anxiety for me. Then he left, closing the door quietly behind him.

I sat on my bed, focusing, and after a few minutes there was a knock at the door.

“Aeli? It’s Lyrus.”

“Coming,” I called. I rose and opened the door resolutely.

My foe greeted me with a broad smile. “Aeli! I’ve been so anxious to see you. How are you?”

I let him in. “Good, I’m good. My Master’s mission here is going well, I think I’ve been a little help.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.” Lyrus sat on the edge of the bed. “I’m just grateful you’ve had the time to spend with me. It’s helped a great deal just having someone to discuss this with.”

I took a seat on the bed as well. “So you told me you have...certain abilities which made you suspect you had Jedi blood?”

“That’s right. Even when I was little, sometimes strange things happened. I confess I do practice a little, even though if Father knew—well, I can’t help it.”

“I understand, Lyrus.” I reached over and touched his arm. “But if you truly do have Jedi blood, and you feel the calling this strongly...well, you know my opinion on that.”

Lyrus regarded me solemnly. “After we do this, after I show you what I can do, if you think there’s a good chance, then I’ll go to the Temple to be tested.”

“Good. All right. Now what exactly are we going to do?”

“My best talent seems to be telepathy. Sometimes I can read people’s minds, and sometimes I know I’ve put my thoughts in their heads as well...occasionally not at the most opportune time, I might add.” He chuckled. “But at any rate, it does work, more often than not. Especially if the other person is open and accepting of me.”

I smiled at him. “That would be me, then.”

I wouldn’t be able to claim that this excellent performance on my part was due to good acting skills. In fact, from the moment Lyrus entered the room I was flooded with alarming affection for him. He was dressed in black and dark gray, an informal suit in the Naboo style, which flattered his coloring. Everything about him seemed more beautiful than any time before: his hair, his eyes, his smile, his voice. I knew Brennan was still protecting me from the full force of Lyrus’s suggestive powers, but be that as it may, I was in the grip of his charms. I found it almost impossible to believe this man wished me ill. It seemed so much more realistic that he was slightly infatuated with me and only wanted to spend time in my company because of it.

“All right,” said Lyrus. “I’ll do my best. Here, just take my hand, look me in the eyes, it will help me concentrate. I’ll try to speak to you...”

I did as he asked, taking hold of his slender, cool hand, and looking at him calmly. In the back of my mind I knew the moment had arrived when everything I had feared would begin, but I found myself instead preoccupied by Lyrus’s eyes. They were such a remarkable liquid brown, with perfect irises like jewels—it was a delight just to stare into them.

Then all the strength left my body and I fell back onto the bed.

Lyrus bent over me and smiled. It was not at all the same smile. “It’s basically paralysis, Aeli. You’ll find you can’t move even your fingers.”

I knew at this stage it was acceptable for me to show fear, and that was a good thing. The sudden shock of the paralysis was terrifying.

Lyrus lifted his hand and stroked my cheek. “Don’t worry, love, I won’t leave you like this. It just makes the next step easier. After that, I believe you’ll just start enjoying yourself.” His hand seized my chin and clamped it so hard it hurt. With his other hand Lyrus grasped my forehead. “I do have talents, as you will see now. It will only feel for a moment like you are dying...”

He was right. It was not a feeling of physical death, but something else...like my very soul was shutting down. Like the stars I had seen spreading from inside Brennan to the far corners of the universe were all dimming and going out at alarming speed. If I had been able to scream, I would have.

But then all at once I felt I was recovering a little...the death-like feeling was fought back.

*Aeli...*

It was Brennan.

*In a little while I will make you forget we had this conversation, along with several other things—forgive me, but if you remembered it might bring suspicion. It must seem as genuine as possible to Lyrus. Aeli...you have to yield to me now.*

I sensed his urgency. I had to obey him at once. I tried to release my will to him but it was surprisingly difficult. It was like surrendering the will to live, it was completely against nature.

*Just a little more, and I can force the rest. I'm almost strong enough now.*

The way I did it was peculiar even to me: I pictured us in a lightsaber battle, our beams in a deadlock. I could see by the look on Brennan's face that he wanted to take my life. I didn't know why. But I looked deep in his eyes and my loyalty rose in me like a tower of strength. I dropped my saber and waited gladly for death.

I was caught in a wave of dizzying disorientation. The charade begins, the charade begins, I thought, and then...

...I ceased to care.

So this was what it was like, having no will. Desiring nothing, one also feared nothing, hoped for nothing. It was painless.

The paralysis abruptly went away, but it made no difference. I had no motivation to move.

Lyrus feigned sympathy and said, "Poor little Padawan, I won't leave you empty like this. No, Aeli, you will be quite full—full and sated and happy."

He shifted his hands slightly and I knew he was going to come into me. The knowledge moved me not in the slightest. I simply watched his face and waited.

Will rushed back into me, and only then did I realize how horrible it had been the moment before. Now I was alive again. I knew Lyrus wanted me to sit up, and so I did.

Lyrus stared at me, smiling. "All kinds of desires will be yours now, Aeli. And with them, all kinds of emotions. Some bad, I'm sorry to say...you will feel sorrow and terror. But others very good—rage...hunger...and lust. Let's take right now, for example. What do you most want to do right now?"

I wanted to kiss him. It was like a horrible itch, it was like thirst, tormenting. I had to do it, before I died of the desire. I reached for him, and he held me off for a moment.

"You'll find me a good Master, my little Padawan. I won't deny you something you obviously want so badly."

He let me kiss him. I took no pleasure in it except to realize that my entire soul was flooded with desire to please him. The thought that he might enjoy the kiss filled me with desperate hope for the reward of his approval. But I also knew he was hard to please...it was far more likely I would fail somehow.

Lyrus drew away. "A nice betrayal, we are off to a good start."

This praise soothed my fear. I hoped he would give me another command quickly, that I might obey him again.

"But what of your former Master, Auri-Owan? Are you so quick to forget such a great man, so... 'unique,' I believe you called him?"

I had utterly forgotten about Brenan until Lyrus mentioned him. I remembered then what Brenan had told me, that it would be his will taking me over, not Lyrus's. It seemed he had failed. I hoped he had failed.

Lyrus stood up, looked down at me. "Renounce the bastard."

I rose to my feet and looked at him earnestly. "I renounce him, my lord—I want no other Master than you! You believe me?"

Lyrus took me in his arms and stroked my back. He was pleased again, I glowed with it. He looked down into my face and said, "You are mine now. Oh...let me correct myself...mine and Lord Sidious's, of course. But I think we both know you want only to be mine."

I nodded vigorously. "Let me prove it to you."

"So you shall, soon enough. The unique and wonderful Auri-Owan will no doubt try to come after you. He won't find you, but if he could, all the better. I can think of no better tribute you can pay me than to kill him."

"I could kill him now, Master!" I was already imagining the look of pleasure on Lyrus's face if I were to do something so important for him.

He laughed, and it was a harsh laugh that made me fear again that he might become angry, cast me aside. "I wish I could allow you the privilege, love, but it might cause a scene. For now we simply need to take you home as quietly as possible. My Master Sidious will be very glad to see you. But where is your lightsaber? You'll be needing that."

I found my saber and hooked it to my belt. Lyrus took my key, beckoned me out the door, and locked the room behind us. We took the back exit, and no one saw us. If anyone had, I was certain Lyrus would have made them forget instantly what they had seen. We avoided the main street and took some smaller side roads, at a regular pace that would draw no special attention. I took no note of our route; I was far more concerned at discerning Lyrus's mood. I had no reason to think I had done anything to offend him, but I was so fearful of his displeasure that the possibility of it loomed large each minute.

Sometime after we had crossed into a more disreputable district, Lyrus made me stop in an alley. He checked to see if anyone was in view, then pulled me into a doorway. In a moment the door was unlocked and he pushed me inside. I found myself in a large but decrepit kitchen, dark and deserted except for a pair of battle droids flanking the door. These ignored us.

“First I must deliver you to our Master,” Lyrus told me irritably. I had very mixed emotions toward this Lord Sidious. I knew I had to obey him, but the thought of doing so was not pleasant, as was doing the bidding of Lyrus.

We ascended some stairs and walked up a hallway to the last door. “It’s Lyrus, my Lord,” said my new Master, knocking.

“Enter,” said a low voice from within.

Lyrus motioned for me to go first, but I knew he was not happy. I hesitated, and he gave me a shove, hissing, “Go!”

I stumbled forward, horribly chagrined. I looked around and found the room to be a large, formal suite, no doubt the best in this building which appeared to be a fallen-down hotel. It was appointed sparsely but with slightly better furnishings than the structure itself warranted. A figure in simple hooded gray robes sat at a table which was covered with charts and the typical equipment used for military planning.

“Lyrus,” said Darth Sidious, “I should never have given you the extra day to obtain this Jedi. It’s a day we could have well spent in some other capacity, we have only tomorrow now. I would delay this whole thing if it wasn’t imperative I return to Coruscant when the Senate reconvenes.” His face was shadowed by his hood, but I could tell he was studying me. “This wisp was so important to capture?”

“Since she is—was—Padawan to Auri-Owan, I guarantee you she’s among the best in the galaxy.”

“Well, you make it your business to know. As usual I suspect you had your own agenda, however.”

“No agenda but your own, my Lord.” Lyrus gave a solemn bow.

“Of course,” said Sidious with audible sarcasm. “See to your compliance, Lyrus, and I will have no objections.” He seemed to study my Master’s face a moment, although his face was largely hidden by his hood. “And leave this one alone. Spare her your lascivious interests.”

“My Lord?”

“I have let you have your way with the other females who interested you, but that’s enough. Restoring this old brothel is not what our work is about.”

I held my tongue during this exchange, but I felt dismay and bitterness toward Lord Sidious. If Lyrus was permitted the others, why not me?

Sidious spoke again. “Show her around, get her settled in to her quarters. Tomorrow you and I have too much to do; let Xis work with her.”

“Yes, Master,” said Lyrus. He grabbed my elbow, bowed, and pulled me out of the room.

What followed was a cursory tour of the premises. Lyrus was in a sour mood that made me feel like I was bleeding inside. He showed me the various floors where the other Jedi were housed, every room guarded by a battle droid, and each one filled to capacity with men and women who looked at me either blankly or with tormented eyes. Over and over I saw the same reaction when they saw Lyrus: first a look of alertness and hope, and then when he took no particular interest,

distress followed by emptiness. In spite of his ill spirits, I was thankful for the time to be the object of his attention. I didn't know what I would do when he left me alone.

That moment came far too soon. "This is your room," Lyrus told me, and pointed to one of the two beds. It was fitted with a stained pillow and a single worn blanket. The room was dimly lit, and as in all the rooms, the window was boarded over. On the second bed sat another woman, who had been lying down until we came in. She seemed typically agitated over the presence of Lyrus, but said nothing.

My Master turned to me. "Believe me, I would prefer to stay with you awhile...Sidious can be maddeningly capricious and unreasonable."

I saw absolutely no reason why Sidious's command should supercede Lyrus's. I longed to ignore it. I didn't want him to leave me, there had to be some way.

Lyrus put his hands on my shoulders and shoved me to the bed, then sat next to me. He put his face close to mine and his eyes searched me. Then he said, "Tell me what you would do for me if you could."

"Anything," I answered at once.

He reached over and seized my left breast, and squeezed it hard. Physically it hurt, but I knew he wanted to hurt me so that didn't matter. "Specifically," he said.

I wanted desperately to give the answer he sought, but I couldn't imagine what it was. My mind raced. "Let me kiss you, Master," I offered.

"Your kiss, believe it or not, is nothing much to me," he replied. Then he stood up, "This is a waste of my time. In the morning Puer Xis will work with you after you eat. Till then," and he gave me a sarcastic smile, "enjoy yourself."

He seemed to linger only long enough to observe the pain on my face. He was leaving me...it was hell. I wouldn't know what to feel, what to want, what to think about. With a slight smile Lyrus turned on his heel and swiftly left the room, pulling the door closed with a bang.

My new roommate and I looked at each other. I knew she had shared my current pain many times but I didn't expect sympathy because I knew it was not my Master's command that she give me any. We averted our eyes, she fell back on the bed, and shortly later, I did likewise. Neither one of us had the motivation to turn off the light. I had no will, but my body still functioned as all human bodies do, and after a time I gave in to fatigue and slept.

It wasn't long before I began to dream. In the dream I was sitting on a bed made of black sky strewn with stars. Someone sat down with me, and when I looked up, it was Brennan.

I burst into tears and threw myself into his arms. "Oh gods, Brennan," I sobbed, "what have I done? Forgive me, forgive me..."

He held my shuddering body gently, rubbing my back. I felt his voice: "You did nothing, nothing, do you understand, Aeli? You're just my puppet."

"I said I would kill you!" I remembered everything I had done and felt and said, and the shame was overwhelming. For a moment I actually felt I would be sick, but my Master seemed to be exuding calmness and I settled down enough so it passed. Still, I couldn't bear to look at him, and buried my face in his shoulder, feeling hot tears dampening the fabric of his shirt.

“Aeli—” He took my face in his hands and lifted it so he could look at me. His clear blue eyes calmed me further, and I stopped sobbing. In a quiet but authoritative voice he told me, “It was me. I made you do everything. There isn’t a word you said that I didn’t put in your mouth myself. None of it was you—not an emotion, not a desire. You did nothing to betray me. Do you understand?”

I caught my breath. “Yes.”

“Your pain hasn’t been for nothing. Already I’ve seen enough to know what we can do.”

“That’s good, that’s good, Master,” I told him, wiping my nose on the back of my hand.

“This won’t last much longer, dearest Padawan.” His eyes were full of sadness and pain. “I hate seeing you suffer, I hate stripping you of all your dignity and loyalty and goodness, everything that makes you a Jedi. I hate that I can’t let you remember this meeting. But even though you’ll forget the dream, I think you’ll awaken in slightly less pain. I hope so.”

“Brenan...” I said, a new emotion budding in my heart. “I’ll be willing to let you kill him, but I’d much prefer if it were me.”

My Master’s eyes held concern but he smiled a little. “I thought you might develop some negative feelings for Lyrus...but rage won’t help you, Padawan. It will all be over tomorrow night. Tomorrow night I’ll tell you everything, you’ll see me with your own eyes, Aeli. But first we have other work to do.”

I clung to his sleeve. “Oh Master, I miss...I miss being a Jedi.”

“In one more day, I promise you’ll get to be a Jedi again. Now sleep soundly for the night.” He put his arm behind me and eased me down onto the bed of stars. “No more pain till morning, Aeli. I’ll take back your will from you while you sleep. You won’t even feel it this time.”

I closed my eyes and all that was left was his voice. “I’m sorry, forgive me...but now you must forget this happened...” Then I found myself in complete blackness.

\* \* \*

I awoke the next day in a sort of numb emptiness. My Master Lyrus, it seemed, would let long hours go by without bothering about any particular one of us Jedi; that is, we were without guidance as to what our desires should be. The whole place seemed almost to move in slow motion: We Jedi were listless as we took turns getting food from the kitchen, and the battle droids who stood guard had no reason to move at all. There was no sign of Lyrus or Sidious.

I was in my room, basically waiting, when a Jedi Knight walked in and came up to me. “Aelida Camil?” he asked, with the closest thing to urgency I had observed yet among my new companions.

“Yes,” I replied.

“I am Puer Xis. Master Lyrus desires that I show you the training room and brief you for tomorrow. Follow me, and bring your lightsaber.”



I knew this man's name. I recalled he was an old friend of Auri-Owan, I had heard stories about him. This knowledge was irrelevant to anything, so I made no comment about it. If he knew my past, he was not inclined to say anything either.

There were stairs leading from the kitchen to the underground level of the building. At one time this must have been quite a large storage area: the ceilings were high and most of the place was one large room. In various corners, a few Jedi worked with lightsabers and target droids, or fought each other with practice sabers.

Puer Xis spoke sternly. "It's imperative that we keep fit, and keep our skills in order. It's a matter of discipline. You are scheduled here for the next two hours. Use your time well, I will be watching you as if with Lyrus's own eyes."

And he put me in a far corner and supplied me with a target. My spirits lifted slightly. At last I had a cause, and not an unpleasant one. Puer Xis wandered off to observe the others, so I started my work. I began as always with the Three Routines, it was instinctive. But when I sought the Force as usual, it was not at all the same. I found a rippling, unsettling darkness that confused me. I was still struggling with it when I felt myself abruptly being slapped.

It was Xis. "I know what you're doing!" he cried angrily. "Our Master would be furious if he knew! The ridiculous ways of that Jedi Knight are not bothered with here. Now practice with the droid."

I felt less anguish at this than might have been expected. I had committed the act out of ignorance, I hadn't had any order from Lyrus. Still, I had been foolish not to realize that following the Routines of Auri-Owan, no matter how broadly they were accepted, would be an offense here. I was seized with fear that Xis would speak to Lyrus of what I had done, and my Master would punish me with neglect and abandonment. I began working with the target droid with all my energy, hoping somehow to redeem myself.

Later Puer Xis returned to fight me himself with practice sabers. It was clear that my Master's will was for me to perform at my finest level, and although my connection to the Force was weirdly twisted, I still found power to draw on. The Dark Side felt very different, but operated much the same. Xis found me a formidable opponent in every match.

He offered me no praise, but when we were done he left quickly and urgently, no doubt to report to Lyrus and Sidious. He told me to make myself presentable, have lunch, and wait for him in my room.

I waited quite a long time, and of course, time seemed to crawl here. When finally Xis entered the room, he motioned for my roommate to leave us and she slunk away. He sat on her bed and I sat on mine.

"Tomorrow a group of us will leave here on a mission. Darth Sidious has determined that you should participate. This is only because you are talented and even more because he sees your complete devotion to Master Lyrus. We'll take a transport to Coruscant at dawn. We'll ambush a group of Jedi in the southern continent and take as many prisoners as we can, killing the rest. For now there is little you need to know except that. And that you should take care to preserve yourself, you are valuable to Lord Sidious. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I replied.

“There is work to be done to prepare for the mission. That should occupy the rest of your day. Tonight you must rest, the day begins early and you’ll be expected to be able to fight at any time, including on the transport if we should be attacked and boarded. Go to the kitchen now, the work detail is being organized there.”

I did not see Lyrus all day except once, when he passed me in the hall. He did not acknowledge me. I knew I was doing my work for him, though, so I felt nothing. I was mostly relieved I hadn’t earned his displeasure.

The day left me very fatigued, and I was glad to go to my room after the evening meal. Glad is too strong a word; my body was glad, but my mind was once again distressed at having no purpose given to me by my Master other than to rest. Still, that was something. I let myself fall asleep quickly.

I was awakened only a little later by the opening of the door. I turned in the bed and found Master Lyrus approaching quietly, having closed the door behind him. He sat next to me on the bed. “So, already asleep, my favorite Padawan?”

I sat up eagerly. “Master Lyrus...”

“Lord Sidious has given me the duty to visit all those going on tomorrow’s mission. He seems to think there could be any doubt of your loyalty to me.”

“Of course not, Master.”

Lyrus caught my chin in his hand. In the dim light I could see his eyes afire with vehemence. “The day after tomorrow you will finally be able to enjoy yourself, Aeli. I think killing for me will be the most satisfying thing you’ve ever done.”

I stared back, thinking the expression of eagerness on my face would say more than any words.

“But to be true to my duty, I ought to test your faithfulness,” said Lyrus slyly.

I had been sleeping only in my shirt and leggings. He pulled the blanket off me and then tore my shirt open. My breasts were exposed to him, but I felt neither arousal nor shame. Mostly I was just glad he was finding me of use, and hopeful that he would give me some sort of desire to feel.

He stared at my breasts for awhile, and I thought he might caress me at any moment, but then he drew his hand back and slapped my right breast, hard. Tears sprung to my eyes from the pain but I made no sound.

“Excellent,” said Lyrus softly.

Then I heard the voice of Darth Sidious out in the hall. “Lyrus! Where are you? Attend me, Lyrus!”

My Master cursed under his breath and shoved me back down onto the bed. “Cover yourself, woman,” he hissed.

Lyrus hurried out of the room and I heard his voice and Sidious’s retreat back down the hall. I pulled my shirt closed and drew the blanket back. My breast was hot and stung, I felt all over my body a nameless, unpleasant feeling, and my stomach was queasy. I did not know what I was supposed to think about any of this. So I pondered what a relief it would be to have a lightsaber

in my hand and the task of killing Jedi, a simple, clear assignment that would, as Lyrus promised, give me at last a sense of meaning. Finally fatigue overwhelmed me.

I was awakened in the dead of night by a sense of overwhelming turmoil. At first I couldn't even think coherently, then the confusion began to clear. I thought I heard a voice, but when I sat up to listen, the entire building seemed still.

*Aeli...Aeli, it's me.*

"Brenan?" I replied, but in my head. Oh, Brenan!—I knew him again!

*It's over, Aeli. Wake up now.*

"Where are you?"

*I'm on my way, soon. Pretend you're sleeping, and listen to me.*

Suddenly my memory of the past two days hit me like a slap in the face. Dismay, horror, shame nearly overwhelmed me—

*My Padawan, listen to me. It's over now.*

I shuddered and clung to his voice for warmth. "I feel...so awful," was all I could manage.

*I know.*

"Did you make Sidious come and call for Lyrus...before it was too late?"

*Sidious intended to do it, just not quite that soon. It wasn't difficult to hurry him.*

"Thank you."

*I told you I wouldn't let harm come to you...although I'm not sure I fully kept that promise. This was much worse than I expected.*

"I would do it again to save these poor Jedi, Brenan," I told him, and meant it. Only I could fully understand the hell they were going through.

*All right, then that's what we'll do. In a few minutes I'll be coming in the back entry. You come down and I'll meet you on the first level.*

"But the guard droids...?"

*Don't worry about them. I'll tell you exactly when to come. Walk at a normal pace, everyone's asleep and the droids in the halls shouldn't suspect you. Dress, and bring your saber, concealed of course.*

"Then what will we do?"

*You know the Jedi will come after us at once, hell bent on killing us. We have to avoid them and get to the underground room right away. I'm counting on Lyrus's desire to kill me himself. In my...spare time...I've been working on that suggestion to him as much as possible.*

"Then he'll have to fight us both."

*No, Aeli, you must keep up the charade as long as you can. We'll act as if I took you hostage and the Jedi forced us down the stairs. I'll keep them at bay, and if I'm right about Lyrus, he'll want to take me on himself, alone.*

“So even with Sidious there, we’ll have even odds.”

*I hope Sidious is there. I’ve observed him enough to know he prefers above all else to make sure his life is preserved. I’m not confident he will join the fight. But I hope so, this is the Jedi Order’s best chance yet to be rid of him. But one thing is very important, Aeli: We have to delude Lyrus as long as we can into believing you’re still under his control. As much as he’d like to defeat me single-handedly, if he realizes your will is free, he’ll prefer protecting his own life. And once he realizes it, we’ll have another problem too...*

“What’s that, Brennan?” I asked trepidatiously.

*He’ll immediately try to take your will, this time for real.*

I shuddered.

*I’ll have my hands full already, because he’ll already be trying to do it to me as we’re fighting. That will hinder me quite a bit. If he switches his efforts to you, I’ll be able to fight more successfully, but I won’t be able to help you fend him off. And I doubt you can do it alone.*

“If that happens, what will we do?”

*Hope that I can kill him before he turns one of the best swordswomen in the galaxy against me. I’m almost to the building now, my Padawan...dress quietly and be ready when I call you.*

“Yes, Master,” I said, with resolution.

My roommate didn’t stir as I slipped on the rest of my clothes and holstered my lightsaber, a fairly difficult task when the only light came from under the door. I stood poised to leave, waiting for Brennan’s command. Any dread I felt concerning the challenge at hand was far outweighed by my joy at being free of Lyrus’s control, even if it had only been an illusion. I was a Jedi again, I had my free will back, and my best friend would stand before me in minutes.

*Come down now,* came the word.

I opened the door stealthily, and walked to the stairs, ignoring the two battle droids on guard in the hall. I padded down the stairs two flights and made my way toward the kitchen, my heart pounding.

Brenan met me in the hallway and seized me at once. He clapped his hand over my mouth.

*If anyone comes, struggle.*

Beyond him the door of the back entrance was standing open. The two guard droids were still, but I noticed a slight slump to their heads.

*Incapacitated. I was quite sure I could do that one way or the other, but I’m glad I managed it the silent way.*

“How did you get in?” I queried back, in my head.

*My mind worked the locks. I’ve been practicing that awhile.*

“Is there anything you can’t do?” I found it hard to contain my joy—and awe—in spite of our dire circumstances.

*Yes, quite a bit. But I seem to find new things everyday that are possible. Here come the droids—now its time to make some noise and draw out our prey.*

As I watched, more battle droids came from the front room and down the stairs. I was ready at any moment to get out of the way when Brennan drew his saber, but this proved unnecessary. I felt a wave of energy from him, harmless to me, but it repelled the droids with such a blast that they hit the walls and shattered into parts. It was incredible. Then one broken chunk of metal bounced off a corner of the wall and we had to dodge to avoid being hit. Brennan took the opportunity to lose his grip over my mouth.

*Call for Lyrus.*

“Master Lyrus!” I screamed as loud as I could.

A second wave of droids came down the stairs and met the same fate as the first. Again, I could hardly believe my eyes. I had to force my amazement back to keep my wits about me. I yelled for Lyrus again, and in the next moment two—no three—Jedi appeared on the stairs.

*Now it gets tricky.*

We were in position by the stairwell to the lower level, so it actually seemed plausible for us to retreat that way. Brennan dragged me down the stairs, brandishing his saber at the same time.

The Jedi pursued us furiously. I could hear more commotion upstairs. Brennan tossed me aside into a corner and I had to fall carefully not to get hurt—but I pretended to be incapacitated. At the bottom of the stairs he engaged lightsabers with the first of the Jedi, a hearty-looking male Padawan. I sat watching carefully, wondering how he would handle this. The exchange lasted but a minute before Brennan succeeded in gouging his opponent across the forehead: just a flesh wound, but one that caused him to bleed profusely into his eyes. Blinded and in pain, the man fell back.

Then I noticed above him on the stairs was Puer Xis. “Watch yourselves, if any of you let yourselves be killed, our Masters will be angry!”

I nearly laughed at this ridiculous statement, but at the same time, I remembered very recently being in a state that I might have said such a thing myself.

“Help him,” Xis instructed the nearest Jedi. “To Rwan-Tem, he’s a physician. Hurry!”

The fallen Jedi was dragged up the stairwell, and Puer Xis himself moved to the front of the onslaught. I felt Brennan’s dismay. To stall for time—time that hopefully would bring us Lyrus—he extended the fight with Xis as long as he could. Finally he managed to deliver a vicious slash to Puer’s right arm. The Knight held on to his lightsaber with his left hand but the pain was too much for him to continue the fight. He looked at Brennan with rage and backed up the stairs.

“Forgive me,” said my Master, quietly.

A pair of Padawans next drew their sabers. I longed to help, but I had to continue the ruse. Brennan kept them easily at bay, and I sensed he figured Lyrus had to be arriving soon—if he could only stall another minute or two, there would be no need for more injuries. The two Jedi got more in each other’s way than anything else, so it wasn’t hard for my Master to delay.

Then: “Let me pass!” came a shriek from the top of the stairs.

I raised my head a little and saw Lyrus come into view. The Jedi parted for him and he drew his saber as he descended. He cast me a glance, saw I was alive, then gave his full attention to Brennan.

“Auri-Owan!” Lyrus cried.

“My Padawan wishes to come back to me,” said Brennan, baiting him.

In my head he cued me. “He lies!” I shouted to Lyrus. “I would never leave you, Master!”

“Give her to me and I’ll kill you,” said Lyrus to Brennan. “Refuse and I’ll kill you both.”

“Not a good offer,” said Brennan, taking a swipe with his saber. Lyrus dodged back and nearly fell into the Jedi behind him. “Is that the offer your Master would extend to me?”

“My Master,” said Lyrus bitterly, “is out of your reach. He wouldn’t be so foolish as to risk himself in this petty conflict. Surrender!” With this he lunged at Brennan, who parried and held his ground.

“Unless you kill me, I’m leaving with Aeli,” responded Brennan calmly.

“I won’t go with you!” I cried.

“You see, she has no care for you, Jedi,” said Lyrus with a broad swipe of his saber.

“You’re a coward, Lyrus...” Brennan dodged back but recovered his stance quickly and returned the blow. “You’ll fight me only if the odds are 50 to one!”

The two locked beams for a moment and I nearly went for my lightsaber.

“I don’t need these Jedi slaves to help me...” countered Lyrus.

“Then send them away! Prove you’re not a coward. As of now, I’m hardly convinced.” To accentuate his point, Brennan lunged and forced Lyrus up a step.

For a moment the Sith Apprentice stood snarling. Then he shouted. “I’m not risking any more of you...everyone, upstairs! Leave him to me!”

The Jedi behind him shrunk back at the force of his rage, then retreated obediently. Lyrus re-engaged my Master and for a moment Brennan I felt Brennan’s head swim a little. I realized Lyrus was working on him, just as he had expected. He recovered, but not before giving enough ground that Lyrus broke into the room.

The two went at the battle full force then. I could both see from Brennan’s technique and feel from my connection to him that he was struggling with Lyrus’s psychic attempts for control. Still, he was the superior swordsman and held his own. I wondered at the wisdom of my continuing to stay out of the fray...surely I could break in swiftly and Lyrus would have no time to react.

Then I heard Brennan’s voice in my head: *He knows!* and an instant later Lyrus took a furious swing at my Master which almost connected.

“How did you do this?—her will is free!” he screamed.

I took no time to wonder how he had seen through us; I seized my lightsaber and ignited it at once...

...then I felt the onslaught. I had never realized the strength Brennan wielded that he had been able to hold off this much power. As before, I felt the stars going out, I felt myself dying. I dropped to my knees and my lightsaber fell from my hands. With horrible certainty I knew that in moments my will would be extinguished and Lyrus would take me over, for real this time. And no doubt he would find no greater pleasure than watching me kill my beloved Master.

Brenan, Brennan...no...any fate but that one...

I was the Golden Padawan, there was no possible way the story could end with one of the Golden Pair destroyed at the hands of the other!

I realized Brennan was trying to help me, I felt energy from him and the stars brightened a little, life flowed back into me. I tried to stand...a little more strength and I could...I looked over to my Master and I could see he had shifted his concentration to helping me.

But no, this wasn't good!

It was only by a nanosecond that my alarm preceded the disaster. I had no time even to think to cry out before I saw it happening. Lyrus took a wild and vicious swing...at first I thought Brennan had only dropped his saber, but then with a flash of secondhand pain I realized the truth:

The blow had severed both his hands.

Lyrus surprised even himself. In his glee he left off trying to crush my will.

Brenan dropped to his knees. Blood poured from his arms, he squinted and at once I realized it was not from pain, but because he was focusing to stop the blood flow before it killed him. This would take all his energy now.

Then I saw one of the hands next to him on the floor.

Horror was supplanted by rage: I would kill this fiend!

I seized my saber again and stood. Lyrus wheeled to look at me, holding me off with his own saber. "He can't protect you anymore," the Apprentice said, his voice dripping with smug triumph. "I don't know how you evaded me before, but believe me, you'll be my slave now until you die."

I felt his power coming over me again. I looked at Brennan and he still sat on his knees, his head hanging now, but the bleeding had stopped. I could feel his consciousness almost gone. He seemed to be dying.

At this realization I was flooded with such fire as I cannot describe. It was not rage or passion, it was almost cold. I knew with certainty that I would see Lyrus dead before I saw the sun again. It was almost beyond a matter of will, beyond my desire...it was outside of the three of us, somewhere beyond. I felt nothing at all but the truth of what I had to do next.

I dropped my saber and slumped, as if in total surrender. Somehow it fooled Lyrus. He laughed and turned back to face Brennan, drawing back his weapon for the death blow.

Then in an instant I leapt across the space between us, till I stood between my Master and Lyrus. In my mind I called to Brennan, "Reach your arm up to me!" I put one hand behind me, behind my back, and felt for Brennan's severed wrist. Finding it, I seized hold of him, my fingers gripping tight.

Lyrus hesitated. “Do you think I won’t kill you both?” he cried, enraged.

“Kill me if you want, I don’t care,” I told him calmly. “You never had my loyalty and you never will. He’s the only Master I’ll ever serve.”

I started to see Lyrus’s face go crimson with fury, but the image blurred. At the same time, I was jumping, into Brennan’s bloodstream. How thin and dark I found it at first, but in one quick circle I restored the flow of stars to brightness. I heard Lyrus shout at me, a command to move aside. Brennan’s hunger for light was immense, but I met it, I drew it from myself and also from what I found beyond us in the wider universe of the Force. Lyrus shouted again, but I didn’t move from shielding my Master, and I didn’t let go of his wrist.

I saw Lyrus draw back his lightsaber again, aiming clearly to take off my head. I gave the last of what I had to Brennan...

Then there was a blast.

Through the blur I saw Lyrus’s eyes grow large. His lightsaber fell to the floor. His chest caved in and he nearly doubled over, as if struck by a tremendous blow. Then a surge of blood burst from his mouth and he collapsed.

My Master spoke, from behind me, and his voice was strong and clear. “You wanted so much to know the identities of the Golden Pair, Darth Lyrus...well, they have just defeated you.”

I released Brennan’s wrist, and fell into a heap.

That was the last—I dropped into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

Blackness lightened to gray, I found myself in a strange bed...clean, fresh bedding. Then I remembered. “My Master’s hands,” I wailed, forcing my eyes open.

I was in a hospital room. Standing over me was Puer Xis. “Aelida Camil, hush now,” he told me in calming tones. “We saved his hands!”

Frantically I reached out with my mind to locate Brennan. I could find no sense of him anywhere. “I can’t find him,” I said, panicking. “Is he dead?”

“No, no, Aeli...” said Puer, taking hold of my arm. “He’s in surgery right now. It’s a complicated procedure but they’re confident his hands will be restored. He’s going to be fine.”

I sat up, my head swimming. “You saved his hands? How did we get here?”

Puer took a deep pensive breath, as if trying to determine where to start. “You were unconscious a long time, Padawan Aelida. Let me tell you what happened. The Jedi...we recovered ourselves immediately when Lyrus died. Recovered enough to function...but it will take some time to get over it.”

I lay back down, tired again. “Yes it will, Puer.”

“You know me?”

“My Master told me you saved his life.”

“Well, that debt has been paid now. When we all—came to ourselves—we remembered everything, we knew you two were down there with Lyrus. We found you both unconscious...



we found Brennan's hands. Rwan-Tem knew exactly what to do, and in fact, we got help immediately. You were both taken to this hospital, and the other injured ones as well."

I saw then Puer's bandaged arm. He caught my glance, and smiled. "Bren—that rascal—I have a word to say to him about this. I think he was trying to get me back for beating him at Azzipan dice."

I laughed, and it felt good. In fact, it felt good simply to be alive and out of that hellish place, and free forever of Lyrus. A surge of joy filled my heart. "When can I see my Master?" I asked Puer.

"Let me talk to the physician, I'm sure you'll be able to see him after he's conscious again."

The doctors had concluded I was unhurt, except for exhaustion, but wanted me to stay the day and night anyway to be certain. That was fine with me, I didn't want to be any further away than that from Master Brennan. I dozed throughout the day and took a couple of small meals.

The transition from passing out in that nightmarish dungeon moments after evading death, then waking in this comfortable and cheery Naboo hospital with all of us safe and well, left me confused and unsettled. I still couldn't shake the shame and horror of my behavior for those two days, the emotions I had experienced. Worst of all, it was impossible to erase the sight of my Master losing his hands. If I couldn't see him, I wished at least I could feel that he really was alive.

A hologram was sent to me that afternoon from Mace Windu. He congratulated Brennan and I on our mission and told me we would be welcomed back to the Temple with much celebration as soon as we were able to return. He also passed along good wishes to me from Calnor, along with the happy news that Master Nago had chosen him as Padawan.

I fell asleep early, and then awoke in the small hours of the night. The hospital was quiet. At once I reached out for Brennan...

*Ah, so you are finally awake.*

"Master! Brennan, are you well?" It was so good to sense him again, that familiar mirth and confidence, his warm golden spirit.

*I feel infinitely better than I did on my knees before Darth Lyrus. And I've been told you are unharmed?*

"I'm fine, although I should be headless. Can I ask this again, is there anything you can't do?"

*With the Force, all things are possible, Padawan. But right now, I seem unable to get out of this bed.*

"I'm coming to you."

I was already on my feet, and I put on the cloak I found on the chair. Brennan said no more, but he led me wordlessly through the halls; I turned this way and another without really seeing, until I was at his door. I opened it quietly.

My Master lay on his back, bathed in street light from the window. He seemed pale...but even in the dim light his hair was still like pure gold. He was...he was so beautiful I wanted to cry.

I saw his arms lying at his sides on top of the covers. They ended in heavy bandages; actually, I realized, casts.

“Yes, Aeli, there really are hands in there. Just not comfortable ones.”

“Brenan...”

I threw myself upon him and he raised one arm to rest it on my back. I clung tight around his shoulders and put my head on his chest. The past days overwhelmed me and all I could finally manage to say was, “Can you believe we’re alive?”

I raised my head to look into his eyes. He replied, “Some moments I can’t believe we’re alive...other times I wonder if we were ever in any danger at all.”

He smiled. I loved him so much.

“Aeli,” he said, “now that you’re here, I think someone needs to meet you.”

For a minute he closed his eyes. I sat up, waiting, watching his face, perplexed. Suddenly his face was illuminated with a strange light, that vacillated between green, blue, and orange. He opened his eyes and with a nod of his head, indicated over my shoulder. I turned...

A ghostly figure stood at the foot of the bed. He was tall and very thin, with long gray hair bound back, and black eyes. He nodded at me and smiled, an infinitely kind smile.

“Aeli,” said Brenan, “this is Master Teg of Aleyra.”

I turned around in my spot next to Brenan on the bed, to face the figure. “Master Teg...I’m so honored...” I said, overwhelmed.

“Master Auri-Owan...Padawan Aelida...son and daughter,” he said, obviously as moved as I was, which made me feel even more humble. “I wish to speak to you both, now that my dream is fulfilled.”

He took a deep breath, and I sensed how very old he was. Old, but incredibly strong. “Good Jedi, it may seem to you that fate decreed this end, but that is not so. I swept away some of the stars that might have been our fate, you swept away others, but until all was done, there were still many outcomes that might have been. By your courage and love the power of the Force held sway, and in the choices you made, it found a way to bring all to rights.”

I could feel Brenan very acutely then, and I knew he was thinking about Darth Sidious.

Teg, of course, knew this too. “Evil will always fight another day, Master Brenan. But remember, so will good.” He took a step closer and drew another long breath. “And so will you, my Golden Pair. It was not my calling to see the rest of your story, but since this is but the first chapter, you two have much left to write.” A sly smile came over his face. “You seem to write very well when you collaborate, I’d advise that for your next work.”

I felt Brenan chuckle next to me, and I laughed too. Then I managed to find my voice. “Master Teg, I want to thank you. Without you...I mean...I might never have found him, nor he me. My life...I...”

I could go no further. I felt Brenan’s arm come around my waist, the cast on his hand came to rest on my leg. I put both my hands over it and held on gently.

“Aelida, in some matters the Force is very hard to thwart,” said Teg with a half smile. “This was one of them.” His eyes turned to my Master. “I hardly need to tell you to watch over this one,” he said.

“With my life, Master Teg,” replied Brennan.

“And you likewise you, even less so,” Teg said to me.

I laughed. “My will does seem so inclined, Master,” I said.

“Whatever stars guide us next, I hope they will sometime bring you to Aleyra.” He raised his hand in blessing. “May the Force be with you.”

We replied in kind, and then the light went out. What a wonderful being...and without him, well, my mind couldn't even grasp what would have been without him.

I turned to Brennan, who drew back his arm. I helped him position it back on the bedclothes. He winced.

“Oh, Brennan...does it hurt much?”

He settled down into the pillow. “What hurts most is my fear that I will be disowned.”

I gave him a quizzical look.

“Go in the drawer of the bed stand,” he instructed.

I reached over to the stand and opened the little drawer. In it I found a small cloth, which I drew out.

“Thank the gods Puer Xis was among those who rescued my hands,” said Brennan. “He knew enough to pocket it before it got misplaced.”

I unwrapped, of course, Brennan's ring.

“You'll keep it for me until I can put it back on? If I lose it, I'll be disowned.”

I looked at him. His face was dead serious but he was wasting his time feigning this solemnity. In my head I could feel him laughing.

“I'll keep it for you,” I told him, feigning solemnity of my own. “Until you win it back from me at practice sabers.”

Of course, he could feel me laughing too.

**E-mail me your thoughts at [dlau@wi.rr.com](mailto:dlau@wi.rr.com)**

**For more about the author, please visit  
[www.dianalaurence.com](http://www.dianalaurence.com)**