

## The Danger Room

06.01.3941 BBY

“Relax.”

Zzzzip! A blaster bolt fired past. Zev could feel the searing heat on the singed hairs on his forearm.

“Feel the remote.”

Zzzzip! Another nearly got him. His pant leg warmed on the right side above his knee as the beam of light left a smoldering, black hole in his pant leg.

“Now!”

The blue energy blade roared from Zev’s lightsaber hilt. He wheeled it in his hand and struck the remote, cleaving it neatly in half. The test was over. Zev let a smile creep over his handsome face. His olive green Jedi robes fit loosely around his shoulders, allowing for freedom of movement and concealing the dull gray metal and bulky joints of his prosthetic left arm.

“Good,” said the calm voice from behind him. “You controlled your emotions well, though I’m going to have to work on these remotes. It was supposed to take you out at the knee. I wanted to evaluate your style after you’ve been wounded.”

“What?” Zev exclaimed, flicking off his saber and replacing it on his belt.

Coming from the shadows, Jedi Master Bao-Dur laughed. “Well you didn’t expect it to be easy did you? Battle does not go smoothly. You will not be able to dodge or deflect every shot. Some Mandalorian scrub will probably be the first to draw blood, and you’ll have to fight through it. Now, head over to the gymnasium for some cardiovascular training with the drill droids, and then you can head back to the dormitories. I have other students to attend to.”

Master Bao-Dur was a Zabrak, with cream colored skin and a crown of horns on the top of his bald head. For such a fearsome appearance, his demeanor was anything but threatening. He had a voice that could calm a wild katarn. He was also the best swordsman of his time, holding the rank of Jedi Battlemaster. He’d taken on Zev as a padawan learner because he too knew what it was like to lose an appendage to battle, and to feel the Force flow through most of your body, but strangely cut short from a complete connection. In the past year, they had developed a good working relationship and growing friendship. It was not without its tension, however, and when the master tried to kill the student, that caused some hard feelings.

“Thank you, master,” Zev said, still a little upset that he was supposed to get shot twice before he was allowed to react. What the hell kind of a lesson was that?

“Indignant Exclamation: What the hell kind of a lesson was that?” exclaimed the grinding metallic voice.

“I know!” Zev agreed with his droid. He was headed for the workout room when he’d called for his droid to bring him the proper attire. Although Zev had found out about his combat sequences, his primary function was that of a protocol droid and Zev did like a neat and clean appearance.

“Calming Assurance: I’m sure he meant you no harm, master. Master Dur has never led you into harms way before. And he was very helpful in fixing that gear that you couldn’t get right in my hip actuator,” HanK replied.

“I guess,” Zev agreed, but the training was getting harder. Although there was no real threat to speak of other than galactic unrest where there is always galactic unrest, the Jedi seemed to be in an arms race mentality. “Wow, HanK, those look really good.” The jumpsuit looked like it was fresh from the stitching droids... clean and pressed to perfection. As he slid it on in the dressing room, it fit tightly over his muscles, making him feel like a hair trigger ready to fire.

“Appreciative Tone: Thank you, master. It is important to take pride in one’s primary function. Now if you’ll excuse me, I would like to get in some time at the blaster range before dinner.”

“Of course, HanK,” Zev agreed. “Don’t forget your credentials. I don’t want to have to come to the kitchen and rescue you from the serving droids in the mess hall again.”

“Embarrassed admission: I don’t know what was wrong with me, master. I guess I just got excited to do some killing. I thank you for rescuing me once again, after I had served you and your friends of course,” HanK replied.

“Of course,” Zev agreed grinning, “but don’t let Master Dur hear you talking about killing like that. He’ll make me re-program you.”

“Acknowledgement: Understood master, though I’m sure he would not rely on your skill to do it correctly. Most likely, he would do it himself. Have a good workout.”

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The droid approached her fast, but she didn’t flinch. The Togruta stood her ground, her unignited lightsaber hilt clutched in both hands, carefully balanced on the balls of her slippered feet.

Clank, clank, clank, clank!

The sound of the robot's metallic feet echoed in the chamber. It was twenty meters by twenty meters, a perfect metal cage. The clawed metal arms extended to their full capacity. Three daggers protruded from where its knuckles would have been, extending thirty centimeters beyond the end of its fists. It intended to rake her through with its claws if she tried to run around him, or grapple her into a deadly embrace if she chose to stand still. It appeared she had let it get too close to avoid. Her instructor placed his hand just above the button that would kill power to the droid. She had failed.

Clank, clank, clank!

Her instincts told her the time was now. She was more used to pack hunting and survival, but these one-on-one lessons were meant for her to unlearn what she had learned growing up on Shili. She acted. As the droid raised its right arm to strike, she dropped low and opened her stance to allow her to avoid the initial slash. As it predictably came down at her, she pushed off on her left leg and aimed herself to push past the droid, now unable to slow its charge. As her body slipped under the attack and by the droid's right leg, she ignited her saber and slashed at its midsection. The blue blade flashed and brought a shower of sparks raining down on the metal floor. The droid skidded for a moment and twisted on its torso for a counter attack. She leapt in the air, feet swinging over her head in a somersault, and struck again at the droid's shoulder. The metal arm fell with a loud rattle to the ground.

Still in attack mode, it swiveled again to make a last killing stroke. She gripped her saber underhanded and twirled away from the robot, giving its preceptors a moment's pause. It was enough to delay the attack that should have been aimed at her exposed back, and allow her to bury her saber into the droids pelvis and upwards through its torso, neck, and finally head, which glowed blue from the inside as the blade vaporized its neural processor. The droid fell backwards, unimpaling itself and crashing to the floor. The battle was over in mere seconds. Asheemi was unharmed. In the control room, the two masters shared a look.

"What do you think?" asked Bao-Dur. He was standing next to the head of the academy, Master Atris.

"That was amazing," she said astonished, not realizing she still had her hand over the kill switch, which she pulled back. "I've never seen a Togruta so capably defend itself as an individual."

"I think she was even disadvantaged in this setting," Bao-Dur explained. "The approach of the droid had to disorient her montrals. She could not have known exactly where he was as she avoided his blows naturally."

"Which means she was anticipating him," Atris concluded. Bao-Dur smiled.

"Yes," he agreed. "In a true battlefield setting, she could be even more effective."

"Mind your feelings, B.D.," she chided. "You already have a padawan learner."

"But she could be a great lightsaber duelist, better than I," he protested, "and she is young. Zev can learn a greater lesson from those that have walked his path."

"You have walked his path," Atris reminded. "Do not let your own wishes cloud your judgment. I will find Asheemi a proper master. She has only just arrived from Dantooine."

"Which makes her all the more amazing," he began, but knew it was no use. Atris was not one to change her mind, and she had it made up before he had started.

"I will train her," she replied. "Have her come to my quarters when she has finished the day's training."

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"Noth wigg gothe, mmrrrhhh nig noth"

"Yes, master, I'm trying," Arlyn replied. She was still getting used to his speech, but as he reached out into her mind and her into his, she knew his words were those of encouragement. She had been straining for only a few moments, but she had been lost into concentration for what seemed like hours. Her golden blonde hair was plastered to her forehead with sweat and the beads were now slipping down her eyes, making them tear up. She shut them tight to squeeze out the irritants.

"No dig neth woth, jurg doooh," replied the Ithorian. The sound came from both sides of the formidable alien's flattened head, forming a melodic stereo sound in the commands. The words made no sense, but his message filled her mind.

"Yes, master, there is no try," she agreed, rededicating her concentration to the task at hand. Her delicate right arm was outstretched and her thin fingers were stiff with muscle tension. She breathed in and out slowly and laboriously as she struggled with a weight that was both gargantuan and ethereal. In front of her was the head of the academy's personal shuttle, *The Historian*, and it was floating a few centimeters off the ground.

As Arlyn struggled against the weight of the ship, it reacted ever so slightly, rising to nearly a meter in height. Master Chodo Habat quelled his excitement. He wanted to laugh at the success of the padawan, but knew that the deep rumble would break the fragile concentration that it took to master this technique. When

the ship reached 2 meters, Chodo shuffled over to the ship and walked underneath the landing gear. With Arlyn's eyes tightly shut, she had no idea he had just confidently put his life into her hands. Chodo shuffled back over to the padawan.

"Neth wath goeth," he commanded, and the girl let the ship gently float back to the steel floor of the landing pad. She opened her eyes and let out an exhausted breath.

"Thank you, Master Habat," Arlyn gasped. She felt like he had been lifting the craft with her arms and back, not her mind. She knew this was a weakness. Her brain wanted to make every activity one that happened within the confines of the body, but the Force was not just what was within, but everything around her as well. She knew she could barely move an astromech droid with her true muscle mass, but with the Force she had just moved a starship.

As she rolled the sleeves of her fitted green jumpsuit back down to her wrists and walked to the training room, Chodo lectured her in his native tongue of Ithorese. She followed the spirit of the conversation with his help and patience. They walked into the relaxation room; one the Ithorian was instrumental in construction. Since the Telos Academy rest on the northern most pole of the planet, there was no natural plant life or greenery to be found. Just outside the blast doors was an environment that could be survived for a short time, but not enjoyed. Chodo Habat felt this was detrimental to the development of the Jedi within the Academy. The students needed to be able to commune with life forms other than their fellow students. The Living Force flows from all life, and it would be necessary to understand this when trapped on a sparsely inhabited planet. The relaxation room was a massive greenhouse, feeding the many plant species with the intense sun through solar panels and deriving nutrients from soil deep under the permafrost of the icy region. It was where the Ithorian could find the most peace.

Arlyn saw her master waiting for her in the room. Master Brianna Kae was a plain woman in excellent physical condition. She had snow white hair like Master Atris, and wore no makeup. Her skin was a creamy white from a lack of exposure, undamaged by any sun's rays. She was pure in every sense of the word, and a highly respected teacher. She wore flowing gray robes, a Jedi garment of times gone by. She and Chodo exchanged some trivial greetings, and then it was all business. With Master Kae, it was almost always all business. The beads of sweat returned to her temples.

"So, did she succeed or fail?" she she asked, making eye contact with Arlyn as she spoke about her. The eye contact was a challenge, an invitation for conflict. Master Kae's technique was always in some way about conflict.

“Agh yenth doohl. Bee fuut bah nah gee go noh.” He replied. Arlyn lit up. She didn’t realize she’d moved the ship so much.

“Two meters?” Brianna replied with an eyebrow arched. “I suppose that’s a success. However, next time, I expect the tailfin to be scraping the top of the hangar. Is that understood?” she challenged her padawan.

“Yes, Master Kae,” she replied meekly. It didn’t seem she would ever please this disciplinarian. She briefly thought of her mother and father, and the unconditional pride they always expressed for her.

“Mind your feelings, Arlyn,” Brianna warned, “your thoughts betray you. Because you were taken so old, you have much to unlearn. My discipline will train you to be a capable Jedi. Otherwise, with your innate power, you could be a great threat to those you hold so dear.”

The backhanded compliment was not lost on Arlyn. She never let herself think she had the power to be great, but perhaps she did. Perhaps she could learn the techniques she needed to be a Jedi knight. She let her feelings slip off of her like beads of water and fall through the floor. She was at peace. She’d even stopped sweating.

“Well done,” her master complimented. “Now, let’s work out some aggression. I have someone I want you to fight. Then you may end your training for the day.”

“Yes Master Kae.”

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A familiar face appeared on the holoivid. Although her eyes were covered by the golden fringe on her scarlet hood, the alabaster skin and flush lips of Visas Marr were unmistakable.

“How are you, Visas?” Atris asked with genuine enthusiasm. The two women had worked very closely together and with Grand Master Vima Sunrider, were nurturing a new order of Jedi into the galaxy.

“I have been well, Atris,” Visas replied in a silky voice. “How are my former companions Brianna and Bao-Dur?”

“Very well,” Atris replied, typing in a few items onto her datapad. “Their padawans are among the strongest in the academy.”

“That is good to hear,” Visas replied. “I have seen a growing disturbance in the Force coming from Kashyyyk.”

Atris looked up from her datapad. She didn't know why Visas was contacting her from her mission to Dantooine, but now she understood why it couldn't wait. Kashyyyk was a planet that had seen its share of turmoil. Human and Trandoshan slavers had conspired with a native chief to take thousands of wookies off-planet to work in various capacities. With the help of Master Revan, the wookies rose up against their captors and overthrew them. The planet had become shut off from the rest of the universe, with more and more wookies returning to their homeland and less visitors being welcomed.

"I already know of this one," Atris told her. "Vima and Jolee contacted me months ago and told me of his presence. I was not aware he was already visible to the Force. Do you think she has seen him too?" Atris asked.

"Yes, Atris," Visas replied. The answer sent a shiver down the woman's spine. The "she" was one of the last off-worlders to be welcomed to Kashyyyk. "She" was now a Dark Lord of the Sith, and the most dangerous threat the Jedi had faced since the Great Purge. Wookies were prone to great depths of loyalty and good, but also relentless rage and physical violence. If a Force sensitive wookie were to exist, he or she had the potential to be a powerful ally to either side.

"We must find a way to get to him first," Atris stated, knowing it was obvious. She was at a loss. Visas Marr, with her Force Sight and charming demeanor, was a natural recruiter and diplomat for the Jedi. Atris was more direct and less diplomatic with her orders, sometimes infringing on good manners for the sake of expediency. Plus, with the wookie uprising, there could be a real chance of having to fight their way on and off planet. A team would be needed, but who would lead them?

"The wookies are a wise people," Visas reminded her. "Although they seem primitive, they are well aware of the Force and what it means to be a Jedi Master or Sith Lord. I doubt they would trust either one, but instead take it as a sign of aggression or an effort to enforce dominance."

"I agree, my friend," Atris confirmed, ruling out herself, Brianna, or Bao-Dur from leading the mission, "Jolee is the most familiar to them, but he is not who I would choose to represent the Jedi Council on a mission of recruitment. He's not even a knight."

"We should send the students," the Miralukka suggested.

"We can't trust a mission of this importance to students!" Atris scoffed. Visas was calm.

"At one time, Briana, Bao-Dur, Atton, Mira, and I were all mere students, learning from a single, unsure master," Visas recalled. "We had no choice but to make

our way in a world that did not want us, and against enemies on all sides. Surely that galaxy was no more dangerous than the one we currently face?”

“True, but if you’ll remember I wasn’t exactly on her side either.” Atris reminded her, reliving the lesson she learned at the hands of the General Shana Ramis’ silver dual lightsaber at her throat, and then the General showing compassion and mercy where Atris thought there would be none. “I believe I have a student in mind.., Vima’s padawan, Shanlar Vivani.”

“He is the Cathar?” Visas asked.

“Yes,” Atris replied. “While I have many that have a powerful connection to the Force here, they do not have history. They do not have a leader. Shanlar could provide that, along with the discipline he’s received at Vima’s hand. If we could send him with some of the other raw padawans, perhaps we could get in past the Wookiee defenses and unnoticed by Darth Gaea. Perhaps the sum of their wisdom can substitute for a single Master.”

“Perhaps,” Visas agreed, hoping the decision was the right one. The aura around Kashyyyk was growing. Something was happening to the potential student, and he was drawing upon the Force at a greater rate. The more he did so, the greater the disturbance would be...and the greater the disturbance, the greater the potential for discovery by the Sith.

“Good luck, Atris,” Visas wished her, “and may the Force be with you.”

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Three nights later, the academy was dark and silent when the rumble of the docking bay doors shook the end of the building. It was far enough away from the dormitories not to wake anyone, but the steel throughout the building vibrated with any significant noise for anyone who was listening. The ship floated in on repulsors and gently came to rest on the open landing pad. The whine of the engines ceased as the power was cut, leaving only some humming and ticking as the ship settled into its hibernation.

“Welcome to Telos, master jedi,” announced Filly, the young pilot. She flicked the intercom back to the “Off” position and continued with her shutdown sequences. She was an attractive twi’lek with pale blue skin that was almost lavender. Her eyes were quick and full of life, and her head tails squirmed and flicked when she was excited. She stood up from the pilot’s chair and flicked off a few more switches and the astrogation panel went dark. The cockpit was nearly dormant now, with only a few more lockdowns before she could turn in. The figure at the door startled her.

“Thank you for the rrride,” said the calm, purring voice. It was deep and assertive. She wheeled but did not see anyone at first, but then the Cathar



stepped out from the hall and into the reflection of blinking lights that hadn't yet been shutoff.

"I didn't know you were still on board," she gasped. She was a bit uneasy around him. Although he was a Jedi, his physical appearance was very feline and gave him an air of danger. "Do you need me to help you trigger the loading ramp?"

"No my dearr," he replied. "I just wanted to acknowledge your skill and bid you good-night. I hope we can worrrk together again soon." He reached for her hand. His hand was nearly the size of her face and the ends of his thick fingers were sharpened amber claws. She placed her hand in his gently, thinking she may have to pull it back if it got too close to his mouth. Instead, he carefully grasped it to avoid hurting her, and shook it gently.

"Thank you, master jedi," she said; relieved she wasn't going to be mauled in her own cockpit. "It isn't often that my work gets noticed. In fact, it's usually best when it doesn't."

"I see," he replied, letting loose her hand. He reached back to his hood and pulled it over his head. His yellow eyes caught the lights and glowed like some evil Sith Lord. With the robe concealing his form, he looked like a ghost.

"Good-night," she said. She was a bit shaky and anxious to get him off her ship. Instinctively, her hand was on the hilt of her blaster and her palm was sweating.

He bowed slightly and walked away. She heard the loading dock's stabilizers engage and the crunch of it hitting the walkway. He didn't make a sound in the ship, nor getting off it. She counted to fifteen and re-engaged the door from the inside, locking herself in. Filly let out a breath that she didn't know she was holding and released her grip on her customized DL-44.

"Creepy Cat," she whispered, as she shut down the rest of the systems, activated the alarms, and headed for her bunk for some well-deserved sleep.

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When Shandlar Vivani stepped off the loading ramp, he was met by a familiar face. Although they had never met, Master Atris' face and trademark platinum hair coiled tightly into a bun was unmistakable. She had been on the Jedi Council and the Jedi Historian while he was a padawan and he'd heard many classroom lectures from her, but that was nearly two decades ago and their paths since had not intersected.

"Master Atrrris," Shan began, extending his clawed hand to the robed woman. "It is good to see you again."

“Shandlar, thank you for coming so quickly,” Atris said, taking his hand more readily than the twi’lek pilot had moments before. “We have a situation that could be dire. Did you have a chance to review my hologram in-flight?”

“Yes,” he replied. “The pilot provided me with plenty of space to do my studies.”

“That’s good,” she said, making note of his tone when he referred to *the pilot*. “Then you understand that your training time here will be shorter than we had hoped before you begin your first trial.”

“I believe I am ready, master,” Shan confirmed coolly. He was not arrogant, but supremely confident. He had waited years for this opportunity, and at one time thought he may be the last of the Jedi. When he received news that Master Sunrider re-opened the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, he couldn’t get there fast enough to renew his training and pursue his dream... of being a Jedi Knight.

“Let’s hope that you are,” she replied. “There is little room for error now. There is a new cloud rising. The Sith are not defeated, they are not dead. We fight for the very existence of the Light Side of the Force, and for the Republic. Your trials will not be a thing of evaluation or preconceived challenges, but living the life and filling the role of a Jedi Knight. Should you succeed; the galaxy... and the Council... will recognize you as such.”

The imposing figure raised both clawed hands to his hood and removed it. His yellow eyes glistened. The red fur that flowed from his head and lined his jaw fluttered under the air vents. His face was stern and without emotion. He was born of a race that hunted and celebrated hunters as heroes and legends. His very nature was predatory, yet he’d overcome it over three decades of instruction and discipline. His great chest moved slowly in and out, needing very few breaths to fill his lungs or beats of his heart to pump his blood. He met her eyes for several moments, and said nothing.

“Very good,” she said, sifting through his unprotected thoughts and sensing no fear or apprehension. “Very good. Vima could be right about you. You could make a powerful Jedi indeed.”

“Thank you, Master Atrris,” he replied, nodding a quick bow.

“Never mind that now, I will show you to your quarters. I know you are somewhat nocturnal, but the rest of us adhere to a strict schedule.” She turned on her heel to lead him to the visitor’s dormitory. Flippantly, she remarked, “So what did you think of *the pilot*? Quite fetching, isn’t she?”

“I suppose so, master,” Shan replied, following her in lock step. “But I prefer older, more experienced women with paler skin.”

She stopped and put out a long, white finger and wagged it at his chin.

“That is not an appropriate thing for a Jedi to say,” she reprimanded harshly.

“Neither is trying to snare an experienced hunterrr with such an obvious trrrap,” he snarled back in the same tone, “but since you went to the trrrouble of laying it out, I thought it would disrespect you not to take the bait.”

Atris didn't smile back. She was caught, and as smart and subtle as she wanted to think she was, her tricks were really best left for the inexperienced padawans of Telos, not for a trained padawan from Coruscant. While she was doing her best, Shan's control and maturity as a student showed her she had more to learn if she was not going to fail her students.

“Well played then, hunter,” she complimented, “and you'll do well to continue to respect the masters you meet here. We are your superiors, no matter how many gifts you possess. Now I will show you to your quarters.”

“Of course, masterrr,” he purred quietly, bowing his head in obedience. He knew there were great Jedi on Telos, but no teachers. He had received history lessons from Master Mical, how to manipulate minds from Master Orssa, and lightsaber training from Vima Sunrider herself. It was hard to be humble, but it would be his lesson to learn among these masters and padawans. He was determined to pass every test.

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The next morning, Zev awoke to HanK cleaning out the refresher.

“They have droids to do that, HanK,” Zev said sleepily, “and you are costing me precious minutes of beauty rest.”

“Contradiction: But master, no matter how long you rest, as you age you become less attractive,” HanK explained. “I would advise you try to stay awake as long as you can in your youth, and rest when you are older and wrinkled.”

“Then how do you propose I get the energy to go through my training every day?” he said with his pillow firmly planted over his head.

“Cheerful suggestion: Simply insert an additional power cell when you are feeling drained!” HanK replied.

“Very helpful, my assassin droid wants me to electrocute myself,” he muttered, now giving up on the fact that he'd get any more sleep this morning. “Very surprising.”

“Reminder: Besides, master, you are due at Master Atris’ office in less than one-half of a standard hour. You will need to hurry if you are to look presentable.”

“Blast!” he shouted, forgetting that he was not going to his normal physical training this morning. Bao-Dur had even reminded him at the end of yesterday’s lesson about concentration. Zev guessed he was concentrating too hard on the lesson and forgot.

The padawan jumped from his bed and into the shower. Luckily, the Jedi Robes he wore were multi-layered, so if the bottom layer was still wet, it wouldn’t show. His hair, however, would be a dead giveaway.

“Patronizing exclamation: Ten minutes, master!”

“Don’t patronize me, Hank!” he shouted at the droid, pulling on his tunic over his head and stepping into his boots.

“Surprised response: Whatever do you mean, master?”

“Just open the door,” he said. The door made a slight *swiff* noise as it rose up and he ducked to get under it. As it slid down, he remembered his lightsaber and datapad on the bed. He shut his eyes and visualized them in his hands. They leapt from the bed and under the door as it closed, landing with a slap against his flesh and a soft clang against his cybernetic hand. “Nice,” he said as he smiled and rushed off to the headmaster’s office.

As Zev arrived at Master Atris’ office, another student was standing there, similarly out of breath. He recognized the man; he was Chodo Habat’s padawan. His face was permanently tanned and rough like old leather. He was probably not much older than Zev, but life had been harder on him. Well, not harder on the man, just the face. He looked over at Zev and nodded.

“Forget you weren’t going to PT this morning?” he asked.

“Yep,” Zev admitted. “You?”

“Uh huh,” he agreed. He flipped the long sleeve of his tunic from his wrist and extended a hand. “I don’t think we were ever formally introduced. I’m Kale D’Mose.”

“Zeven Thanas,” he replied. “They don’t do a good job of socializing us, do they?”

“I think it’s on purpose,” Kale assured him. “It was a little different on Dantooine. We had a large outdoor atrium where we’d hang out more.”

“You were trained on Dantooine?” Zev asked. “I thought it was still under construction?”

“No, way back,” Kale corrected. “I’ve been at this for a while. Well, on and off.”

“Same here,” Zev replied. “Setbacks.” He raised up his metallic appendage and grinned. “Got this when the Sith laid waste to the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. Not enough of us had taken Lightsaber Combat.”

“You survived that?” Kale said, impressed. “Good show! I remember hearing about that when I came back. I was lying low. My master, uhm, had other priorities to attend to.”

“Was he killed?” Zev asked.

“No,” Kale replied. “She survived the Purge.”

“Have you seen her again?” Zev asked. “If your old master is available, why are you training under Chodo?”

“She’s a little busy, but she still makes time to make sure I’m on the straight and narrow.” Kale said sheepishly, and then Zev figured it out. His former master must have been none other than Master Atris. When Darth Nihilus rose to power, Atris delved into the remaining Sith holocrons to try and amass enough knowledge and power to stop him. She succeeded only in falling to the Dark Side, redeemed by a former Jedi Knight that she herself had exiled years before. The subject was one that most at the academy danced around. She now taught students how to resist the lure of the Dark Side, a temptation she knew all too well.

“Who’s a little busy?” asked Arlyn. She said this while landing a punch on Zev’s shoulder, forgetting that she was supposed to only punch the other one. A pop and aching knuckles reminded her.

“What’s up Little Bit?” Zev said, laughing under his breath at her repeated mistake. Arlyn did try to act the part of one of the guys, but she was a little awkward still with a sheltered upbringing. Still, she’d taken a liking to HanK one night at dinner, and he’d decided to show her the ropes where the teachers wouldn’t.

“Not much,” she said, coyly trying to look distracted by something else. “Guess who lifted the Historian with Master Chodo yesterday?”

“Probably that Starlighter kid,” Kale volunteered. “He’s not built like much, but he’s pretty good with the telekinisis training. I’ve seen him in action.”

“No,” she admonished, “me you laser brain!”

“Good job, kid!” Zev congratulated. “You’ll have to tell HanK later. That will give me another thing to threaten him with if he gets out of line. I’ll bet Master Kae was proud.”

“She just wanted more,” Arlyn replied, suddenly sullen. She rubbed the back of her shoulder absentmindedly.

“Did you drop it on yourself?” Zev kidded.

“Uh? Oh, no. After that she made me go spar. I got my ass handed to me.”

“By who?” Kale asked.

“Her,” Arlyn said, pointing down the hallway. Walking up as silently as a snowfall was Asheemi. She greeted them with a bow.

“Greetings fellow padawans, I am Asheemi Ta of Shili,” she said, following a long taught custom of her people. Her voice was pleasant and she spoke excellent basic, but it was hard not to notice the rather vicious looking pointed teeth that were a distinguishing feature of her face. It was also hard not to notice her deep red skin and athletic body, which was strategically covered for modesty. She was glistening and must have not skipped PT before being summoned.

“Greetings Asheemi,” said a voice from the headmaster’s doorway. It had slipped open while they were looking away. Standing in the doorway, Master Atris beckoned them inside.

There was plenty of room in the chamber for everyone. Kale, Zev, Arlyn, and Asheemi stood close to the doorway as they faced their teachers. Standing in the office was Atris, Bao-Dur, Chodo, Brianna, and a robed Cathar they didn’t recognize. It was a literal menagerie of Jedi talent and incredible power.

“Come in, padawans,” Atris bid the group and motioned to a viewscreen at her conference table. The Jedi masters seated themselves around the table as the students stood behind them. The Cathar remained standing and Atris circled the table so they could see her and the viewscreen simultaneously.

“Your masters have told me how much progress you’ve made,” she began. “Zev, you have demonstrated an amazing connection to the Force in spite of being limited by your replaced arm. Your lightsaber prowess has nearly come full circle since you were last under our teachings. Bao-Dur has expressed his full confidence that you are ready for more challenges.”

“Thank you masters,” Zev said, mostly in Bao-Dur’s direction. He had learned a lot from the Iridonian and had come to depend on him as a friend. They shared a bond beyond their master-apprentice relationship. Although this was a big step, he was a little sad to see the end of his formal training. He tried to reach out and feel if his teacher felt the same way, but his thoughts were a void. When his eyes returned to Atris, she looked as if she knew that, and he quickly cleared his mind.

“And you Kale,” she continued, “have made great strides as well. When I knew you before, the council had chosen to give up on you, saying your control of the Force would never be strong enough to become a Jedi Knight. The Council has been wrong before, and I am actually happy that they have been proven wrong again. Chodo has also recommended you to proceed to the next step in your training.”

“Chotha,” Kale replied in rough Ithorese. Although he could understand it perfectly, for a human it was a hard language to pronounce properly. Chodo grinned, quite literally, out of both sides of his mouth.

“Arlyn, you have a great power, probably the strongest of any student here, and have been able to harness it at times within our walls,” Atris acknowledged, “but with great power comes great responsibility. Master Kae has said you are a willing student and have a bright path, but you must concentrate on that path and not on those who may or may not be on it with you. Do you understand?”

Arlyn was distracted by the positive tone of Atris’ message. She always felt like a failure, like at every success she was a step behind her peers. Instead she was being acknowledged right in front of everyone as the head of the class. She began to feel pride, and then tried to concentrate it away, focusing on Atris’ other words. She must stay on this path. Perhaps Master Kae was the perfect teacher for her all along.

“Asheemi, you are the newest recruit to our ranks,” Atris confirmed. Kale and Zev had never seen her, and Arlyn only the day before during their duel. “Though you have not spent the months training the others have completed, I knew your parents and mourned their loss. I have also seen your potential, and have decided to take you as my padawan. You will receive no further instruction here; you will accompany your classmates on their assignment.”

The other three gulped. For Atris to do this, Asheemi must be thought of very highly. Her species was perfect for the Jedi Order, selfless and naturally quick to learn and adapt. They assumed, but did not know, that Asheemi was from a long line of Jedi ancestors. She must have continued to receive a Jedi upbringing as other force-sensitives like Kale and Zev hid their powers to prevent discovery and assassination.

“Thank you, master,” she responded, bowing deeply.

“Although as my padawan, I will expect you to cover yourself more appropriately. We are not in the jungles of Shili,” Atris admonished.

“Yes master,” she replied without an argument. She had decided to go to the training room alone that morning to keep her senses sharp, but that had been a mistake. She must remember to seek permission and not be such an individual. It had always been her downfall on Shili.

“Students, with you is Shandlar Vivani. He is a promising student from Coruscant sent here to help you with your field training.” Atris flicked her hand and a switch on the viewscreen activated. A hologram of a planet appeared on the screen, and then split and showed a recording of a large humanoid beast fighting what looked like Mandalorian mercenaries.

“This is Kashyyyk, home to the wookies, among other things,” she started. “Visas Marr has detected a disturbance in the Force from this planet, centered on a native.”

Each of the people in the room shared glances with each other. They knew from reputation and previous encounters that wookies were the beast-like humanoids in the recording. They were capable of great fits of rage as well as amazing acts of loyalty and courage. Master Revan employed a Wookiee companion named Zalbaar who was so powerful he could hold his own against a Sith acolyte without assistance from a Jedi. A Force sensitive with that genetic background could make a great Jedi with the proper training, or a vicious Sith without.

“His name is Kyybecca, meaning Honored Defender,” she continued. “He was first discovered to have a connection with the Force many years ago by Jolee Bindo. It has remained mostly dormant until now. There is something that is agitating him and causing him to call upon the Force. This has revealed him to Visas Marr, and our enemies.”

Atris would not have called them out by name, since at one time she thought to join their ranks. The term Sith did not slide easily from her throat, but all in the room knew they were the only threat that could not be easily overcome by a fully rendered Jedi Master like Atris. They could not sense fear, as she was adept at concealing her emotions, but they all felt her seriousness. If the Sith were to get to Kyybecca first, they might have a weapon able to draw first blood on the new Jedi Order.

“I sense you understand the gravity of this discovery,” she said solemnly. “You will not leave immediately; your masters and I wish to observe you first. Teamwork will be of utmost importance on this mission. The wookies are distrustful of other species, and the interference of a Jedi Master might be taken



as a sign of aggression and put the mission in danger. That is why we will use your talents to do this. First we would like to put you through a series of tests so that you can learn each other's ways and fight, if need be, as a unit instead of individuals."

"Master Atris," Zev spoke up, "I would like to inquire about my droid. Will he be allowed to accompany us?"

"Yes Zev," Atris replied. "Bao-Dur assured me there is nothing to be feared about his failure in the field and that he's well suited for this type of mission. Since he is combat enabled, he will be required to train with you as well."

"I will also allocate other non-Jedi members of this team. They will be there to support you in ways you are not trained to do yourself. One will be a pilot contracted for this sort of mission. Her call sign is Blue Filly. She and her ship, the Darkhorse Courier, will be at your disposal. She has many talents besides just piloting, so I suggest you do not underestimate her because of her lack of Force sensitivity."

"We will not, master." The Cathar spoke up for the first time from the back. He strode to middle of the line of students. His shoulders were as wide as some of the other students at the academy were tall. His feline eyes against a rather human, albeit furry, face was disarming. They were yellow and the black slit of his pupil was barely visible under the bright office lighting.

"Another will be Kalwarr, a native of the planet," she continued, annoyed with the interruption. "He is a former slave, returning to his home planet for the first time in many years. We are hoping his presence will keep the wookiees from attacking you on sight."

"That would be nice," said Zev with a sarcastic tone. The other students chuckled before a look from Atris ended the levity.

"Let us begin our drilling at once, padawans," Shanlar suggested, motioning towards the door. "We can make our more informal introductions on the way."

The other students looked at each other and took their cue. They exited the chamber and made their way to the Danger Room without any more words. Before they turned the corner, they heard the teachers begin talking and the door swiftly shut. They were excited about being given a mission, but knew there was much to do to prepare. It was exactly why they'd come to Telos to be broken and rebuilt as new warriors, keepers of the Jedi traditions. Each of them had given up much in order to serve the Force, and finally it was time to do it. It was time to stop being students, and start being Jedi.