**Chapter Twenty-six**

Melea Vondarr paled, eyes wide at the sudden appearance of Master Lucian, calmly seated in the captain’s seat. “*You. How?*” she questioned, as Anaïs felt herself relax fully, finally *safe*.

“With the Force, many things are possible,” the small, ancient man smiled, looking over to the display and putting in a flight plan, one that would take them away from the light traffic in the system and head to a position just to the side of the hyperspace point. Their jump input, if she read it right, would set them running parallel to the real hyperspace route. Normally such a thing would be incredibly risky, but Anaïs had gotten used to her master doing so, to the point she didn’t even feel worried anymore. “So, tell me *young* lady,” the man prompted the information broker, tone cool, and speech far more formal than Anaïs had gotten used to during their training, “just what exactly you think you were doing?”

“I, *what?*” the old woman sputtered, trying to wrap offense around her as a shield, to allow her to look down on the Jedi, just as she’d looked down on Anaïs, “Who do you think you are, to question me?”

The Jedi turned away from the elderly woman to give a look of wry amusement to Anaïs, before his expression turned cold once more. “I believe, that I am a Jedi. I believe, that I and my apprentice are the ones that ensured that you and your grandson did not suffer certain death. And, I believe, that I am the one who now holds your life in my hands.” His gaze shifted slightly, “And if you try to gain access to my ship’s systems again, boy, I’ll crush your rig, and possibly your hands.”

“*Yes sir!”* Crix said, quickly turning off the modular datapad he’d slipped out of his pockets, disassembling it rapidly and storing it.

“At least one of you realizes the gravity of the situation. Amusingly, it isn’t the person in danger,” the Jedi Master drawled, standing. “Come with me. If we’re going to have this conversation, we might as well do it away from a place where someone might do something. . . *rash.*”

Wan, and with a stiffness to her movements that she hadn’t had a moment ago, Mrs. Vondarr followed him out the door, Crix and Anais bringing up the rear. “*He wouldn’t really crush my hands, would he?*” the young man whispered, sweating.

“No,” the padawan started to reassure, before her master’s lessons about *not making promises she couldn’t keep*, one of *dozens* he’d tried to teach her on Uphrades, made itself known. “Okay, *probably not,*” she corrected, and could practically feel the boy’s spike of fear. “If you don’t try to fight him, and you haven’t done anything *really* bad, you’ll be fine,” she stated with authority, though at her declaration she felt a faint swell of fear from the woman in front of her. “And if he does crush them, he’d probably just make me heal them as training,” she sighed. “Though if I didn’t do it right, he’d do it correctly instead.”

“*Oh. . . okay,*” Crix muttered, and, though he still was worried, she could practically feel the relief her words brought him despite her poor job at trying to calm him down. “I wasn’t trying to hack the ship, I just wanted to tap the collection program I put on the holonet to look for trouble.”

“Then you should’ve asked,” Master Lucian, leading them into the meditation room, called back, having heard the boy’s quiet statements, and causing Crix to stiffen. “I’m not a slicer myself, but I know you *don’t* need to access the ship’s main data-core for that.” The man waved into the air, and added, “Use that connection point.”

The young man hesitated, looking to Anaïs, who nodded, her Master not the type to set people up that way. Pulling out a small datapad, he started to work on it, even as they entered the mostly empty room, cushions moving on their own to form four seats, two apart from each other, and two together off to the side. The Padawan headed to the paired seats, Crix following, nose already down ino the data, and they sat, while the older two faced off against each other.

“Alright, you wanted to talk. So, talk,” Melea Vondarr declared with a challenging air, having regained her composure.

In response, Master Lucian stared at her for a long moment.

“*Well?*” she demanded, almost glaring at the younger-*looking* man.

After a pause, the Jedi asked, “What were you hoping to accomplish, young one? While I was keeping attention on myself, I *did* have moments to conduct my own interrogation. You were a major mover in the resistance on Noonar, but your actions seemed. . . ill-informed.”

“Ill-informed?” the information broker repeated, offended. “We were trying to stop a brutal regime from taking power!”

However, instead of disagreeing, the Master Jedi nodded. “Yes, but that’s an idea, a philosophical goal. And one you very obviously failed at. What were you trying to *do*. In *real terms*. What were you *physically* trying to achieve?” he clarified.

“We were trying to remove the Baron from power, *obviously*!” Melea practically spat. “What do you *think* we were trying to do, *support him?*”

Again, the Jedi nodded. “That is what you appeared to be doing, by concentrating the resistance into easily attacked cells, while holding back the more ambitious of your members. And, again, I have to ask *how* you were trying to do that?”

Mrs. Vondarr scowled, obviously not used to being treated that way, in some ways reminding Anaïs of Master Halrol, and like the Jedi Master she was losing the seemingly unflappable superiority she’d displayed to Anaïs at a small handful of Master Lucian’s words. “We were trying to do things the *right* way, by getting undeniable proof to the senate of his crimes they’d be forced to act and remove him from power! And, no thanks to you, we *will!* My comrades will have the information they need, now, and our case against him will be so great that the Senate will *have* to act! The people of the Republic will demand no less! This time next month, the Baron will be where he deserves, *behind bars*!”

The centuries old Jedi Master looked at her before he started to chuckle, descending into full bellied, hard edged laughter. The old woman scowled hatefully, feelings so deep that Anaïs felt the **dark** ripples clearly, while from her master came a twist of his presence in the Force that reminded Anaïs of when the padawan quoted the Temple without truly considering what she was saying.

“Um, Grandma?” Crix said, looking up from his datapad. “He’s dead.”

The woman’s head snapped over, as, scowling, she demanded, “*Who?*”

The boy beside Anaïs cringed, but still answered, “The Baron. Ana’s Master killed him.”

Mrs. Vondarr looked back at the Jedi, rage burning in her stare. “What did you *do!?* Now his second in command will take over-“

“He’s dead too,” Crix interrupted, prompting laughter from Lucian, and Melea’s furious glare. “*Sorry.*”

“Don’t apologize for telling the truth, young man,” the Jedi informed him, as he continued to regard the information broker. “Did you think me that foolish, youngling? Or did you believe that you, and *only* you, could have solved that problem?”

“*It. Would have. Worked,*” the old woman bit out, and the good cheer on Lucian’s face evaporated.

“In point of fact, no, *it wouldn’t,*” Master Lucian replied, with equal force. “You started small Melea, or, as I met you, the slicer known as *Cut-Queen*. When I sorted out the underworld of Noonar half a century ago, you were nothing but a two-bit datapad jockey, lesser in skill than even your grandson. I gave you a taste of power, and a task. A task that you *failed* at, I might note.”

The woman, who had flinched at her old moniker, glared at him, but didn’t say a word as he continued, with a sigh, “But I had hoped you would grow into your position, and now see that you only did a lazy, half-hearted job of it. Maybe success made you sentimental, and with the power you gained you allowed yourself the kind of illusions you *promised* me you would not fall prey to,” he declared, the darkness of his presence spreading, the shadows in the room deepening. “I remember well: ‘I’ll stop this from happening again. I’ll make sure there isn’t someone like Trigger, or Destron again.’ What would the friends you’ve lost say to what you’ve become, CQ? Sitting back and hoping for someone *else* to save you, instead of doing it yourself?”

“It’s their *job!* It’s why they *exist!”* the old woman shot back.

“*They do not care!”* Lucian returned with equal fervor. “You started *small*, and I *told you to focus on your world!* I did so, because *that* you could understand, *that* you could handle. It takes *time* and *training* and *experience* to understand the scale of the system in which we live, so divorced is it from anything easily observable, but you thought your tiny world *important*, and tried to bend the greater *galaxy* to your will, because you believed yourself *just*. Do you think you are the only world with problems? Do you think you are the only world that is being oppressed? Do you have any idea how truly *large* the Republic is?”

But the woman would not be deterred. “And they are big enough to do what is right!”

“Padawan, how many planets are there in the Republic?” The Jedi asked, not breaking his gaze with the information broker.

Startled, Anaïs quickly replied, “One point four million, though a hundred thousand or so of those aren’t full members.”

Lucian nodded, “Yet there are only just over a thousand seats in the senate. But let’s suppose they are being fair, and looking out for planets that aren’t represented fully. Let us suppose that a mere five percent of worlds in our government have issues that might, *might* require Republic intervention, such that they would need to have their evidence of such reviewed. That is only *seventy* *thousand*. That would mean, if a mere ten minutes were given to each, a paltry sum of time to decide such things, it would take almost *five hundred days* to address them all, assuming the senators did *nothing* but listen to them all day, forgoing sleep, food, or any break at all. If you consider the Senate meets a *mere* nine hours a day, to handle all of the issues out there at ten minutes per world, it would take them *three and a half years* to hear them all. And that’s assuming that no *other* issues come up, and then that is with them doing *nothing but listen to calls for aid.* And you think the Senate itself would hear your plea? That it wouldn’t be thrown to a sub-committee that would spend five *seconds,* see that you are an Outer-Rim territory, and *ignore you?* Do you understand just how incredibly *small* you are?” he asked scornfully.

“We pay our taxes so that-” Melea tried to argue, interrupted as a ripple of *power* came from the Jedi.

“You pay *tribute*, *girl*. This is not the Core, or even the Colonies. They may call it by a different name, but that *is* what it *is,*” the Jedi Master sneered. “That is why I told you, *I told you,* that you could only rely on yourself. That you *may* receive help, but you were to never, *never,* depend on it. But you received help from my brothers and sisters over the last few decades, who traveled the major trade routes to suss out trouble, and came to thought you were *owed* it.”

The old woman sneered right back, “Brothers and sisters? They didn’t even *know who you were!* I asked, and do you know how they reacted to your ‘code’? They were *repulsed* by it, and by *you!*”

Anaïs blinked, surprised at the statement, the woman’s smug certainty hiding pain and anger of uncomfortable truths but also showing that she at least believed what she said. However, the padawan also was surprised by the fact that the woman hadn’t addressed her master’s accusation, only attacking his character instead.

There was a flash of sadness across her master’s face, and an answering smirk on the information broker’s, before the man sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I talk of the problems of scale, and you try to throw how *individuals* in an organization of *thousands* react to my practices, and individuals of lesser experience and power at that. So, what, because a few Jedi disagreed with the code you *gave your word* *you would follow*, you thought yourself no longer bound?”

Mrs. Vondarr froze.

“Oh, did you think I wouldn’t know?” the man asked mildly. “A code that *repelled* the Jedi in its looseness, in what it permitted, by your own admission, and you couldn’t even follow it. Pray tell, ‘respected elder’, what does that say about *you?*”

In the ringing silence, Anaïs considered that revelation, and wondered which crime the information broker had committed. Or, from the way her Master had said it, which crime*s*, *plural*.

“He broke your rules first!” the old woman declared, probably referring to the Baron, though it sounded almost childish.

“I fail to remember the part that said the code had to be followed, ‘unless the other side didn’t’,” The Master Jedi commented, eyes hard. “It was for your defense as much as theirs, or do you honestly believe the Baron would’ve started his purges if you hadn’t *killed his infant children.*”

“They weren’t supposed to die!” Mrs. Vondarr argued. “Once we had them we could have forced him to-”

“To *what?* To give up? To bow to your wishes? And how long would you have held them, to prevent him from going back on his word the second they were safe?” Lucian demanded. “In one breath, you tell me how you couldn’t fight because you were following proper Republic channels, and in practically the next you defend crimes that would have that very same Republic *execute you*. Only if *I* hadn’t mentioned it, you just would’ve pretended yourself without sin. *Wouldn’t you?*”

The woman scowled, “With what *you’ve done*, you’re in *no* position to judge me!” she declared, sitting back as if she had somehow won. “You talk as if you haven’t done *worse* than I have, but my trade is information, ‘Jedi’. What is *anything* that I’ve done, compared to what *you* did to Ka-”

***DARKNESS*** flooded the space causing the woman to choke, the air toxic, as shadows leapt forward with razor edged teeth, ready to rip and tear. Around Anaïs they were calm, eddies of shadows standing ready to defend instead of rend, and she quickly reached out, both physically and in the Force, wrapping an arm and her Presence around a terrified Crix.

And then, in the space between moments, it was gone, as if it had never existed, the shadows innocuous, the air clean, only a slight reverberation in the Force the only hint that anything had happened at all, only for a different presence to fill the space, not a storm, but something resolute, and invincible.

“*If you know that name, you know it was my failure, quite possibly my greatest,”* the Jedi spoke, eyes supernaturally shadowed, voice reverberating with the Force, not to trick the mind, only ringing with Truth. “*And it is because of that, and things like it, that gives me the right to judge you, Melea Vondarr, failed, disgraced, and fallen guardian. Every promise you made to me you have broken, every duty you have abandoned, all in the pursuit of foolish ideals and power, over those that would fight and die to protect the innocent. I will not give you the death you crave, standing tall at the apex of your so-called victory. No, I am not that merciful.”*

“What are you going to do?” Crix croaked, shaking as Anaïs released him.

The Master Jedi turned his gaze towards the boy, who shivered, but tried to meet it, quaking in his seat. For a moment, Anaïs could see the young man, not as she had seen him, but as her *Master* saw him. Wounded, and scarred, but not broken in spirit. Naïve, but not stupid. With the potential for great good, or great evil if pressed the right or wrong ways. Weak in the Force, but with a spark of something *else* entirely, though it was little more than a dying ember. More than that, there was something deeper, points of possibility, almost like she’d seen on her run into the base, but infinitely subtler, and infinitely more complex, tied into every aspect of what made Crix, *Crix.*

And, a shadowed tendril of force, shot through with gold, that reached and out and pressed *just so.*

“I am going to pass judgement, for it is not from moral superiority that such a capability comes, but from the strength to enforce it. There is no quality of ‘good’ or ‘evil’ inherent in a person, only power, or the lack of, and how one chooses to use it. She has mis-used hers, in the pursuit of good, so I will give her one last task, and reward her accordingly,” the Jedi stated, looking back to the old woman, who was still breathing in ragged gasps.

*“Melea Vondarr, your time as a warden of your people is* ***over.*** *Within six months, you will retire, having given over the reins of whatever power you’ve gained, and whatever networks you have built, along with a warning to follow the code, and what will happen if they do not. You may advise them, but only for an additional six months, after which you will divorce yourself from it completely. You shall spend you last years how you wish, but they will* ***not*** *be in the pursuit of power. Spend it with your family, try your hand at an art or craft, relax, I do not care, but you have proven yourself unworthy of power, and will not take it again,”* The Jedi pronounced.

The woman coughed, biting out, “And if I don’t? What then?”

“*Then, in a little over a year’s time, I will kill you,”* he stated, not a threat, only a statement of fact.

Letting out a long breath, the *solid* presence retreated, and he sighed. “I gave you a second chance. By your own agreement, I should kill you for what you have done, *Cut-Queen*. I so rarely am in a position to be merciful, please, allow me to be this time. Unless you are so wrapped up in your pride that you care *nothing* for your people, for your *family*,” he said, waving towards Crix. “Be there for them, and don’t vanish without a trace, as you will if I am forced to return you to the Force. You have until we arrive at Ithor about this time tomorrow to make your decision. Padawan, show her to the first guest room, where she will stay until dinner, then return. We need to have a word with Crix. A much nicer one, young man, don’t worry, but her presence here will do more harm than help.”

Anaïs nodded, and stood, motioning for Mrs. Vondarr to follow. The older woman stood, but glared at the ancient man. “Anything you have to say to him, you can say in front of me!” she spat.

“And this is why you can’t handle power, Cut-Queen,” Lucian sighed. “For you grasp for it even when it does you no good.” This time when he spoke, it *was* with the pressure of a Mind Trick. “Follow the young woman back to your room, think about my offer honestly, and wait to be called.”

The Information Broker’s face went blank, and she turned, almost mechanically, walking towards Anaïs, who shivered at the casual display of power, so far beyond her own capabilities. Still, she had her task, and showed the woman to the first guest room, whose door automatically locked if you weren’t keyed into the ship’s systems. Leaving the woman there, the padawan returned, hesitating, before sitting next to Crix in a small show of support.

“What do you want with me, um, sir?” the boy asked, the Jedi obviously having waited until she’d returned.

In return, Master Lucian sighed. “Kid,” he stated, dropping the formality, the image of the unimpeachable, unapproachable Jedi shattering and just leaving a tired man, “I’m pissed at your grandma for breaking her word, ignoring her duties, and using what help I gave her to make things *worse* while claiming to make things better. From what I can tell, you *actually* tried to help. So, I’m offering you a job.”

Crix stared, unsure what to make of the suddenly un-Jedi like Jedi. “Like you offered Grandma Melea?” the boy finally asked, and the man shook his head. “Then what?”

“You’re skilled, but I know CQ’s type. I’d hoped she would’ve turned out better, but now? You saw her humbled, kid, and she’s not going to forgive you for that. Also, I’d say there’s a. . . seventy percent chance I’m going to have to kill her, purge her organization, and dismantle a good bit of it in a year’s time.”

“But, but then, if she’s probably going to do that, why let her live?” the young man asked, unnerved by her Master’s suddenly changed tone, quickly adding, “Not that I *want* you to kill her, just. . .” he trailed off. To be fair to the young man, it was a question Anaïs had as well, and she looked at the old man inquisitively.

The Master Jedi shrugged. “Because I might be wrong. Because there’s a thirty percent chance she’ll *do the right thing*, instead of what she *tells* herself is right to appease her own ego, and the network she’s built can be turned to *help* people. That’s also why she can only advise until this time next year, so she doesn’t try to run it from the rear, when she has time to convince herself that it could never work without her.”

Crix winced. “You’ll. . . you’ll probably have to. . .”

“I know, young man,” Lucian nodded, sadly, but understandingly. “But she deserves that chance. *You*, though, you could help elsewhere. Three organizations could use your help, actually. One is safe, and deals with financial problems. One is somewhat dangerous, and deals with intelligence gathering on potential trouble spots. One is very dangerous, and would be a bit like what you did today, though only once every month or so, but their work is always important. If you had more talent in the Force, there’s a fourth place you could go, but while you have both talent and potential, Crix, Force Sensitivity is not one of your gifts. Like your grandmother, you have until we arrive on Ithor to decide, or you could choose none, and go back to the life you’ve lived up until now. As with her, I offer choices, though, given how unstained your hands are, they’re much *nicer* choices. Anaïs, if you could show him to the second guest quarters?”

The Padawan nodded, showing the young man to his quarters. For once he was silent, deep in thought. It was only when they got to the door, this one without the auto-locking feature, that he spoke. “Ana, which one do think I should do? I liked helping people, but. . . today was *scary.*”

“One, my name isn’t Ana, it’s Anaïs,” she noted, a little coldly, though at his apologetic wince, she warmed a little. “It sounds like you want the spy job. But, you can think about it, and maybe you can get the contact details of the others, if it doesn’t work out for you.”

He blinked, smiling at her. “Thanks. Yeah. I think I’ll do this. And, thanks for helping me. I. . it wasn’t until your Master came down, and then started to. . . yeah, I could’ve died. I could’ve died a *lot* today. And. And you stopped me from. . . *thanks*,” he stressed, heartfelt, and despite his stumbling words she understood what he meant, *Gratitude* singing brightly in the Force from him, his weak presence making the sensation a faint whisper, but the purity of the emotion making itself known regardless.

“It’s what Jedi do,” she smiled back, shrugging. “But you’re welcome, and you helped save me too. Master Lucian isn’t offering because he’s nice, he’s doing it because he thinks you could help other people, kind of like we do.”

Her words had a bolstering affect on the young man, who hesitated, before taking an awkward, almost lunging step forward, hugging her, before stepping back just as quickly, face bright red, and closing the door with a *swoosh*.

*. . . um, okay?* Anaïs thought, a little nonplussed, but still returning back to her master, feeling him waiting through their bond. She. . . wasn’t really sure what to do with that. Did she have to do anything with that? She knew the *Temple* would say to ignore it, attachments bad, yada yada, but she’d never asked Master *Lucian* about it, and. . . she kind of didn’t want to.

*Yep, ignoring it,* she decided, re-entering the meditation room, the other seats pushed away, only the one opposite her master there, though it was the same cushion she’d sat on before instead of the one Mrs. Vondarr had used.

She sat, not sure what to say, and Master Lucian let out an almost explosive sigh. “Well, that was a shab-show,” he swore, getting her attention, as while he spoke plainly, she didn’t remember him swearing.

“Master?” she asked, unsure.

The man just shook his head. “When the Force calls you, *really* calls you, nine out of ten times it’s throwing you into something *bad*, but something that only *you* can really fix. It’s not nice, it’s not peaceful, but it’s what’s needed. Speaking of which,” he looked up, locking eyes with her. “Padawan Anaïs, today you made me proud.”

*What?* “I, um, the Temple says pride is unbefitting of a Jedi,” she threw out in a bid for time to settle suddenly chaotic thoughts.

Sure enough her master snorted. “Then the entire Temple is unbefitting of the Order,” he shot back. “Having pride isn’t bad, being *controlled* by pride is bad, but you already knew that, didn’t you.”

“I, *yes,*” she admitted. “It’s just, I failed!” she objected. At this, her master raised a single brow. “I was caught, trying to get in. Well, not caught, but I was *about* to be!”

“And the reason you weren’t?” Lucian prodded.

She waved in the direction of the guest quarters. “Crix set off an alarm, which opened up a safe channel and let me escape.”

“Safe channel. . . *ahh,* figured out *that* have you?” he smiled, shaking his head. “Of course you did. And, what makes you think you failed, if you succeeded in your task? And you *did* succeed, Padawan, more than I expected. Not because I doubted your abilities,” he added, as she felt hurt at her Master’s lack of faith, “but because I had *no* idea the difficulty of your task. And, with what you did, that was a *very* difficult task indeed, more worthy of a practiced padawan, or Knight by the *current* ‘standards’, instead of someone less than a year into their apprenticeship.”

That. . . helped. “But,” she started to say, and hesitated, looking down, already starting to feel out the edge of the problems. “*You* don’t need extra help. But, you do, don’t you. You just set them up, so they work without us needing to meet them. But there was the man on Fabrin. You went *directly* to him for what you needed for me. The *Temple* says a Jedi should accept the help of others, but never depend on it. But. . . you’re not doing either. You don’t *depend* on it, but you don’t just accept it, you seek it out, but could work without it. You just. . . wouldn’t be able to do as much, would you?” she asked, looking up, to see her Master’s easy grin.

“*Exactly*,” he smiled. “Some of the most stagnant of our Order, which is a sizable percentage, believes that ‘when the Force, your ally is, need more assistance, you do not’,” he quipped. “The Force *is* a great help, but if you have allies, what you can do *grows*. However, one Jedi can do what a thousand Force-blind soldiers cannot, because the Force *is* a tremendous ‘ally’, though ‘ability’ would be closer to the truth.”

“Because the Will of the Force is just your own desires reflected back, and guidance it gives you is just the way to accomplish them?” Anaïs questioned, remembering the lesson, months ago, on their way to Uphrades.

“Got it in one,” the Master Jedi nodded. “Today, you trusted in the Force, you listened to it, followed its directions, and accomplished what you set out to do, didn’t you?”

She frowned, starting to argue, “It took me a while to hear it-”

“*Padawan,*” her master noted, a reminder of her skill level, not a rebuke.

“Alright, yes, I *did* listen to it. And it led me to Crix. And he led me a way to get in. But. . . without your help, I would’ve had to leave Mrs. Vondarr to die,” she pointed out.

Lucian regarded her, “But you would have, if I couldn’t’ve come?” She thought about it, before nodding, once, solemnly. “Then you listened to the Force, and it did not lead you astray. You set your priorities, and the Force guided you to fulfill them. That, at its core, is what being a Jedi is about. Wanting to help others, and getting out of your own way enough to follow the Force to do so.”

“If that’s true. . . the failure she mentioned. The one that you. . . *reacted* to. What happened then?” Anaïs asked, hesitantly.

The shadows stirred slightly, but there was no other indication other than the shift in her Master’s presence, *Sadness, Regret, Loss,* and *Grief* swirling among him tightly.

However, as he promised, Master Lucian did not lie to her, did not tell her it was nothing, but picked his words carefully. “That is what happens when you don’t understand the Force. When you think it has a Will of its own you must suborn your own to, so you do not take care of your feelings, other than suppressing so. That is what happens when the distinction between ‘*I must* ***stop******him***’ and ‘*I must* ***save******them***’ is a screaming gulf of. . .” he trailed off. “I believed teachings that were flawed, and it cost me *everything.”*

The old man, for a moment, truly looked his age, though his skin still held the smooth texture of youth, his eyes, not while supernaturally shaded as they were before, looked *ancient.* “In part, that was the fault of my own Master, who fell to the **Dark**, and of the others to whom I turned for advice that did not correct me. In part, that was my own, for not questioning, only believing, as was Temple doctrine. In part, that was the fault of the Sith who I *stopped*, *damn the cost*. Anaïs, *that* is why I am so insistent you *question*, you *understand*, you *pay attention*, while trying to share my centuries of experience, and the ‘unerring’ teachings of the *Temple* can rot in their stagnated arrogance for all I care.”

 He scowled, the merest whisper of ***hate*** in his presence, but it vanished in an instant. “However, I am well aware that I might be wrong. That, despite what I have learned, I’m just as mistaken as I was before that day. But all I can do is keep going forward, keep trying, keep trusting in the Force, knowing that it doesn’t have a Will to put faith into, and knowing that, while I might not *mean* for what happens to occur, it is still my *responsibility* for making it happen in the first place.”

He laughed, a little bitterly, though there was a note of humor in it. “The Force, it is a gift both great and terrible, like giving a child command of an army. They could do great things with it. They could do terrible things. They could do things they never meant to. But, at the end of the day, it is *them* that has accomplished those things, for good or ill, and they need to accept that.” He sighed, “And something no thinking being is naturally good at is taking ownership of their mistakes.”

Anaïs sat, completely still, unsure of what to say. Did she agree? She *had* asked, but as usual, wasn’t prepared for the answer she received. “So, what mistakes should I take responsibility for?” she finally asked.

“As far as I can tell, there aren’t any,” her master offered, to her complete disbelief. “I’m sure there *are* things you could’ve done better, and you know what they are, but in the larger scale of events, you succeeded completely. I’m sure it was messy, and scary, and felt like you were inches away from failure, but all that means is that the Force pushed you right to the *edge* of your skills, and you rose to the challenge. For now? You see what skills that need to be worked on, so next time you don’t need to kill anyone in cold blood.”

She felt her heart skip a beat at that off-handed statement. “I, you know about. . .”

Her master nodded, but his gaze was sad, not judging. “It clings to you, and will continue to do so for the next few days, but it will fade, and your meditations will cleanse it from you. Your mental shields need work, and there are techniques to remove the taint faster, but over-reliance can cause. . . catastrophic failures when you face *true* Darkness. But you did not call upon the **Dark**, Anaïs, of that I can tell, and in doing so you were able to succeed. Remember, Padawan, while the **Dark** can give you a moment of power, it destroys *any* ability to navigate the future, the Sith version of the same technique being *very* different, and the two completely incompatible. It makes hunting fallen Jedi much easier, robbed as they are of the ability to move before they even detect your presence, but that is all the more reason to avoid falling oneself.”

“Are we going to. . . hunt fallen Jedi?” she asked. Dealing with opponents who couldn’t sense the Force was bad enough, but to-

*“No,*” her Master stated vehemently. “No, Anaïs, you are *not* ready, as it would not be a Padawan you pursued, but a Knight, or greater, and I have *no* desire for your death, for the Force to guide us in that direction.” The young-looking man smiled fondly at her. “Go, rest, you’ve done well, and come far, Anaïs Vand-Ryssa, but your journey has just begun. Take this victory, and use it to grow every greater, for, as your skills rise, so will the challenges, and the good you can do in this galaxy.”

Walking back to her room, she wanted to feel happy, wanted to feel proud, but all she could think of were the people she’d killed. They *were* bad people, absolutely, and *all* of her training was clear that sometimes you had to kill bad people, but her success, for all her Master had praised her, felt hollow. *Is this what’s it’s like to be a Jedi?* she wondered. If Lucian was going to kill the Baron, and might kill Mrs. Vondarr, what was the point of doing *any* of this?

Unbidden, a face rose up out of memory. Small, dirty, tired, and hopeful. The girl she’d healed on Fabrin, and who Master Lucian had arranged to take care of. And of Crix, who’d walked into the jaws of death over and over, pulled out at the very last minute by her fumbling efforts.

*That’s it, isn’t it?* Anaïs thought, thinking of her master’s words. *The galaxy is huge, and it takes effort and experience to think that large. And I have neither. But without me, both of them would’ve died, and know they can live, and help others, even if it’s not right now.*

She knew Jedi weren’t supposed to have attachments, but these *weren’t* attachments these were. . . accomplishments. Something she could point to and go *I did this.* The Temple would disagree, and say she should help just to help but. . . what did that even *mean?*

*No,* Anaïs thought, *I’ve done well. I’ve gotten stronger. And, as Master Lucian says, this is just the beginning.*