**Chapter 6**

“Do you know what the hardest part of flying an invisible ship is?” her Master inquired.

Anaïs thought about it for a long moment. “Not being as invisible as you think you are?”

The Jedi Master considered her words, nodding after considering them. “I’d say that’s second, possibly third. No, the hardest part is that *no one knows you’re there*.” As the cruiser descended through the atmosphere, it carefully avoided the light air-traffic, though she couldn’t see where it was all *going,* as there was no city in sight, and they were supposed to be quickly approaching the capitol city of the planet, Fabrin, but all she saw were forests, swamps, and plains.

The *city* of Farbin was on the *planet* Thorgeld, as opposed to the *planet* named Fabrin, which was out in the Expansion Region, while they were still in the area of space known as the Core. It was all very confusing, and not something she’d looked that deeply into before. Her Master’s statement of “*Learn.*” hadn’t been that comforting.

“Master Lucian, *where* is the city?” she finally asked. She could feel a great many people in the way they were flying, but she couldn’t get more than a general direction when she concentrated.

With a small laugh, he pointed forward, and *down.* “Those here took after the Alderaanian design philosophy of integrating their cities with nature, but they didn’t want to put in all the effort that took. Instead, they just went underground, leaving nature to reclaim the surface, which presents us with a problem.”

Following a small freighter, above and behind it, their cruiser tracked it for a few minutes before it slowed, descending towards an area of plains. Before it hit the ground, though, the earth seemed to split, lifting and separating out the grassland to reveal an industrial metal shaft the larger ship descended into, their cruiser watching it do so, the ground re-shifting and coming back together, as if it never moved.

“Why didn’t we follow them down?” she asked. “There was enough space if you want to come in unnoticed.” That was, after all, why they’d arrived in this system they way they had. Instead of coming out of Hyperspace close to the planet, they’d arrived on the other side of the system, spending the two hours it’d taken to come in on sublight drives. She’d been working on her Force Healing, not having very much luck, when they’d arrived in system, only to be informed that they still had a ways to go.

“Oh, I wasn’t aware you knew the internal schematics of their docking bays,” her master commented, surprised. “If there’s enough room to maneuver *all the way to the city*, I shall defer to your wisdom.”

She reddened, not having thought that far in. “What is our plan, Master,” she deferred instead.

“You’ll see,” he stated enigmatically. They continued on, and as they flew she could see the occasional small structure, durasteel painted the same color as its surroundings, and several natural looking stone spires revealed to be camouflaged air vents. In a rocky area, a natural depression formed what looked like an excellent place to hide the ship, only for Master Lucian to pass it, landing the ship right *next* to it, in open view.

Powering down the engines, he stood up, walking out as she moved to follow. He didn’t say a word, making his way down to the bottom level of the ship, and the small cargo bay that the boarding ramp led into. She’d turned the corner when she was caught off-guard as a cloak hit her in the face, covering her head. Freezing for a second, she reached up and took it off, seeing it to be her Master’s robes, though they were oddly cool.

A look at her Master told her that while the cloak belonged to her Master, it was one of likely many others he owned, as was still wearing his an identical garment. “You look like a Jedi,” he told her. “This’ll help until we get you something of your own.”

“Master?” she asked, confused, even as she put it on. It was a little heavier than it looked, and was actually a little small on her, but it still fit over her. “Why is that something bad?”

Not looking at her, he moved to the side, pulling away cloth to reveal a speeder bike. “Your presence as a Jedi is itself a statement. As a Consular, it would attract attention and demand respect, giving your words weight. As a Guardian it would warn away those stupid, naïve, or confident enough from attacking you, and could win a fight without ever igniting your saber or striking a physical blow. As a Sentinel, however, it’s a blaring alarm to those you seek that you are there, and to hide until you pass.”

He glanced at her, and at the tightly woven braid of hair over her shoulder, the rest in a loose ponytail behind her. “Which is why you need to lose the Padawan braid, or braid it all, so it looks like a style.” She couldn’t help but finger the tightly woven hair that she’d been waiting for years to wear. As if sensing her indecision, which he probably was, he added, “Not right now, you’ll give yourself away in a dozen other ways, so it won’t hurt, but decide by next week.”

Revealing a second speeder bike, he activated both of them, opening the ramp and leading them down. She followed, glancing backwards and seeing the open ramp and cargo bay seeming to hang in mid-air. Holding up a hand, she stopped, and a shadow passed over them. A ship was coming down right next to theirs, but it angled itself to the side. The dull thrum of machinery sounded from the rocky bowl they hadn’t landed in, the blocky ship descending down into it, the same thrum sounding again. After a long moment of silence, the sounds of distant birds and insects returning.

Moving once more, straddling one he gestured for her to get on the other, which she did carefully. “Um, Master?” she asked, disliking there was yet another thing she had to bring up. “I’m not the best at flying these.”

He didn’t respond, pointing the controls out quickly, “Throttle, break, turn the handles to turn, lean slightly into the turn, we’ll start small and do what I do.” With that *woefully inadequate* explanation, he gestured, the ramp into the ship closing, and took off on his bike at a jogging pace. Trying to speed up, she started to move *way* too fast, and tried to hit the brakes, only to be thrown from her seat and, instead of hitting a tree, froze in mid-air, her Master reaching up towards her.

Dropping her back to her seat, he said, “Put your hands on the bars, and don’t do anything. I’ll add it to your training.” Blushing deep red in shame she did so, and the controls started to move on their own, the two of them speeding off into the forest at a pace that would’ve been terrifying if her Master had not been controlling her bike for her. Even if he could control her bike, she still resolved to find a way to practice speeder *bikes.* All of her training had been riding animals and driving airspeeders, and, while she wasn’t as good as Jorrel, she hoped her Master wouldn’t mention this the next time she saw him*.*

<<SWPP>>

Parking the bikes in the underground garage, just inside the guard station, the pair stood, waiting for the lift that would take them down to the subterranean city. “If we’re supposed to be sneaking in,” she said quietly, no one else with them, “Why did we check in?” At her master’s inquisitive look, she explained, “Why didn’t you cloud their mind with the Force?”

“Tell me, Padawan,” he said in the way she was coming to realize meant she’d missed something. She didn’t know *what* it was, and that bothered her. “Does Force Confusion work on computers or sensors?”

She shook her head, trying to think of what she’d missed. They’d stepped through a basic scanner, but that shouldn’t’ve been an issue, those things only checking for biological contaminants and the like. Stepping into the lift as it arrived, completely empty, she shook her head. “I’m sorry, Master, I didn’t see any sensors.”

He smiled, “That’s because you’re standing in it.”

Looking around at the descending elevator, “The sensors are hidden?”

“The fact that the guard called a lift at all means the controller needs to know who’s coming down is the computer aspect. If they saw no one, or entered no credentials, calling for a lift would set off an alarm. And yes, the sensors here are hidden,” Master Lucian explained, pointing at the decorative plaque with the city’s name. “Fabin is the planet where the Fabritech corporation, galactic purveyor of scanner technology, came from. Before they colonized a word and move their corporate headquarters there,” he added. “And the first stop where we start building your new identity. But for now, you’re my niece, and I’m just an eccentric old hermit who lives out in the woods and you’re taking me into the city to meet my family.”

She turned to look at him in disbelief, as her Master looked many things, but old was not one of them, only to see the man had seemed to age a hundred years, still wearing the same clothing but withered, though with a stubborn yet shaky stance. Closing her eyes, she felt his Force presence pulled tight around him, wrapping his features, the wrinkles seeming to turn smoky as she stared. She couldn’t see through it, but it was only by focusing on it that she could tell anything was different at all.

It was that way that they passed through the second layer of security, the first one topside just being a guard-post. If she hadn’t been paying attention she would’ve missed when, with subtle telekinesis, he input the Padwan’s ‘record’ into the computers while he was talking with the older woman manning the station behind a glasteel barrier. He paid the small fee and they entered Fabrin proper, a prodigious underground cavern in which a sprawling city spread out.

Paying a few credits, they got an airspeeder taxi out to the residential sector. Once it was out of sight, and Master Lucian took them into a building, only to nod to the receptionist and walk to the back without stopping, taking a back door out into an alley, that he straightened up, looked at her, and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I just realized I don’t have any credits. At all,” she observed. She’d studied how to manage intelligence networks, and how to investigate, so she knew the value having credits required, but if she was trying to not be a Jedi she couldn’t go to a bank and withdraw credits from the Temple’s general accounts.

Her Master laughed, “Yes, you do. All Padawans get a stipend for supplies and such in the field. And if you don’t, I’ll make sure you get one myself. Come along.” Leading her through street after street, they did attract some looks, but they were fleeting things, the people going back to what they were doing a moment later, some lingering on her but only for a moment. Focusing without breaking stride with her Master, she tried to feel if he was using some kind of Force power, but if he was, she couldn’t tell.

They eventually ended up in front of a tall building, not out of place on the city street, and he walked inside without breaking stride. Taking the lift to one of the top levels, they stepped out into a richly appointed lobby. “Hello!” the receptionist, a younger woman, though still older than Anaïs, greeted. “Welcome to Sivron, Highwind, and Daagh. Do you have an appointment?”

“Tell Sivron that his favor has come due, and that the one he called ‘Nightwalker’ has need of his services,” Master Lucain cryptically stated. The receptionist looked just as confused as Anaïs was, but moved to do so anyways. A moment later a panic yelped carried down the hallway.

Now very nervous looking, the receptionist returned. “I’m sorry, Mr. Sivron isn’t available right- wait, you can’t-”

“**I’m allowed to go inside**,” the Jedi Master instructed, the woman’s eyes going glassy as she repeated his words, Anaïs following after, as he was obviously allowed to go inside. They walked down the hallway, the door opening in front of them on its own, as Lucian entered a blaster bolt shot out, only to dissipate harmlessly on a piece of curling shadow that formed in mid-air, blowing away like smoke a moment a later.

She wasn’t really sure what was going on, but he was allowed to be here, so she followed her Master, only to find a panicked human with a small blaster pistol cowering behind his desk. “Mr. Sivron, or should I call you ‘Sever’, when last we met I told you that you-”

“I didn’t!” the overweight human protested, wispy white hair whipping back and forth as he frantically shook his head. “I never did and I never will!”

“I know, which is why I did not visit you twelve years ago,” the younger-looking man replied coolly. A sudden understanding dawned in the fat man’s eyes, and she felt through the Force as his fear spiked, before decreasing, confusion taking its place as Master Lucian continued, “But I said you would owe me a favor. I have need of an identity created, and you have the skills, and connections, to do so. I will, of course, pay, but it must be blaster-proof, and above question.”

“You’ll. . . pay? You’re not going to. . .” the older man trailed off, suddenly getting up with a speed that belied his bulk, taking his seat behind his sizeable desk. “Why didn’t you say so!”

The Jedi Master dryly observed, “You shot me before I could.”

“It’s not like that would’ve actually done anything,” the older man blustered, “So, can I assume it is for the young lady with you? Deciding to settle down? Found love at last?” he questioned leering slightly at Anaïs in a way that she would’ve found discomforting if she couldn’t feel the oddest sense of hope coming from the elderly man, and not an ounce of lust.

“Training an apprentice,” her Master replied flatly.

The old man’s genial smile froze for a second, “You mean, to do. . . *what you do*?”

Master Lucian nodded, “That is what the term generally means, yes. Also, please spread word, when you do, that if she is to be harmed, those that did so will not survive. And by that I don’t mean the trigger pullers, I mean the order givers, no matter how vaguely they might have done so. You know, I care not for technicalities.”

As they talked Anaïs wondered what, *exactly*, it was that her Master was known for to get this kind of response. Jedi were supposed to be respected, *yes*, but not feared. *At least, that’s what I’ve been told,* she thought to herself. Directed to a seat across from Mr. Sivron, she answered a dizzying array of questions about herself, at her Master’s instruction, while her Master poured over a datascreen.

The questions started to make sense as, once Anaïs started asking questions herself, the older man was happy to explain the process. Questions such as “On a scale of one to ten, how good a driver are you?” (only for her Master to look up and state “Two” before she could say five), had the man explain, “Then you crashed your father’s airspeeder when you were fifteen, and while he paid for the bacta and surgery to not leave a scar, it explains why you don’t look *exactly* like your picture. That way those who feel the need to look deeper, and there are always those who do, find something and can walk away happy, believing themselves smarter for having found a secret of yours!”

“He’s right,” her Master idly agreed, causing the old man to puff up slightly in pride, the elderly human’s fear having dissipated as he’d worked.

They went at it for several hours, even calling up a Tailor to design her new clothing. She’d noted how surprised Mr. Sivron had been when she’d taken off her Master’s cloak, revealing her initiates tunic. “You’re. . .?” he’d asked, trailing off as he looked at her, then the Jedi Master, who’d looked back at him with an eyebrow raised, as if daring the older man to ask more questions. “Explains why you need this then,” he’d just muttered to himself, then got back to work.

Eventually they were finished, Anaïs dressed in black pants that hugged her legs and hips, and a grey vest with black panels, similar to her master’s robe. Mr. Sivron sent something to Master Lucian’s datascreen, only for the Jedi to look at him, unimpressed. “And the *real* price?”

“Sorry, sorry, old habits,” the old man laughed, paling at the Jedi’s look. “Not *that* old though. No habits of those left. None. None at all.”

Staring at the man who’d just created a false identity for his Padawan, Master Lucian reached inside his robes and tossed him a credit stick, which was quickly plugged into the older man’s terminal. “And our business is done,” Mr. Sivron sighed, “Now, and I mean this in the best way, but *please* go away and never come back.”

“The favor has been repayed, the debt cleared,” the Jedi intoned, speech formal. “Whether or not we ever meet again, however, is entirely up to you. Come, Anaïs, this was only our first stop today.”

<<SWPP>>

“What do you mean ‘stay here?’” Anaïs asked. “It’s only evening here.”

The cycle of lighting here matched the surface above, the general lighting dimming as fainter streetlights were left to illuminate the great underground cavern that held the city at ‘night’. They’d taken another set of confusing twists and turns, only to end up in front of a small hotel, which had already had a single room reserved. A single room with only a single bed, in which they were currently standing.

“And you’ve had a long day,” her Master countered. “The little one reminded me to take it slowly and easily on you, and I am. His words were ‘Remember, Master, that what is routine for you is alien to these younglings. They need time to adjust to your ways, as they are not what the Temple has prepared them for.’ Now, I can see what he meant, with all of this ‘Notable Nine’ and ‘having a single bad thought means you’ve fallen’ Bantha druk, but I *believed* he meant your need to rest, and not deal with too much at a time, *especially* with the state of your Mental Shields, or the lack of them. It is very likely he noticed long before I did.”

She winced, not having liked *that* conversation. The way her instructors had tested her Mental Shields had seemed perfectly serviceable at the time; they sought out her mind with the Force and attempted to probe it for weakness. It was only after nearly an hour of questioning, on their way through the system, that she’d realized the issue.

Her instructors hadn’t expected her to embrace their teachings completely, to still have darker emotions, like Jorrel, to feel annoyance and self-recrimination at their correction and her failure to achieve their high standards. When she didn’t feel those things, believing her teachers to have her best interests at heart, taking their criticisms as truth and striving humbly to improve, she ‘passed’ the test. When those looking for darker emotions found none, they declared her Mental Shields up to task.

Even now she could feel the city around her, the faint presence of tens of thousands of lives in a chaotic mess pressing in on her. Where they were, things were peaceful, and she assumed that’s why her Master had chosen her to stay here, but elsewhere she could feel the bright swirls of hope and compassion, but they were notable in how they stood out of the greys of apathy, with far more streaks of darker feeling running throughout the city, almost as if they were its foundation.

“How many more places are you going?” she tried instead. She *did* feel tired, from what had happened on the ship to the interrogation she’d been through, but she could keep going.

Master Lucian stared at her, and it felt like he was looking through her, before he nodded. “Fine, leave your bag here, but wear the cloak. Follow me, don’t say anything, and try to keep yourself centered.”

She happily changed, hurrying out of the refresher to join her master. Instead of more roads and alleys, though, he took a set of stairs down to what seemed to be the basement of a building, accessible from the outside, except, while there was a door to the basement, the stairs kept on going.

They descended further, and further, well beneath the city, taking a door to another set of stairs, then a passage, then another set of stairs, eventually leading to a large underground passage. The scent of oil, sweat, and unwashed bodies hitting her as she stumbled, trying to keep up. It wasn’t the smell, that made her falter, though, but the emotions that filled the air just as thickly. The dark swirls of negative emotion that ran through the city? They weren’t set, somehow, into its foundation, they were spread out below it.

They moved through these faux streets, more like enlarged maintained tunnels, and attracted far more stares then they had on the surface. *No,* she thought, *I’m attracting more stares.* Their eyes slid off of her Master, but they seemed to stick to her. From the corner of her eye, she saw three large figures start to follow her, only for an invisible ripple of shadowy Force to ripple across her senses and for them to head back to the tunnel entrance they’d stepped out of.

The third time this happened, Master Lucian stopped, sighed, and stepped into an empty alley. She followed him. “Have you received *no* stealth training?” He asked her before she could say anything. “You’re attracting too much attention.

She *had,* she’d studied how to hold herself quite a bit in her studies of spycraft, and the records had been clear. She was to hold herself straight, showing no hint of fear or weakness, moving smoothly, and said so to the older Jedi, who just stared at her, and sighed.

“That’s how you deal with *information sources,*” he stressed, “as a *Jedi*. That kind of calm strength tells them you’re in control, if you do it correctly, and sets the minds of the people you employ at ease. They’re not snitching, then, they’re just confirming something you already know. Did your training also tell you how to sit, and how to arrange the structure of meeting places?”

In point of fact, it *did,* but she paid attention to what he said. “But, we’re not at a meeting place, and I don’t look like a Jedi,” she replied thinking it through. In that case she’d look like. . . she wasn’t really sure. “What am I showing instead?”

“Overconfidence, weakness, and like you don’t belong, so you won’t be missed,” he said flatly, and she tried to view herself that way, and her shoulders dropped a little. Her straight stance, when everyone around here was bent, would show she didn’t belong, but not in the way that *Jedi* didn’t belong. Her showing no fear wasn’t seen as strength, it could show a lack of awareness that one would *never* attribute to a Jedi. Her smooth movements, though. . . “How do I look weak?” she asked.

He looked her up and down. She was a little tall for a girl, and not the most muscular, but she was fit. “You don’t seem to have any weapons, no bulge of a blaster under your cloak, which you can tell when you stand like that. You move more like a dancer than a fighter, though not as bad as some Jedi I’ve seen, but that’s why they always moved in on you with three or four, instead of one or two. Unless you’re *very* good, *or a Jedi,* that’ll be enough to overpower you, and Jedi are rare in the *extreme,* even in the Core.”

“But,” she said, her hand going to her brown belt, her saber hidden away in a pocket. “I’m armed. Only, it doesn’t look like it, does it?” she asked before he could say anything. Her Master shook his head. “Then teach me how to blend in, Master Lucian, so I don’t need your help.”

“You’ll need my help for quite a while,” he observed, though there was no rebuke in his statement. “You were doing this,” he instructed, standing next to her, and copying her stance, tall, straight, and with a haughty expression that wasn’t *entirely* necessary. With long, sweeping, straight steps he moved down the alley and back. “Do this,” From there he dropped his shoulders, leaning forward slightly, and taking smaller steps that were even, but had a little bit of a sway to them with one leg.

As he started to walk back, five dirty looking men, and two equally dirty looking women, stepped into either the alley, the seven of them blocking the way out. The leader, a devorian, sneered. “What do we have here? I thin-”

“**Go home, think about your life, and take the moral actions needed to make things right,**” Her Master commanded, and she started to leave the alley, ready to head back to the ship, when she stopped, wondering what she’d just been doing. “Sorry, not as good as the little one,” the Jedi apologized. “Never got the trick to exemptions. Now, as I walked, you do so. I’ll make sure we aren’t interrupted again.”

She did so, wondering what just happened, but focused on perfecting the step. The leg movement seemed too specific, too intentional to just be a bad leg, which would make her appear weak. It was only on her third try, as he told her to “pretend that side’s slightly heavier, that’s all,” did she understand. While not armed, the slight weight imbalance would make sense if she was carrying a weapon under her robes, which, slightly hunched as she was, she could very well be hiding.

When they exited the alley, which the locals had given a clear berth to, they attracted stares only until they turned a corner. While the looks of others didn’t slide over her like they did her Master, they no longer lingered, just caught for a moment. Moving deeper and deeper down the twisting tunnels, she could hear the faint sounds of music coming from the way they were going.

Up two sets of stairs, they found themselves in an area that, while dingy, mercifully didn’t smell. A large set of double doors were set into the wall, with a line of young people waiting to get in, wearing clothing that looked like a stylish approximation of what those below had been wearing, minus the stains, the wear, and likely costing a hundred times as much.

Skipping the line, Master Lucian headed for the doors, only for one of the two guards, a large human, to step in front of him while the other, a gran, watched him with two eyes, the third watching her. Before the guard could say anything her Master held up a hand and the larger man’s eyes glazed as he stepped aside, the Gran freezing, looking at anything other than the two of them, though his three eyes remained alert and unclouded.

It was hard to tell from the general emotional stink of the place but while Anaïs could tell the human guard had been Mind Tricked, the muted emotions giving him away, the Gran practically stank of fear. Not sure what else to do, she followed her Master through the doors as a few of those waiting complained, but the alien didn’t say a word.

Inside, she was almost hit by a wall of sound, the inside some kind of club, dark with flashing lights, music pounding rhythmically, the air physically thick with fumes, and the Force thick with so many emotions it made her head spin. Feeling a hand on her elbow, she focused on the small blot of shadows that was her Master, who led her to a side table. “My business is further in. Do you want to stay here, and get used to it? I won’t judge you poorly for it, Padawan.”

His voice was kind, understanding, but she focused inwards, centering herself. The air swam with desire, fear, anger, everything that should be the dark side, but also with bits of hope, happiness, friendship, enjoyment, even ecstasy unlike that which she’d ever seen, and she could feel it tugging at her. Some part of her whispered to join the throng on the dance-floor, to give herself to it and be filled by it in turn.

This, in some ways, was like the call of the Dark she’d felt before. Sweet and seductive. But it also wasn’t, also an affirmation of life, and living, and community in a way she’d never thought possible, though. There was darkness here, but more than that, and she closed her eyes, centering itself, focusing only on her presence and the shadowy presence of her Master, blocking the rest out. “No,” she said, more to herself than him. “No, I’m okay. You said I could come with you, so I am.”

Opening her eyes, she could see a glimmer of something like respect in the older man’s eyes, which brought her a happiness completely unlike that found in the masses before her. “Then follow me, and remember, keep yourself centered. This will be much less pleasant than staying here would’ve been.”

With those ominous words, he walked away, heading towards a pair of doors at the back. Two humans, subtly armed with a blaster pistol and vibro-knife each, didn’t move as the shadows reached out from her Master and clouded their minds. She followed him through the doors, and down a hallway. Two more guards stood at the next door, thirty feet away, one already stepping forward and drawing his gun.

Without breaking stride, her Master raised one hand and the large human shot backwards with a cry, breaking through the far doors with a crunch. The second man started to pull out his weapon, and Anaïs moved to pull her saber, but another wave of her Master’s hand picked him up like a doll and threw him through the doorway as well.

Undisturbed, Master Lucian calmly walked through the doorway, an office seen on the other side. A Vibro-ax, humming barely audible over the muted pounding of music behind her, arced in from the side, her Master easily grabbing it by the handle and holding it. “Ah, there you are Alfosco,” he commented cheerfully, yanking the weapon and sending a small but muscular man to the floor.

Anaïse followed her master into a richly appointed office, the two guards groaning as they tried to get up. With a wave of his hand, her Master telekinetically picked them up and pushed them against the wall in a way she was intimately familiar with, before turning his back on them, as if they were no more concern.

“Alfosco,” the Jedi Master repeated, “I am so sorry to have to meet you again. I *thought* I was clear twelve years ago, when I removed your boss and his other lieutenants. I do not care of your venial sins, but some things I *cannot abide.*”

The man, presumably Alfosco, struggled to his feet, only to quickly turn, blaster in hand. Before he could fire. Master Lucian had stepped forward and wrenched the weapon from his hand with a bone-shattering *Crack*. The man howled in pain, fingers broken, before he was thrown backwards, against the wall, just like his guards were, across the room from them.

Seeming to ignore the living wall-hangings, Master Lucian moved to the desk at the back of the room, typing in the computer. “Hmmm, Alfosco, what’s your password?” The man, whose screams had petered off to pained cries, yelped as he was dragged off the wall to hang in front of his own desk. “Alfosco, your password?”

“*E Chu ta!*” the larger man spit in reply, swearing.

The Jedi stood, rolling his eyes, “No need to be *rude*.” With a hand that dripped shadows to her senses, he placed it over the man’s forehead, and the floating man screamed as the Force penetrated his mind.

“Master?” Anaïse asked, shocked at what she was seeing.

Now twitching, Alfosco was pressed back against the wall as Master Lucian typed something into the computer. “Yes, Padawan? I am, as you might be able to tell, a *little* busy right now. Be a dear and watch the door, it appears as if our entrance into that second set of doors without a keycard has triggered an alarm and. . . *You kept the list?”* he asked, looking at Alfosco incredulously. “Why would you keep the list if you weren’t going to. . . oh. Right. So you could think yourself cunning. And here they come, *lightsaber out* please, Padawan.”

Through the doors at the end of the hallway came six heavily armed, and lightly armored, men with blaster rifles. On reflex Anaïs went for where she normally kept her lightsaber clipped, wasting a precious second as she remembered she moved it and flipped open the pouch it sat in, igniting it even as the first bolts sped down towards her.

Falling into the Force, she deflected the bolts away from her and her Master, barely able to keep up against the barrage. Glad to have something she’d actually *practiced for,* she furiously built Force Barriers, allowing her defense to be tighter, but it was too much, the shields taking the hits but being dispersed almost as fast as she could build them. She didn’t know how long she could hold out, as sooner or later-

Something whipped by her head from behind, barely missing her and her dancing saber, and pierced one of the riflemen, catching the second that was standing behind him in the arm as the Vibroaxe buried itself in the far wall.

With only four shooters, she was able to work in enough of Form V’s other variant, Shien, into her defensive use of Form III, Soresu, to send the bolts back at them, killing two and dropping the last pair. Keeping her sword up, her stance wavered as she felt their deaths in the Force, small bits of the blackest darkness spreading out into the sea of energy all around her.

While the anger she’d felt had been burning hot, and the dancefloor was as warm as bare flesh, the deaths were cold things, like the void of space should feel, empty and terrible. Not only that, she felt a death to her side, looking over and realizing that, in her haste, she’d accidentally sent a rogue bolt to one of the pinned guards, catching him in the chest, killing him.

“Oh no,” she whispered, only to feel the shadowy presence of her Master behind her, protective darkness, so unlike that which *she’d* created, wrapping around her.

“It’s okay,” he said, and she turned, realizing he was right behind her. “Every death brings a bit of the dark, just as every birth brings a bit of the light. It is regrettable that we must kill, and never do so for killing’s sake, but it does not make you dark. I very much doubt *any* Jedi out there has been able to go out and help people, bringing peace, safety, and life, without also dealing out some death. Do you see why I asked you if you wanted to stay?”

Without words, she nodded.

“And, with what just happened, do you wish you had?”

That. . . that was a more difficult question. If it was going through the other doors that had brought the guards, they likely would’ve ignored her. She could’ve stayed back, out of things, and her Master could’ve dealt with them. He hadn’t killed anyone, and while whatever he’d done to Alfosco had *seemed* bad, he’d needed something from the man’s terminal, and he *had* asked. Maybe if she’d stayed away everyone here would’ve still been alive?

Yes, that Vibro-ax had been thrown by her Master, and she could feel the person who’d been cut by it slowly dying as well, the one who was pierced having died almost instantly, but if *she* were better, he wouldn’t have needed to. But. . . Master Lucian had allowed her to come, and, if he was right, she was going to have to kill someone eventually. “Are these. . . are these bad people?” she finally asked, remembering her lessons, even if they might’ve been tainted by lies. “Do they hurt the innocent, and bring disharmony to the Force?”

“The second one is a matter of debate,” he stated, “But the first? It’s their stock and trade. You didn’t answer my question, my Padawan. Would you have rather stayed out on the dancefloor?”

She wanted to feel sure of her decision. These people *hurt* innocents, her job as a Jedi was to *protect* innocents. QED. She didn’t *feel* sure, though. But he wasn’t asking if she *felt* sure, he was asking if she’d wanted to stay behind, to let *him* handle all of this while she did nothing to help. Slowly, she shook her head.

He looked at her, deeply, and she felt his presence upon her, studying her, before he smiled, an oddly warm expression completely out of place with their surroundings, and she felt like she’d passed some test she hadn’t known she was taking. “Good. Now, I believe it’s time to have a conversation with Alfosco. My intel was solid, but it rarely hurts to check.”

Turning around, he pulled the man back down, still suspended in the air, but closer to them. “Now, Alfosco. You remember me, you remember my stipulations, you even *wrote them down*, why did you not follow them? You could’ve been strong, could’ve had your little criminal empire, and I wouldn’t have had to come here.”

“I’m not telling you Druk, you piece of kriffing sithspit!” the hanging man snarled.

“Ah,” Master Lucian commented, “I’m sorry, I wasn’t being clear. That wasn’t a request. Luckily for you, I’m not, in fact, *sithspawn*, and as such would not torture you merely for the pleasure of hearing you *scream*. I will still, however, enforce compliance, as you’ve lost that courtesy. So, let’s try this again. Why did you not follow my conditions? ***Tell Me.***”

He seemed to be struggling, before finally yelling “Thirty years!” An answer that made no sense to Anaïs, but caused her Master to sigh.

Shaking his head, the Jedi asked, “So because I only come through here every thirty years or so, you thought, since I’d come by a mere twelve years ago, that you were *safe?* Who did. . . Oh, you’ve been *gossiping,* haven’t you Alfosco? Did you find another that escaped me, and thought you could do the same?”

“She had!” the man crowed, deciding to talk. “She had, and she lives here. Let me go, and I’ll tell you where she is! I’ll even follow your stupid kriffing rules! I saw what you did, you can only get what I know, but I don’t know it! I can contact someone who can! Just let me go an-“

“You’ll give me the location of Madshi Strliv, petty lowen warlord from Gavryn, whose boss I killed, just like I killed yours,” the Jedi interrupted. “She waited a whole two years before doing exactly what I killed her boss over, then got spooked when I stopped nearby, and ran. She lives about seven-thousand feet that way,” he stated, pointing to the right, and slightly down. “I know, Alfosco, she’s my *fifth* stop today. You are my *second.* So, you broke my rules, and thought you’d run before I got back, because if *two* people did so, and were still alive, obviously could too.”

Beyond his fear, Anaïs could make out confusion as well. She wasn’t the only one. “You didn’t know about Jornagrav? You made this decision from a *single* person I hadn’t gotten to yet?” Master Lucian demanded. “Of *course* you did. Return to the Netherworld, Alfosco, and let your darkness disperse. May what you come back as live better than you have this time.”

With that pronouncement, the Jedi Master lifted a hand, wreathed in shadow and pressed it against the floating man’s forehead. Darkness compressed, and the man twitched, once, going slack as he died with barely a ripple in the Force.

Anaïse stood there, not sure what to say, as the pinned guard was pulled off the wall, eyes wide as he reeked of fear. Her Master probed his mind, before repeating, “Return to the Netherworld, Salvcad, and let your darkness disperse. May what you come back as live better than you have this time,” and killing him as well.

Turning, he lifted one of the injured guards, the blaster injury not immediately lethal, but she’d studied enough to know he likely wouldn’t survive if he didn’t get help soon. Once again, her master probed the man’s mind, but instead laid him down, kneeling beside him as he healed the man’s wound, the force coming down and the flesh slowly knitting back together, leaving only a small scar.

The large man blinked, starting to get up, before Master Lucian’s small hand pressed firmly on the man’s wide chest forcing him down like one would a child. “Listen, and listen well. I have no problem with small crimes, but there are some things I cannot abide, as they are unforgivable and hurt all. You shall find a list of them on your boss’s computer. I do not care if it is you who is in charge, or another, but go home, and tomorrow, tell those that remain to not violate those strictures, or I will come again. Also, I did not wait thirty years this time, I may not again. Do you understand me?”

The large man nodded, terrified but attentive.

“Good. I have spared your life, Kellain, you who sought to kill me, and a debt has been established. I may never call upon it, but if I do, you will answer, and you will serve.” Master Lucian smiled, getting up. “Now then, I believe we shall leave this place Padawan, and hopefully never return.”

She holstered her saber and followed him out, numbly, past the cooling corpses, passed the densely-pack dancefloor, the dancers not aware of the slaughter that just happened not even thirty feet away from them, and it was only when she realized they were almost to the surface that she finally asked, “Why?”

“Hmmm?” her Master asked, turning.

“Why, why do that?” she asked, demanded really, pointing back the way they came. “What did that help? What could Alfosco have done to deserve that, or the guard? You just went down there, and you killed them, *I* killed them!” She felt her emotions rising out of control. She was supposed to be a *Jedi*, she was supposed to *save* people, not walk in and *murder* them with abandon!

“Ah,” he said, a little awkwardly. “Right. Follow me,” he stated, turning around, walking back the way they’d come.

“I don’t want to go back!” she protested, only to get a confused glance.

She tried to feel what he was doing in the Force, trying to use the Force Bond that connected Master and Padawan to understand *what had just happened*, but all he was, was mildly confused, and a little embarrassed. He’d just walked in, killed people, not in combat, but when he had them pinned down, and he wasn’t bothered about it at *all!*

“We’re not,” was all he said, walking down with powerful strides. She followed abandoning the stupid crouch-walk he’d taught her. She didn’t see what the point of hiding was when her Master was *apparently* fine with just randomly walking in and *killing* people. She had a sudden, horrible thought.

“When you told those people to ‘make things right’, what did you mean?” she demanded, attracting attention but she *didn’t care*.

He just shrugged, “That’s up to them. If they hadn’t done that much, they’ll try to undo the damage. Apologize to those they hurt or robbed, make restitution. If their souls are tainted, their actions darker, they may turn on each other, or on those who’ve done far worse. Some might even kill themselves, though only the weakest of wills and those with the blackest of actions will do that. It doesn’t really matter, they were going to at best, rob us, at worst, kill me and rape you. Or the other way around. I’m not the best at those things, and, like I said, I was busy.”

She looked around the corridors they were striding down, at the small groups that stayed in shadowed alcoves. Some sheltered themselves in fear, others were like rock-vultures or eskrats, waiting for easy prey. She locked eyes with one, and focused on him, slowing. She could feel his fear of getting caught, his lust for her, his anger at everything around him, his greed that could never be filled, and she stopped, wondering if this was what her Master had seen, wondering if she should kill him. He’d obviously hurt people, he wanted to hurt *her*, wouldn’t it be best if-

A hand on her shoulder stirred her from her thoughts and she tried to turn, but the hand was firm. “Come, Padawan. Clearing vermin does nothing, for there will always be more. Better to impose order, and to let the scum police themselves.”

Shaking, she followed him, trying not to look at those around them. She hadn’t noticed it before, but, while the smell was physically unpleasant, being down here was like wading in an open sewer in the Force, and she *hated* it. “And this is why you need Mental Shields, Padawan. We help those who cannot help themselves, but we must not be a *part* of it, lest we find *ourselves* needing saving, where *no* such help exists.”

Focusing on his presence to the exclusion of all else, she took comfort in the shadows. She rebuked herself for ever thinking himself evil, their curling shades hiding her from the world around her, the warmth of the golden sparks that danced within calming her. On the excursions she’d taken as a youngling, and as an initiate, it had always been to carefully selected areas. To see nature on other planets, or on guided tours of the top few levels of Coruscant. She knew the layers were over five-thousand layers to the planet-wide city, and she’d only seen the top five, and thought she knew the pain of others. She was a *fool.*

“We’re here,” her Master’s words brought her out of her thoughts. “And you are inexperienced my Padawan, not foolish.”

She reddened. With how much she was leaning on him, she must be an open book to him. She didn’t even have the basest of Mental Shields to keep him out, not that, with how strong he was, it would help. They were standing across the way from a set of doors, with a guard at the front, and she wasn’t sure what her Master wanted her to do. Was this another nightclub? No, there was no line of young, wealthy people ready to pretend to be destitute. No, this area was *worse*, stinking and full of those who looked like they hadn’t a good meal, new clothes, or a bath in weeks.

Opening her senses to the Force, she flinched, recoiling bodily, only not falling because her Master caught her. They were deep, at least twelve levels down, and the doorway before her was like a festering wound, injured and rotting as despair, pain, death, and a sick, tainted, pleasure that left her gagging wafted off the area before her.

“Don’t. . .” she stuttered, “Don’t make me go in there,” she begged. She wasn’t ready. She couldn’t. Was *this* what being a Sentinel meant? Going to the worse places and doing horrible things to worse people?

“I won’t” he reassured, directing her to sit. Trusting him, she did so, finding herself perched on a shadowy seat that hung in the air. “But now that I’m here, now that I’ve found it, I need to go inside. Stay here, and calm yourself, my Padawan, though stay alert.”

And with that, he was gone, striding towards the sickness and rot that felt like it would infect her just by being so close to it. Speaking with the guard, the larger man, *why were they always large men,* opened the door and went inside, her Master following. The slight ripple of the guard’s death was almost imperceptible against the sickness in the Force that was before her.

She sat there, trying to stay focused, as her Master’s presence seemed to expand, blocking out the pain, and grief, and fear, and death that surrounded the space before her, until it was indistinguishable from anything else, and she was able to relax.

“Are you a witch?” a small voice asked beside her.

Not jumping, if only because she felt so *tired*, she looked to see a small girl, maybe six years old, staring up at her. She looked Atrisian, a human with dark, almond shaped eyes that looked up at her in awe and wonder. Focusing on the girl, Anaïs felt her open, innocent curiosity, and a little fear. “I’m a Jedi, youngling,” she told the small girl.

“Jedee?” the youngling repeated, looking down as she tried to remember something, before looking back up. “Oh, mommy talked about you once! She said you help people. Can you help mommy? She’s really sick!”

“Where is your mommy?” the Padwan asked, with a sinking feeling as the little girl pointed at the doorway her Master had walked into.

“She said she was gonna get medicine. I think I might be sick too, but mommy needs help more,” the small girl said with a serious nod. “The big man at the door said he could give me a little medicine while mommy was inside, and it made me feel really good, but then I got sicker.”

“What did he give you, what did it look like?” Anaïse questioned, only to sit, face frozen as the little girl described a Spice Crystal, a dangerously addictive variant of the drug common across the galaxy.

Looking at the girl, the Jedi could see the circles under her eyes, and the fact that, while one couldn’t tell for sure under the rough-hewn dress, she seemed dangerously underweight. “I’m learning healing,” the Padawan offered. “Do you want me to try to help you?”

The little girl hesitated, looking back towards the door. “Only if you help my mommy too.” Promising that she, or her teacher, would, and hoping she could keep that promise, Anaïs laid her hand on the little girl’s head, and focused on what little she’d learned.

Healing, her Master had instructed, *needed* emotion. It was why so many Jedi trained in the Temple had trouble with it. When dark-side users healed, they stole the life force from others, greedily gathering what they themselves had lost, the dark side taking a portion for itself. Light-side healing, however, was a giving of oneself for others, a *desire* for them to be healed, to be whole. One did not give of their own life-force, thought that was also possible, for if that was true a Jedi could *never* heal themselves, which was the only form of healing *every* Jedi was able to do, even if it was only a little.

A healing trance, where one fell into a deep sleep and healed themselves at a rapid rate, was the Force doing most of the work, but was wasteful in energy, requiring the subject to sleep to even it out. Healing was the desire to mend, to bring life, and as such was something only a follower of the light could do well. More complicated healing was possible, he’d warned, but required a great deal of knowledge and control to more finely direct the Force which, as a user of the Light, wanted to help.

Sith Alchemy could approximate Force Healing, *making* the dark side of the Force, which wanted to hurt, do *exactly* what one wanted, but was always a tricky proposition, and many a dark adept had died from trying something beyond their capabilities. To heal with the light, one wanted to make another better, and call upon the Force in that spirit of aid.

Anaïs did so, still unfamiliar with the ability, her connection to the light side of the Force with this technique tenuous at best. The girl’s wonderous exclamation of ‘You’re glowing!’ nearly dropped her out of it. Cracking one eye, she saw that, while nowhere near he master, her palm was glowing slightly, the light almost white, but faint, like an old bulb. Closing her eyes fully, she focused on this little girl, who hadn’t had the life Anaïs\ had, who was likely hooked on drugs because some *kriffing sithspawn* was bored.

She felt her connection wane, starting to darken as she almost lost control of the power and took a deep breath, focusing on the child. Nothing else mattered but her, and even if it might take her a hundred times as long as her Master would, she’d help this child. Directing the Force, she let herself be a conduit, but the technique still would not work.

*No,* she thought, *not a conduit.* Conduits were passive, like the Jedi Masters in the Temple claimed to be. *No, I will be a guide.* She wasn’t going to *make* the Force heal this girl, she just would want to, and ask the Force for help. If she failed, and couldn’t use the technique, she’d ask her Master to help, beg him if she needed to. This wasn’t about practicing her Force Healing, it was about helping another person.

Focusing, but not demanding, she felt the Force move through her, slowly, parts lingering on herself, healing *her* body, and while she didn’t want that to happen, wanted to heal the girl instead, the Force didn’t listen, healing them *both*, slowly but surely.

“Hmmm. Not bad.”

Startled, the technique shattered, and she opened her eyes as she saw her Master kneeling in front of her, holding the now-sleeping child. “Master?” she asked, feeling like she was about to fall asleep herself. Looking outward, she flinched. Her Master’s presence now no-longer covered the area in front of her, but it seemed, less. Still like a wound, but no longer festering. *There might be scarring*, her medical training said, her exhausted mind making silly comparisons, *but it will heal.*

“This girl, her mother,” she said, before Master Lucian could respond. “She’s in there.”

Looking over the child, the Jedi shook his head. “Her body is, but her soul joined the Force hours ago, if not days.”

“. . . And the others in there?” Anaïs asked fearful to hear the response.

The man shrugged, “Those who were lost, but good, I restored. Those who were stained, I cleansed. Those who were too far gone, I gave mercy to. It is not narcotics that I oppose, Padawan, it is places like that.”

“How many are there?” she asked. She felt like she was falling asleep just sitting here, but if she could help him with the two or three others that surely-

“Dozens upon dozens,” he replied, “And it would take us *months* of work to clear them all, assuming we were allowed to work in peace. No, by the time I’m done, others will do the work for us, and we shall have left, hopefully not to return while you are still my Padawan.”

Feeling her stomach drop, she gazed back on what had been a rotting sore in the Force, then down to the sleeping girl in her Master’s arms. “What are you going to do with her?”

“What *should* I do with her?” he asked in turn. “Her mother is dead, and Suzu here does not know who her father is. She has no family.”

“We can’t just leave her here,” Anaïse protested. “Maybe we could take her with us?”

Shaking his head, her Master argued, “In point of fact we *could* just leave her here. If we had not arrived, it’s what would’ve happened to her anyways. Do you think taking a youngling like this with us, *knowing* where we are likely to go, is a good idea.”

Her Master wasn’t wrong, but he wasn’t *right* either, “We could take her to the Temple-”

“While she is still young enough, *barely*,” he interrupted, “she is not a force sensitive. They would have no place for her there.”

“Then somewhere else,” Anaïse argued. “We could take her to an orphanage.”

Master Lucian nodded, “We could, but the better ones require payment, and the lesser ones, they would be little better than leaving her out here. You are given a stipend, Padawan, would you spend it on this girl who you have just met. A girl whose name you did not even know? Healing her took but a moment, but this will be a stone around your neck for the next decade. One or two, one can bear easily, even wear with pride as a pendant, but will you stop, or will you keep going? Your stipend only goes so far, Padawan, what will you do when that runs out? What will you do when the weight grows so great you can no longer stand?”

“I’ll figure something out!” she declared. Why was he arguing her with this? With what she’d seen today, with all the horribleness, she just wanted to save this one girl. Was that too much to ask. “I don’t care what it takes, she needs help, and I’ll give it.”

“Be careful of that charity,” her Master warned, “For it can very easily turn to desperation, and fear, and cloud one’s judgement. More than one Jedi has fallen, doing ‘whatever it takes’ to save one, sometimes even despite the wishes of the one they are saving. It is a fine line between saving a life because it is right, or saving a life for personal reasons, even if it hurts others who do not deserve it. That said, do not worry Padawan, I shall cover this young one’s care.”

“But, you said,” Anaïse trailed off, looking up at her Master as he stood, and she still sat, exhausted and confused, just feeling *empty*.

“I laid out the options, and explained them. You have a lot of work ahead of you, Padawan, but that is *why* you are a Padawan.”

Feeling even more numb than after the slaughter, she followed her Master up through the sub-levels, coming out on the surface. They took an air-car to an orphanage, and were met by a harassed looking older woman. A conversation was had, notes written, Anaïs signing her name when prompted, and a small bag of credit-chips exchanged.

In a blur Anaïs was back in her room, where she mechanically undressed and got into bed, not registering anything else. “You’re leaving?” she asked as her Master paused at the door.

“I said I had many more stops, youngling,” Master Lucian reminded her, though she wasn’t sure if it was the tiredness made her see his fond smile, or the light seemingly glimmering in his eyes. “One day, you may even join me. For now, sleep, rest, and learn. Today was the first of your training. You did quite well, despite what you may think, and we shall leave this planet when you wake.”

The door closed behind him, the lock turning, leaving her in the darkened room, and her thoughts. The violence, the darkness, it all washed over her, but in the middle of it all, was the face of the young girl she’d managed to save.