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Freefall
by WynCatastrophe

Summary

Anakin is fifteen and angsty, Obi-Wan is thirty-one and hassled, Yoda is really old and concerned about the state of the galaxy. Meanwhile, an outsider in the Jedi Temple is making friends and shaking things up, and nobody knows Mace Windu's exact age, but we're sure he disapproves. Besides, someone is out to kill the Chosen One, Jedi philosophy isn't quite hitting the mark, and the Republic is going downhill fast.

Notes

This is a story about love, but not about romance. It's a story about sex, but nobody is having any. It's a story about losing your way in the dark, and finding yourself in the moment of crisis. This is a story about fate, about friendship, about heroes … this is Free Fall.
CHAPTER ONE

Ryn Orun sat cross-legged, hands up-turned on her knees, fingers relaxed and slightly curled, her back almost but not perfectly straight, and smoothed the frown off her features for the seventeenth time in the last five minutes (and yes, she was counting). Master Yoda insisted that controlling the body was the first step toward controlling the mind.

So far, Ryn was a spectacular failure at both.

The frown came back, sneaking onto her face, the tiny pulling of little muscle groups belying her effort at serenity.

Damn.

She took a deep breath and started over, visualizing the muscles beneath the smooth skin of her forehead and telling them, one by one, to relax.

Good. As long as nobody looked too closely, she looked like every dutiful Jedi-in-training the Temple hosted.

And something blazed in her mind, a disturbance that was as much in her psyche as it was in the Force: a Presence, bright and fiery, buoyant with possibilities. This was the source of the feeling she'd been fighting all morning, the nervous edge of excitement that defied all her attempts at calm, every effort to please Masters Yoda and Windu by making herself perfectly passive and pliant—something that had never made much sense to Ryn, because if you made an act of will, even over yourself, then that had to be active, which would seem to make this determined passivity self-defeating. She hadn't mentioned this to Master Yoda yet—Jedi, even Masters, had some curious blind spots when it came to the theories they had learned as children, an inflexibility that Ryn was sure would prove destructive someday, because it couldn't not.

But now the presence was here, and Ryn let curiosity get the better of her. (Actually, she was pretty sure that curiosity had always had the better of her, but she was hoping no one else had figured that out yet. With Master Yoda, one could never quite be sure.) She scrambled to her feet and headed toward the Presence, drawn to it without any need for conscious thought (although, being Ryn, she was doing plenty of that, too).

She followed the feeling down, toward the lower levels of the Jedi Temple, still well above the deep recesses of Coruscant, trying to pay attention so that she didn't run straight into a wall (her feelings did not come with directions). The sense got stronger as she went, and her feet hurried down stairs and around corners, sorting through the intricate maze of the Temple's corridors. Suddenly she felt that Presence on the same level as herself, frustratingly close but now definitively moving away, and she ran around two more corners, just to work off her frustration, and then …

Smack.

She ran headlong into something warm and solid, something that triggered a flash of pain in her head, where she'd hit it, but that wasn't going to be a problem, because, suddenly and unexpectedly, she was bathed in light, a radiant energy that swept through all her cells and made her feel alive in a
way she never had before.

It was intoxicating, and she let her eyes slide shut to savor the experience, giving herself over to it, forgetting who she was and what she was doing, and the fact that she was supposed to be practicing control.

Some time later, she heard voices and opened her eyes.

She was lying on her back in a dimly lit hallway, while two men in Jedi robes knelt over her, their faces concerned.

_Not again._

"I'm sorry," she said automatically, not even sure what she was apologizing for. She was sure it would come to her eventually.

"No, _I'm sorry,_" said the younger of the two Jedi—a Padawan, actually, his status proclaimed by the thin braid worn behind his right ear. His voice was low and husky, inexplicably vibrating in Ryn's own chest. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

He leaned forward over her, his fingers threading through her hair—_checking for head injuries,_ she realized—and she barely heard him asking, gently, "Are you all right?" because something, suddenly, became very clear, a knowledge that washed over her like a crashing wave, drowning everything else.

She had spent the last two years listening to girls talk about boys and wondering what all the fuss was about, or what was wrong with her that she didn't have those same feelings. Physically, everything appeared to be on schedule, her organs taking on the shape and rhythms of an adult human female; and it had been well over a year—almost two, really—since she had experienced that first dark gush of blood that signaled her readiness to do her part in continuing the species.

Except she wasn't interested.

Until now.

She had waited patiently, all this time, wondering why she didn't feel the same strange compulsion to mix with the opposite sex that her peers were exhibiting at every turn, even in the precincts of the Temple. And she had been an outsider, an observer, watching these mysteries without a glimmer of understanding. But now it was obvious. She had been waiting, her body ready but her feelings dormant, for exactly this moment: so that right here, right now, this young man with the warm hands and the intense blue eyes could touch her and bring her suddenly to vivid, brilliant life, so that every nerve that had never known quite what to do with itself before could sizzle into action and all the connections that had been missing could fire into place and her blood could sing in her ears and the pulse in her veins could push her, in the space between one breath and the next, over the threshold between the innocence of childhood and the heady knowledge of new womanhood.

The Padawan and his Master were still looking down at her with concern, unaware that her life had just changed, that _she_ had just changed, dramatically, and that the woman lying on the floor beneath them was not the same as the girl who had skidded around the corner.

She had to say something.

"You have an overwhelming presence," she said distinctly, fighting to find herself in the psychic maelstrom that was this young man's aura—unmistakably the Presence that had been wrecking her concentration all morning. It was an effort to be aware of herself, her own boundaries, her
separateness, in the midst of that compelling energy.

The youth didn't seem to know how to answer this. His Master took over the situation with more than Jedi calm, with the deep unshakeablleness of a truly grounded soul. "My name is Obi-Wan Kenobi," he said, his voice low and reassuring—not the throaty tiger-purr of his apprentice, but a well-modulated instrument with a warm tone. "This is my Padawan-learner, Anakin Skywalker. Are you injured?"

Ryn nodded, registering this information, then shook her head abruptly as his question penetrated the layers of confusion. "My name is Ryn Orun," she said, easing back a little, breaking Skywalker's contact with her arm as she set her palms to the floor and pushed herself, a little gingerly, to a sitting position. She was floundering for an explanation that didn't sound utterly crazed when she saw that Kenobi was eying her thoughtfully.

"Master Yoda has mentioned you," he said, studying her as thought she were a puzzle to be solved—much as Yoda did, actually.

Ryn could not help but feel a twinge of resentment at being eyed this way again, but she pushed it doggedly aside. He didn't know her and was never going to, so of course his primary interest in her existence was scientific, not personal. Besides, it eliminated awkward explanations about her talent—or, in this case, liability. So she sucked in a deep breath, letting the air clear her mind, trying to ignore the fact that the air seemed to be permeated with Skywalker, like the fragrance of a thousand flowers, or the smell of the air before a storm. She nodded on the exhale, studiously not looking at Kenobi's apprentice. "Yes … well … your apprentice has an unusually strong presence. I'm afraid I was momentarily overwhelmed … but I'm fine, now."

Skywalker's aura, just to her right, became tinged with chagrin, and Ryn risked a quick glance to toss him a friendly grin that she hoped said no hard feelings and not you just became the center of my galaxy. "It's only fair. You knock out my psychic walls and I bruise your shins."

The Padawan snorted a laugh, accepting her friendly tone more than her dubious logic.

"Can we escort you somewhere? Assist you somehow?" Kenobi asked, impossibly solicitous.

Ryn shook her head as she tilted forward, getting her legs under her and pushing to her feet, an action that seemed to take a great deal more concentration than she usually gave it. "No, thank you. I'm certain you have other duties, and I will be myself again momentarily."

Kenobi gave his apprentice an admonishing look, and Anakin, just scrambling—well, flowing really, a liquid ripple of lean muscle that even a mature Jedi or a Twi-lek dancer would find it hard to match—to his feet, glanced hastily at Ryn, obviously embarrassed and, rather less obviously, resentful at being embarrassed, a resentment Ryn sensed he was transferring to her. "I apologize. I did not meant to cause you distress."

Ryn flashed him a another smile—a little shaky, but nonetheless genuine. "You didn't. Actually, I found the experience fascinating." She bowed to Kenobi. "Don't let me keep you."

*

"You are troubled," Obi-Wan Kenobi observed to his apprentice as they climbed to the upper levels of the Temple.

Anakin made a frustrated noise, as much at being so transparent as anything. "I don't like being looked at like some sort of curiosity. It makes me feel uncomfortable."
"You refer to the young woman we met downstairs," Obi-Wan said. It should have been a question, but his tone betrayed no hint of interrogative. "I think it's safe to say her interest in you was far from academic."

Anakin was not so easily convinced. "She said she found the experience fascinating." He imbued the word fascinating with impressive disdain.

"You must learn to attune your senses to listen to people's feelings, as well as their words," Obi-Wan told him. "Use all your perceptions. She was keenly attracted to you."

"Of course she was," Anakin's lip curled. "I'm an interesting specimen."

Obi-Wan permitted himself a small smile. "And a rather attractive young man. Do not underestimate the effect physical magnetism can have on the untrained mind. Animal instincts are hard to ignore."

Anakin's face twisted in disgust. "I don't want to be part of her animal instincts!"

"You had better get used to it," Obi-Wan advised him. "You are at an age when females are beginning to see you as more than a child to be doted on. And there are members of both sexes who will be curious about a Jedi's prowess, drawn to the perception of power like moths to flame. From now on, fending off unwanted advances is a part of your life."

"Ugh!" Anakin exclaimed. "She's not going to make any advances, is she?"

"Her name is Ryn Orun," Obi-Wan said gently, "and no, I don't think it likely. I have heard of her before, as I said. She is a special project of the Jedi Council, a young woman of unusual abilities, discovered in exceedingly odd circumstances. Master Yoda is particularly eager to learn more about her gifts."

Anakin absorbed this information in quiet concentration. "Then she is being stared at all the time, too." He didn't wait for Obi-Wan to agree before asking, "What gifts?"

Obi-Wan suppressed a sigh. Anakin was so ambitious, so determined to be the best at everything—a legacy, perhaps, of his childhood as a slave, but in any case a poor quality in a Jedi. Jealousy of power or position was a characteristic more fitted to a Sith than a member of the Jedi Order. "She shows a remarkable, but not entirely predictable, talent for empathy. She has some ability to use the Force, but apparently it is erratic. Master Yoda feels that the empathy may have its source in her genetic structure, rather than directly in the Force. We don't know nearly as much as we would like about the humans of her home planet. It's something of a surprise that Orun even came here."

"Well, then, what is she?" Anakin demanded, losing patience with the slow progression of his Master's thoughts.

"Patience," Obi-Wan reminded him, because that was his duty. Then, thoughtfully: "If the Council knew the answer to that question, they would not need to study Orun."

* *

Ryn lay back on her narrow bunk and considered her meeting with Anakin Skywalker and the surprising effect it—well, he—had had on her. She had heard of him before today, of course; how could one live anywhere near the Jedi Temple and not know of Obi-Wan Kenobi's extraordinarily gifted, deeply controversial young Padawan? But their paths had never crossed, and Ryn had never expected them to. The Council kept Kenobi hopping, taking his young apprentice on mission after mission, and Ryn was kept busy in her own way, undergoing Master Yoda's numerous tests, striving to understand and master her own abilities while at the same time re-channeling them into something
the Jedi could accept, or at least learn to live with. Longing for home, as she tried not to long for a life of her own. She was the sacrifice, the price, the stand-in to buy her people's honor. It was part of the treaty; it was her duty; it was what she was born to do. If her people's happiness had demanded that she die for them, Ryn was sure she would have done it without hesitation, gladly.

Living in captivity for them was much harder.

And now there was Skywalker.

Just in case things weren't complicated enough.

It ought to be easy to forget him, to put him out of her mind—since they had essentially nothing in common and weren't likely to meet each other ever again—but Ryn knew, with the deep certainty she had always had about some things—real things, the things that mattered—that this was quite impossible. She could never go back and unfeel what she had felt that afternoon; she could never recapture the innocence of all desire. And she wasn't sure she would want to, in any case. Prurience was bound to catch up with her sooner or later, for goodness' sake. Why it should dawn on her so suddenly, precipitated by the single experience of meeting one young man, was a puzzle of its own. He was a powerful presence, no doubt about it, but Ryn had sensed a lot of powerful presences and never felt anything remotely like the electricity that had sizzled through her nerves today. He was certainly attractive, but attractive was nothing new to a girl born and raised on Loreth, planet of the beautiful and desirable. Scientists had been clamoring for centuries to figure out just what was the magic combination of fabulous genetics and planetary phenomena that gave the humans of Loreth their extraordinary symmetry of form and unusually high levels of pheromones. Her people were the catches of the galaxy; and while Skywalker could hold his own among the best of them, there were few people less likely to be overwhelmed by sheer physical appeal than Ryn Orun.

She sighed and flung one slender arm over her head, bunching a rather thin pillow up against her shoulder. Sometimes, she knew, there were no reasons. Sometimes things just were. The question was: what to do about it?

What she wanted to do was to get to know this Anakin Skywalker better, find out if her instincts about him were right. That probably meant that seeing him again wasn't such a good idea. Most things she wanted were bad ideas: like stealing a shuttle and flying home, or telling Master Yoda where he could put his meditation exercises next time. Or dashing around corners in hopes of falling into the same toned set of arms a second time.

She sighed again, feeling more rebellious than usual—probably because she spent so much of her time refusing to feel anything at all—and wondered when had been the last time she had done anything just because she wanted to. She had a strange sense that it might have been never. Surviving Coruscant was one kind of nightmare, but it wasn't as though life on Loreth had been any great pleasure ride, either. She had been born to a life of sacrifice, a life lived for others. It was her calling, her duty, her inheritance. And maybe, sometimes, her curse.

So what she wanted to do right now was to follow that current of feeling that was tugging at her senses and see if he was free for moruna juice, over which they could have a nice, normal conversation, during which she would definitely not say anything like, "You changed my life and I think I liked it." Right. But she had no business trying to see a Jedi Padawan, and hunting a boy down just because you ran into him—literally—and enjoyed the experience was not only lame, it was also just a little bit creepy. Nobody liked a stalker.

But on the other hand, if she stretched out her senses—and she could definitely still feel him, somewhere nearby—just to see if she could tell where he was, and she followed that tug of feeling, just to see if she really could find him that way—well, that was just testing out her abilities. An
experiment, like the ones the Council made her do all the time. She'd never felt anyone's aura this strongly before; it was worth investigating. Master Yoda would be proud.

*That is the biggest rationalization I've ever heard.*

She was being ridiculous, lying there debating the prospective creepiness of tracking Skywalker through the maze of Temple corridors, to see if she could, and also, of course, because she'd like to see if that wild tingle from this afternoon was still there, or if she'd somehow imagined it, made it better and stronger in her mind than it really was—but she didn't seem able to help herself. She couldn't stop thinking about it, and she certainly couldn't go to sleep.

In the end she made what she thought was a reasonable compromise: she would stop lying in her bed, struggling uselessly to go to sleep, or to think of other things, and walk down to one of the gardens, open to the night sky (such as it was, full of the lights of Coruscant). There she would meditate, and attempt to pinpoint Skywalker's location, and someone else's, too (probably Master Yoda's), as a control, and then she would wait until tomorrow to go to Master Yoda and tell him of her efforts, so that he could check and see whether she had been right in sensing the locations, and also so that she wouldn't feel quite so sneaky, as though she were spying on a stranger. And then, if she was feeling really brave after talking to Yoda (decidedly unlikely, but still possible), she could seek Skywalker out through normal channels (say, by asking around among the other Padawans) and ask him if he liked moruna juice. If he said yes, fantastic. If he said no … well, the hell with him anyway.

She pushed aside the light blanket and stood to pull on her civilian clothes, a style typical of young adult females on her world: snug pants that laced at either hip, paired with an equally snug top that left just a strip of her smooth midriff bare and made the most of the new changes in her shape. She shrugged a worn jacket, rather too big for her, over the top: a concession to the cool night air of Coruscant.

In the garden, several stories below but not yet at the lower levels of the Temple, Ryn took deep breaths and tried to relax, to clear her mind. Unfortunately, her mind was still clouded with Skywalker—whose presence, while calmer and less overwhelming now, was still like the charged atmosphere just before a storm, heady and intoxicating, impossible to ignore.

*Concentrate,* she heard Yoda's voice saying, echoing in her mind for maybe the thousandth time.

*I'm trying,* she thought, and then stopped, caught by an idea.

Instead of fighting to clear her mind of all thought and all sensation, for the first time since coming to Coruscant she gave herself over to a rush of feeling, accepting it, diving headlong into it. And then she turned with her eyes closed and pointed. Skywalker was … *there.*

Ryn opened her eyes and looked to where she was pointing: out of the garden, over the confines of the Temple, out across the dazzling nightscape of Coruscant.

She frowned, trying to remember what lay in that direction. It was part of the political district, containing the Great Rotunda in which the Senate met, the offices of various dignitaries and public officials, and, at a somewhat greater distance, the enormous gravity of 500 Republica. A Jedi knight might visit any or all of these places by day; the duty of Jedi to the Republic put them in frequent (thought not always happy) contact with politicians of every stripe. But it seemed an odd time for such business to be conducted. The hour was little before midnight, and Jedi, for the most part, kept remarkably steady hours. Most Padawans should be in bed by now, not hobnobbing with the rich, famous, and deeply corrupt.
Forget it. Monitoring Anakin's bedtime is Kenobi's job, she told herself firmly.

Pushing Kenobi's apprentice to the back of her mind proved impossible, so in the end she just tried to work through her awareness of his presence. It took her a few tries, but at last she thought she could point to Yoda, high up in the Temple, his aura calm and unruffled. She supposed it would be easier if she could use the Force more and her own gift for sensing people less; but so far, much to Yoda's frustration, that had proven impossible. Or inconvenient. A really bad idea. But that line of thinking was dangerous, so she shut it down and reminded herself that right here, right now, she had the Force perception of a reasonably functional amoeba. That was almost painful, at times: having had a taste of the Force, it was difficult to resist the constant urge to reach out through the Force and touch the universe in a way wholly different from that experienced by most beings.


Something stirred, a subtle shift in the sense of the air around her, and Ryn moved her gaze to a small doorway on the far side of the garden just before Obi-Wan Kenobi stepped through it.

The Jedi Master's eyes flickered in surprise, a reaction swiftly controlled.

Ryn bowed politely. "Master Kenobi," she greeted him, holding her vowels tense, her consonants crisp, imitating the precise diction of Coruscant's upper crust.

Kenobi inclined his head, his manners impeccable. "Miss Orun."

Ryn flinched at the courtesy title, so different from the one she had held on her homeworld. She had gotten used, by now, to being addressed by only her first name; accepting a civilian courtesy title, however well-intentioned, was another matter entirely. Not his fault, she reminded herself sternly.

"I can leave, if you would prefer your privacy," she told him, still jealously guarding every syllable for accent.

Kenobi smiled, blue eyes creasing at the corners, ever so slightly. "I believe that it was I who interrupted you."

"It was no interruption, I assure you," Ryn answered quickly. "In fact, I was just leaving. If you will excuse me." She made a break for it that she felt sure was at least half as dignified as she would have liked, but Kenobi's voice caught her before she had made it halfway to the exit.

"One moment, please. If I could impose briefly on your time."

Ryn smoothed a wince from her face as she turned back to face the Jedi Master. "How may I help you, Master Kenobi?"

"I was wondering: can you explain at all why my Padawan affected you so strongly this afternoon?"

Ryn shrugged. "Insufficient training and control on my part."

Kenobi frowned at her, through her, seeing things behind her green eyes that she would rather have hidden. "I see. Does this happen often?"

Ryn could feel her muscles tightening, readying for fight or flight, when neither was feasible. Not good. Stay calm. "No. Never before."

I knew that, Kenobi's look said. "Then how do you know that's the only explanation?"
"I don't."

Kenobi studied her for a long moment, as though she were a particularly difficult puzzle he wasn't quite sure how to solve.

"We seem to have gotten off to a bad start," he said finally. "Perhaps we could try again."

Ryn watched him, waiting.

Kenobi cleared his throat. "My name is Obi-Wan Kenobi, and I am intrigued by the way you responded to my apprentice this afternoon. I would be grateful for your insights."

Ryn drew herself up to her full height—no mean feat for a girl her age, but still shorter than Kenobi—and spoke distinctly, all the pride of a young aristocrat rising to the fore and stiffening her spine. "I am afraid I have little insight to offer, Master Kenobi. As I said, this experience was entirely unique, so I have nothing with which to compare it. Any attempt at an analysis at this point would be altogether speculative, and therefore highly suspect."

"I understand." Ryn thought that was unlikely, but she saw no need to say so. "If it would no cause you undue stress, however, I wonder if you might consent to meet with us tomorrow, and attempt to explore this mystery further?"

On the one hand, she would see Anakin Skywalker again. *No, no, bad idea. Don't think that way.*

On the other, it had all the makings of a very awkward meeting.

"My time is not my own, Master Kenobi. If you wish to enlist my services, such as they are, then you must speak with Master Yoda. I will do his bidding, of course." She bowed again. "Good night, Master Kenobi."

*

Ryn broke into a trot almost as soon as she was out of Obi-Wan's sight, jogged down a corridor until she realized she had no idea where she was going, and finally stopped cold and slid down with her back against a smooth permacrete wall, crouching with her head bent nearly to her knees.

*You are being ridiculous,* she scolded herself. *You have developed an adolescent crush, and now you are so obsessed that meeting with his teacher makes you act the fool! Get a grip!*

But it was more than that, she knew. Her gift made it more. She had all the symptoms of what Master Ki-Adi-Mundi called SRI (Sudden Romantic Obsession), so common among adolescent humans as to be banal; but there was more. Ryn didn't just think the object of her unprecedented interest was special; through her extended senses she could *feel* him, and she *knew. That's probably what every girl thinks,* she told herself; but she wasn't very convincing.

And so, even more so than most teenage girls experiencing love—or, well, *lust*—for the first time, Ryn felt torn between her eagerness to see Anakin Skywalker again and her feelings of awkwardness and embarrassment, with a healthy admixture of curiosity thrown in, just to keep things interesting: What did Anakin's powerful personal gravity *mean*, anyway? And was it only affecting her, or was he subtly altering the psyches—temporarily, at least—of everyone who passed within his sphere? Were the Jedi immune? Just how did he *do* that, anyway? And was this the source of his physical attractiveness, or just an added bonus? And …

*No more ands,* Ryn told herself sternly. *Go to bed. Let these questions answer themselves in their own time.* That was good advice, if she could take it; but somehow Ryn felt that if she could drag
herself back to her room and put herself to bed, then that would be all the mental discipline she could handle for the night. With a sigh, she pushed off and headed for the repulsorlift. It was going to be a long night.
Chapter Summary

"I'd say thank you, but I'm not feeling particularly grateful."

Chapter Notes

I feel vaguely embarrassed, posting this chapter. Maybe that's appropriate, as all the characters in it are embarrassed at some point. If Ryn comes off as painfully reticent and improbably overwhelmed by Anakin's presence and good looks ... then I guess I've done my job. :) This is her dive off the deep end. It's also the beginning of Obi-Wan's interest in cross-cultural research and ethnography, and the dawn of a friendship that will change Anakin's life, in ways good and bad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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CHAPTER TWO

The door chimed quietly and Obi-Wan sent his apprentice a final look of warning before saying, calmly, "Enter."

The door slid back to reveal Ryn Orun, giving off waves of nervous energy that belied her composed expression.

"Miss Orun," Obi-Wan greeted her, noting out of the corner of his eye that Anakin rose and bowed politely, despite his objections to their visitor … and her purpose here. "We are pleased that you could join us."

"Thank you, Master Kenobi. I hope that I may be of service to you." She executed a minimalist bow. "Shall we begin at once?"

Kenobi blinked. "Ah … of course. How do you wish to proceed?"

"That must depend greatly on what you wish to accomplish," Orun answered, keeping her gaze fixed on Obi-Wan's face. "Perhaps you can tell me what you hope to achieve?"

The words were courteous, but Obi-Wan sensed an underlying … something, not quite a threat, perhaps a challenge.

"I'd like to learn more about your curious reaction yesterday," he said cautiously. "I've never encountered such a phenomenon before. I think we owe it to the galaxy to learn all we can."

"Master Yoda tells me that a true Jedi is always studying," Orun answered, which Obi-Wan took for an assent.
"Is there anything we can do to make the experience more comfortable for you?"

Her eyes finally flickered to Anakin. "Worry about the comfort of your Padawan," she murmured.

"I'm sorry?"

"My presence is making him nervous."

Anakin shifted, leaning forward slightly, a pose that Obi-Wan recognized as his best-defense-is-a-good-offense stance. "I should think that I would be the one to make you nervous, given what happened yesterday."

Orun gave him a tight smile. "I never said I wasn't nervous."

Anakin had the grace to blush. "Sorry," he muttered, looking down.

"That's quite all right," Orun said, her tone bland. "Very understandable."

She turned to Kenobi and said, briskly, "You will understand, sir, that I have never done anything of this nature before, so of course I am proceeding by trial and error. I have prepared a list of possibilities that I believe merit consideration." She handed over a flimsiplast with an almost military snap. "You will see the details before you, but basically they all fall into one of two categories: either it's me, or it's Padawan Skywalker. I tend to give more credence to the latter, but I am hardly an impartial observer."

Obi-Wan glanced at the list, handed it to Anakin. "Elaborate on some of those hinging on your own gifts, please."

The young girl took a deep breath and nodded. "It is possible that this entire experience is a normal consequence of my Lorethan heritage. It's difficult to say, because Lorethan females traditionally have very limited interactions with males outside their immediate families from the point of their first menses until their hormones approximate the stability of an adult. I am the exception to that rule. The barest edge of hesitation. "Times are changing."

Obi-Wan frowned. "But Lorethans are human. Human females routinely experience puberty with no ill effects."

Ryn smiled wryly. "I wouldn't say none, Master Kenobi. Puberty is often a trying time of life, for humans of both sexes. More importantly, I think you will agree that the Lorethan sexual experience is rather different from that of most human groups. We are, after all, famous for it."

It was Anakin's turn to frown. "I don't understand."

Sex is a natural part of life, part of the Force, Obi-Wan reminded himself. "The humans of Loreth are widely regarded as being among the most attractive men and women in the galaxy—a circumstance partly due, if I recall, to an unusually high concentration of pheromones. Scientists speculate that something inherent to the planet may affect humanoids who reproduce there over a period of generations. Is that right, Miss Orun?"

"You are correct, Master Kenobi," Orun answered smoothly. "But I should like to add that, though many on Coruscant consider our custom of effectively cloistering girls during the most volatile stage of puberty to be barbaric, we have found it to be quite necessary. We all give off highly erratic levels of these pheromones during this time, due to changing body chemistry—and, of course, all the usual mood swings and biochemical fluctuations that come with adolescence. I'm not sure what the human standard is, but on Loreth these effects can be fairly extreme. Until yesterday, however, I had not
experienced even the usual interest most adolescents feel in the opposite sex."

"Do you think it's possible that the dangers of this period are exaggerated by those with an interest in maintaining the status quo?" Obi-Wan asked, not sure how blunt he could be with her. "After all, many would consider it a sexist system."

Ryn shrugged. "Anything is possible. However, I don't think it's particularly likely. Lorethan hormones are quantifiable; they have been studied by the best scientists in the galaxy, to say nothing of all the quacks. And as for the system's being sexist—well, so is biology, or men would carry half the babies. Girls spend that time learning the ins and outs of adult society. Boys are sent away to training camps, a bit like military schools—often for a longer period." Her sense in the Force darkened, became clouded with misery. "Or at least they were, before the war. These days … things are different."

"I'd hate to be a boy on Loreth," Anakin said, and Orun smiled.

"I can't imagine that it's so much more difficult than being a Jedi Padawan," she said diplomatically. "Although it's probably much less exciting."

Wait a minute.

"Miss Orun, you said something interesting just now: that until yesterday, you had not experienced the feelings humans associate with the beginning of sexual awareness." Ryn nodded slowly, her expression wary, and Obi-Wan was reminded of just how young she was, despite her steady bearing. "But now that has changed? Have you any idea why?"

"I would assume it's related to the psychic reaction I had to your Padawan," she answered—a little too quickly, Obi-Wan thought. As if she'd been expecting the question, and had prepared herself against it.

"But was it a cause, or an effect?" he pressed her. "If, for whatever reason, you were having a delayed experience of adolescent feelings, couldn't that have heighted your awareness, your sensitivity to the world around you, enough to bring about the kind of feeling you had yesterday?"

Ryn frowned at him, but the expression was thoughtful rather than forbidding. "Highly unlikely," she said decisively. "Why just then? And why Skywalker? There had to have been other young men in the vicinity—if I were experiencing nothing more than the pressure of a delayed mating instinct—let's call it what it is—why not any of a dozen others who traveled through roughly the same area at the same time of day? Too many holes here. I think it much more likely that my sudden—and, I might add, rather uncomfortable—prurience is an effect, rather than a cause, of yesterday's psychic experience."

"Please explain."

Ryn hesitated, and Obi-Wan could see, just for a moment, the fear and uncertainty in her eyes, and a sense of humiliation so deep and tearing that it startled him.

"I have a good deal of self-discipline," she began slowly, "and I generally keep my feelings on a pretty tight leash. But that doesn't mean, of course, that I don't have feelings, or that my wants and needs are different from anyone else's. I think probably I had been suppressing my feelings of interest and attraction, pretty effectively, for a long time, and when I encountered the psychic thunderstorm that was your apprentice yesterday, his presence was strong enough to break down the barriers I had built for myself, and suddenly I felt everything I should have been feeling all along." She glanced at Anakin. "I'd thank you, but I'm not feeling particularly grateful."

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Obi-Wan regarded her closely. "You really think that's the explanation?"

"It feels right, sir."

"It still leaves us with the question: why Anakin?"

"I had not forgotten it, sir."

Her studied politeness was maddening, but Obi-Wan sensed that it was somehow necessary for her, a shield against a conversation that flicked on her raw nerves. "And?"

"And for that I have no answer, save that he is special." Her eyes cut to Anakin again, quickly, and then back. "But I have no doubt you already knew that."

He did, indeed. And, more unfortunately, Anakin knew it as well, and felt the pressure. "Then we are right back where we started," he concluded calmly. "Needing a scientific investigation in order to understand what is happening before our eyes."

"It would seem so," Orun agreed, her crisp bearing slumping, just a little.

"Very good," said Obi-Wan, determined to stay positive. "Well, can you sense Anakin now?"

"Yes."

"When did you first begin to sense his presence as you approached?"

Ryn shook her head, black braid sliding just a little. "I never stopped, after yesterday—in the morning, sometime."

Anakin stared. "But we didn't even land on Coruscant until almost noon!"

Ryn gave him an opaque look. "When did you drop out of hyperspace?"

"About nine hundred hours."

She nodded, as if confirming something to herself. "That would make it about right."

"Hold on," Anakin said. "Even a Jedi would have to concentrate to feel someone that far out. How can you"—

"I thought Jedi could sense each other across the galaxy, with time and training."

"Time and training, and considerable power and discipline," said Obi-Wan. "But we search the currents of the Force for a disturbance—a ripple, if you will—that we recognize."

"I don't know anything about ripples," Ryn said, her smooth young face tightening in frustration. "But then, perhaps my abilities with the Force simply don't allow me to sense them. I'm not trained in the Jedi way."

"I can imagine," Anakin said sympathetically.

Ryn Orun gave him a flat stare. "I doubt that."

Anakin opened his mouth—to voice an angry retort, Obi-Wan was sure—but his Master cut him off.

"You're right, Miss Orun. I don't think any of us can ever truly understand another being's
experience. The best we can do is to show compassion to all. In your case, for example, you might be able to show me some compassion by laying out a method of study."

Ryn sighed, and for a moment she looked her real age, still a child in many ways.

"Yes. All right," she said reluctantly. "Your Padawan will not like it, but probably the best way for me to get a clear reading—for lack of a better word—is for me to stay nearby for a day or two. But I will add, Master Kenobi, that before I came here this morning I visited a Two-One-Bee unit and requested a battery of blood tests. If all this excitement has been caused by a mere fluctuation in my adolescent body chemistry, we will soon know it." She hesitated. "If it has, I'm not entirely sure what will happen. It would most likely be disruptive to have me quartered here in the Temple, among Force-sensitives who will constantly be aware of every change, but as far as I'm aware, there is no good alternative place here on Coruscant, even if my duties permitted it."

Obi-Wan blinked. "Place for what?"

"An isolation period."

Ah. "Perhaps none will be necessary."

"I hope not, but that would be highly unusual."

There was something more behind her words, but Obi-Wan could not quite see it. Ryn Orun's mind was well-guarded, whatever Force ability she lacked. Such secrecy should have made him nervous, but his instincts told him he could trust the young Lorethan, despite the brevity of their acquaintance. So instead of probing deeper, he said simply, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Until the possible becomes actual, it is only a distraction," Anakin quoted, with what could best be described as a smirk.

"In the meantime," Obi-Wan concluded, giving Anakin a discouraging look, "why don't the two of you go down to Dex's and pick up some lunch for all of us?" Maybe having a goal would keep Anakin centered for the time it took the girl to get a sense of him.

* 

"This is just an excuse to put us together, you know," Anakin said as they left the Temple precincts and made for an air taxi.

"Of course it is," Ryn said, apparently unperturbed by Obi-Wan's maneuverings. "But would you rather be sitting in a lab while I stare at you? Wouldn't that be awfully uncomfortable?"

"At least it would be honest," said Anakin. "I don't like pretending that this is a social call."

"Then don't pretend," Ryn answered, as though it were all very simple and obvious.

Anakin sighed. "I don't like being studied."

"I know." She didn't say anything else, but something in her voice reminded Anakin of what Obi-Wan had told him about her circumstances.

Anakin wanted to give her the cold shoulder of his silence, but compassion made him say, "I'm sorry. I know you don't like it, either."

Ryn shrugged, the gesture engulfed by her overly large jacket. "I don't suppose anyone does."
They were quiet for a moment, as Anakin flagged down an air taxi. When they were seated, he said, "I know I shouldn't be taking my feelings out on you. None of this is your fault."

"Sure it is," Ryn said, staring over the side of the air taxi's open cockpit. "If I hadn't gone looking for you yesterday—even though I didn't know it was you I was looking for—then I couldn't have come barreling around the corner and run into you, because I would have been safely upstairs, practicing meditation techniques. And none of the rest of it would have happened."

"All right," Anakin said," I take it back. It's all your fault." He gave her a sideways glance. "Feel better?"

She gave him a wry smile. "Not really."

"Good."

The air taxi set them down on a little platform a quarter of a kilometer from Dex's, on the same level in this rather disreputable-looking district of Coruscant. "We can walk from here," Anakin said. "There's enough sidewalk."

Sidewalk space was a rare commodity on a world devoted entirely to cityscape; most space here was vertical. But there were still a few areas where one could be a pedestrian for a limited space, without actually going indoors.

"I don't think it can be healthy," Ryn said abruptly, looking over the edge as they started off.

"What?" Anakin asked, looking around for some unexpected threat.

"Coruscant," Ryn said. "An entire planet where everything is manmade. Nothing grows here, not even weeds."

"I like Coruscant," said Anakin.

Ryn cocked her head at him. "Why?"

Because it was the center of everything. Because it was an exciting place to be. Because it was the opposite of Tatooine. "Because there's always something happening, I guess."

Orun wasn't impressed. "There's always something happening everywhere. But on Coruscant it's always something with a political agenda." She leaned out a little, to look over the edge again. "I miss plants."

That sounded like a non-sequitor to Anakin, but apparently she thought it was relevant. "Plants?"

"Can't you sense it?" she asked, jumping a meter-wide gap in the sidewalk. "There's next to no plan life here. I miss that. Plants are so … alive. No hidden agendas to muddy things up. Just pure life energy."

Briefly Anakin remembered Zonama Sekot and its fiercely vibrant ecosystem. "I hadn't thought about it that way."

"I'm surprised," Ryn said, weaving her way through a knot of humanoids whose formation wouldn't allow her to go around. "It seems like a natural way for a Jedi to look at things."

Anakin followed her through the knot—pushing aside the impulse to show off by simply floating over. "Maybe," he admitted. "But a Jedi doesn't need to be surrounded by plants in order to sense the
"I guess that's where you have me at a disadvantage." She said the words without rancor, but Anakin sensed an underlying tension beneath her calm acceptance.

She stopped in front of the large, somewhat dirty windows declaring this section of the enormous building to be DEX'S DINER. "This is where we're headed?"

"This is the place," Anakin confirmed, and he sensed her skepticism, too, as she followed him through the door.

The droid waiting tables was busy, but Jettster himself was standing at the counter and came forward to greet them.

"Hey, there!" he called cheerfully. "If it isn't Obi-Wan's apprentice! And you've brought a friend, too! Whaddaya know!"

"This is Miss Ryn Orun," Anakin said, not letting his voice betray his ambivalence about her presence. "Ryn, this is Dexter Jettster."

Ryn bowed slightly. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Master Jettster," she said, in the smooth tones of a practiced diplomat, and Anakin cut his eyes to read her face. But all he saw there was polite interest, and he had to give it up, because Dex was asking for their order.

In point of fact, Anakin was not a particular fan of Dex's cooking, but he was a friend of Obi-Wan's, and so Anakin placed an order of his Master's favorite, something relatively harmless for himself, and a popular Corellian dish for Ryn, since she claimed "never to have sampled from this assortment of delicacies."

They found themselves standing outside on the landing with two bags of food, waiting again for an air taxi.

"I hope you like the Corellian," Anakin said as the waited—more to kill the silence than for any other reason.

"I look forward to trying it," his companion said politely, glancing into the bag she held against her chest. "Although I've always heard that Corellian food is a death trap."

Anakin grinned. "It's not the healthiest thing in the galaxy, but as long as you don't make a habit of it, you'll be all right."

Ryn frowned at him under sleek black brows. "That's what they say about death sticks, too," she pointed out.

Anakin had to laugh, just a little. She had a sense of humor a bit like Obi-Wan's: dry and sly, but without his Master's subtle edge of disapproval. "This time it's true," he promised.

They caught one of those increasingly rare phenomena on Coruscant: an air taxi with a sentient driver, a Dug who looked so much like Sebulba that for a moment Anakin's chest tightened. But of course it wasn't Sebulba, and when Anakin used just the tiniest Force-push to help him persuade the Dug to let Anakin drive, Ryn didn't say anything, just scowled at him and then laughed as they shot in and out of traffic, weaving around buildings just for the fun of it.

"Obi-Wan would not approve," Anakin noted without remorse as they stood once more on Temple grounds, having paid the air taxi fare.
"It stands to reason," Ryn said, not sounding all that worried. "The more power one has, the greater the responsibility to use it wisely. And not, say, to go for joy rides in air taxis."

"I didn't damage anything!" Anakin protested, feeling nettled as his own capricious conscience sided with Ryn. "And I paid for all the mileage, and gave him a nice tip. I wasn't hurting anything."

"True," Ryn admitted easily, shifting her sack of food. "It's the principle of the thing. It bothers me that anyone can and does just alter another sentient being's thoughts on a whim." She hesitated. "No one deserves that power. And I wonder sometimes if anyone is responsible enough to wield it."

"All Jedi have that power," Anakin reminded her.

"One of the many reasons why Jedi make me nervous," Ryn said. "I trust their intentions, but nobody's perfect. Sooner or later a Jedi is going to make a mistake. And the galaxy will have to pay for it."

Anakin frowned at her as they reached the Temple steps and started to climb. "The Jedi are good people," he said firmly. "Brave, kind, loyal, compassionate."

Ryn cut him off. "The Jedi Order comprises some of the most decent beings in the galaxy," she agreed. "True heroes. But they are not infallible."

They turned off down the corridor that would take them to the area set aside as quarters for Jedi not currently on missions off-world.

Anakin said, "You take a bleak view of Jedi, considering that you live and study in the Temple."

"Maybe that's why I feel the way I do," Ryn answered. "And I'm studied more than I study, if you know what I mean."

He did, which was a fairly uncomfortable knowledge to have. "Master Obi-Wan uses his power for good," he argued, forgetting his earlier conviction that Obi-Wan would not have approved of his toying with the taxi driver.

"I believe you," Ryn said, and if there was any sarcasm in her thoughts, Anakin could not detect it, even through the Force. "Individuals I can trust. It's the idea of a whole order of superpowered beings who answer to no one but themselves that worries me."

"The Jedi answer to the Senate," Anakin said. "And the Order is made up of individuals."

"All of whom are flawed," Ryn said, evidently warming to the debate. "Even the members of the Jedi Council—maybe especially the members of the Jedi Council. Eventually, somebody always screws up. And with the Jedi, all it takes is one to bring this house of cards down around our ears."

House of cards? Anakin thought, but what he said was, "You don't seem to think much of the Council."

Ryn shrugged. "They haven't impressed me so far. Although, on balance, I think the Council is at least more well-meaning than the Senate, which you brought up a moment ago. If you thought that would reassure me, you must not have been paying much attention to what goes on in the Senate these days."

Anakin would have liked to have pursued the conversation—Ryn certainly had an unusual take on things, and she wasn't afraid of speaking her mind—but somehow he knew that it wasn't a debate they could carry on in front of Obi-Wan. Not only would it make him terribly uncomfortable—as
any suggestion of the Council's fallibility inevitably did—he might even feel he had to say something about it, and that could only end badly. For all of them.

*

Obi-Wan winced as he listened to the sounds of his visitor vomiting in the refresher. "I don't suppose you could have chosen a gentler way of introducing her to the finer delicacies of Corellian cuisine? Or, stars forbid, chosen something else? Corellian food would challenge anyone's stomach."

"She said anything would be fine, Master," Anakin said innocently. "How was I to know her reaction would be so violent?"

"Hmph," said Obi-Wan, signaling his skepticism without actually having to make a case for his suspicions. "Well, I certainly hope you'll be a little nicer to her this afternoon. After all, your dubious food choices have clearly ruined her day."

Anakin's "Yes, Master," sounded properly grave, but Obi-Wan had his doubts. The two of them had seemed friendly enough, when they returned from Dex's, but the Jedi Master still felt a reluctance on both their parts. Orun was embarrassed and defensive and reluctant; Anakin was embarrassed and resentful and reluctant; and the sum total of their combined efforts to cooperate seemed to have been to secure a lunch that made at least one of them miserably ill.

Ryn Orun staggered back into the room, still looking rather pale.

"Are you all right?" Obi-Wan asked her, noticing with a grim sense of confirmation that Anakin wouldn't meet her eyes.

"I'm fine," she answered, her voice a little hoarse. "May I trouble you for a glass of water?"

"Of course," Obi-Wan said, getting it himself just in case Anakin decided to throw any poisons in. "I'm so sorry the food made you ill."

"It's probably just the grease. I've always heard Corellian food was heavy."

"Well, perhaps it wasn't the wisest choice for your introduction to galactic cuisine," Obi-Wan suggested, holding his glare on Anakin for a few seconds to make sure he got the message. "What do you usually eat?"

Ryn shrugged. "I don't often leave the Temple, so it depends on who's cooking that day. I like Master Yoda's soup. Or, well, some things I can't pronounce. I help in the kitchen sometimes."

"What do you make?" Obi-Wan asked, more out of a sense of politeness than any real interest.

Her answer, though, was odd.

"Whatever I'm told."

"Haven't you any choice?"

"I just follow orders. I'm not the kind of cook you want experimenting."

"If I get poisoned, I'm blaming you," Anakin teased her, with a sidelong glance at Obi-Wan.

"If you get poisoned, it will be payback," Ryn countered calmly. "Maybe Shaak Ti will be in the mood for Corellian tonight."
Anakin laughed, apparently unconcerned about having his ulterior motives revealed. "The deep-fried tubers are the best. Make sure you get them extra-crispy."

Ryn leveled a glare at Anakin as she sipped her water, but she didn't say anything.

Obi-Wan's instincts told him that it would be wise to go ahead and end this encounter while it was on a reasonably friendly—or, say, non-violent—note. So:

"Thank you for sharing your time and energy," he told Ryn. "I imagine you should return to your quarters now and rest. Some healing meditation might also ease your stomach."

"I will certainly try it, Master Kenobi. Padawan Skywalker." She handed Obi-Wan her glass and included them both in her very correct bow, only slightly shaky, before exiting the room with the precision bearing of a military officer.

*

But when Ryn got back to her small room, she did not sink into a meditation pose and begin contemplating the mysteries of the Force, or the busy workings of cells in her own body. She lay down, immediately leapt to her feet and threw up again, then gingerly stretched out on her bed and thought about Anakin, trying to sort the day's jumble into something quantifiable, something she could make sense of. And trying, at the same time, to memorize the tilt of Anakin's head when he was thinking, or the shape of his mouth when he smiled--because, while she knew she had and would see many sights more beautiful by any objective standard, she was sure that none of them would ever affect her quite the same way.

She fell asleep with her heartbeat still loud in her ears.

Chapter End Notes

If you've made it this far, you might as well tell me what you thought of the journey. Share some feedback!
Down the Well

Chapter Summary

Obi-Wan hits a little too close to the mark with his research, Ryn digs herself in deeper with Anakin, and a message from the Hutts is cause for concern ...

Chapter Notes

This was the chapter that made me laugh at teenage hormones, which of course you can't do when you are actually a teenager. Don't be afraid to roll your eyes while reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Disclaimer: George Lucas owns Star Wars. I'm just borrowing the toys ... all in good, clean fun, no profit. :)

CHAPTER THREE

Ryn might be young, but she wasn't stupid. She recognized that the new racing of her heartbeat, the rushing thunder in her ears every time she looked at Anakin, might be heady stuff ... but it was ultimately unhealthy. Anakin was a Jedi Padawan. He wasn't going to ignore his supposed calling as the Chosen One to drop everything and fall head over heels for her.

And, also, he just wasn't interested.

So when her bloodwork came back from the Temple's medical facility and informed her of what she had already guessed: her hormones had risen sharply, and she was now giving off pheromone levels approaching the norm for Lorethan girls her age—she told Master Kenobi the next day, and lied through her teeth when he asked her if she thought it had anything to do with her encounter with Anakin.

Obi-Wan's look said he didn't believe her disclaimer, but he was too polite to call her a liar.

Instead he asked her if she would permit him to study the fascinating phenomenon of Lorethan adolescence. Ryn, recognizing the countermove for what it was, glared at him, but she couldn't find a decent way to refuse. She was at the disposal of the Jedi—all the Jedi—for now. It was part of her assignment. So she let out a tense breath, smiled with perhaps a few too many teeth, and said, "Yes, of course, Master Kenobi. How may I be of help?"

And so for the next few weeks she spent much of her spare time with the Jedi and his Padawan, breathing into testers, or donating blood samples, or merely standing around letting Obi-Wan monitor her reactions to various stimuli—sometimes through devices, more often through the Force.
Until the day she walked in on Anakin, coming out of the refresher.

Knocking for entrance, she’d heard come in from somewhere inside the small suite of rooms Skywalker and Kenobi shared, and stepped through into the living area.

She was looking around for the origin of Obi-Wan's voice when Anakin stepped out of the refresher, still wet and toweling his hair, wearing only his Jedi breeches.

"Master, have you"—his words broke off as his eyes fell on Ryn.

Look away, fool, look away! Ryn told herself, but she stood frozen, lips parted in surprise, her eyes widened as though to take in more of the sight before them.

He was … magnificent. Lean but hard, with the well-developed muscles that came from countless hours of lightsaber practice. Ryn's mouth worked futilely as a wave of heat swept through her. She knew the slang term for what she was feeling: turned on. Followed closely by embarrassed. She knew Anakin knew it, too; a few days in his company had been enough to develop a healthy respect for his Force perceptions. There was no stealing glances at Anakin. He always knew.

He could have done so many things then. Laughed at her, or turned away in disgust and discomfort—she knew her reaction made him uncomfortable—but with the careless compassion that was so much a part of him, he ignored her lapse and motioned to the kitchen alcove with his damp towel. "I think Obi-Wan's cooking."

Ryn nodded mutely, not trusting herself to speak, lest she say something stupid and unproductive, like kiss me.

She turned the corner into the kitchen area and flung up a hand in greeting as Obi-Wan turned to face her. He didn't say anything, but his minutely lifted brow was enough to tell her he had sensed what was happening in the other room. Ryn blushed even more fiercely, unable to hold his gaze.

"I'm sorry," Obi-Wan said quietly, watching her. "I didn't realize how difficult this would be for you. Is it normal among Lorethans to feel so … intensely?"

Ryn shrugged, trying to convince herself that she wasn't miserable. "I don't know. I have nothing to compare it to." She hesitated. "Maybe this"—obsession, fixation, madness—she couldn't make herself be explicit—"happens to everybody. Or maybe that's the point of the cloistering, to keep it from happening. I just don't know."

Obi-Wan waited, just a beat. "Maybe it would be easier for you not to come here. Get some distance."

Ryn pressed the heels of her hands to her temples. I tried that already, remember? "It probably wouldn't help." She tried a shaky breath, then another. "Maybe it's just something you have to grow out of. No quick fix." She breathed in again, a little easier this time. "Speaking of what's normal for a Lorethan adolescent, I contacted my brother on Loreth last week and asked for some hard data on the whole sexual maturation process, since you seemed interested. This is what he sent in response." She pulled a datachip from a pocket in her tunic and held it out to Kenobi.

"Interesting," Kenobi murmured, holding it up and looking at it as though secrets might be printed visibly on its surface. "I'll have to take a look at it later."

Ryn shrugged, moving forward to stir the cooking vegetables, since Obi-Wan seemed to have forgotten them. "I hope it's helpful. It's … we … don't often share data with offworlders."
"Yes," Kenobi said absently. "I'd always heard Lorethans were rather xenophobic."

Ryn frowned. *Don't rush to take offense,* she reminded herself. "I don't know about xenophobic," she said cautiously. "But being an independent world in a contested territory has perhaps made us wary of outsiders, especially foreign governments." She didn't mention that they had a special fear and distrust of the Jedi, but she knew she didn't have to.

"I must say, I'm surprised your government allowed you to come to Coruscant at all, much less study in the Jedi Temple," said Obi-Wan, confirming his ability to fill in the blanks.

*Allowed?* Ryn thought, remembering the sight of her planet from space, drifting father and farther away, the only home she'd ever known or longed for. "We owed the Jedi a great debt," she said, still being careful. "Your order lost a man in our fight, whether we wanted him there in the first place or not. It was only fitting that we should send a life in return."

Obi-Wan considered her silently for a moment. At last he said, "Don't let Anakin hear you talking like that. It sounds almost like slavery."

*It does, doesn't it?* Ryn thought, not caring this time if he could sense her thoughts or not. But instead of saying anything aloud, she flipped a small strip of bright-orange vegetable out of the pan and tasted it for crispness, playing for time.

She burned her tongue, but when she could speak again she said, "Well, I think I'm just a loan, anyway. The Jedi Council just wanted to study me for a while. *And they've had plenty of time to do it, too. Why haven't they sent me home yet?*" She tried a grin. "So I'm really more like a science experiment than a slave."

Obi-Wan smiled back, but Ryn thought he looked more troubled than amused. "How old were you when you were brought here?"

"I've only been here a few months."

"And now you're nearly thirteen."

"That's right."

"That must be hard."

"Sometimes. *Every day.*"

"I never thought much about homesickness until Anakin came along," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully. "He missed his mother very badly at first."

"I can imagine." Despite the Jedi doctrine on attachment, there was a warmth about Anakin that made it difficult to believe that he would easily forget someone he cared about. Ryn felt privately that the Jedi were wrong and personal attachments were necessary for a healthy life. But it wouldn't do any good to say so, since it was a good bet the Jedi knew the typical Lorethan stance already, and she didn't have anything to add to it. So she said, "Don't you think he still does?"

Obi-Wan frowned at her. "What makes you say that?"

Ryn started to shrug, caught herself, and said, "Well, he certainly misses something."

Obi-Wan continued to regard her closely as she lifted the pan of vegetables from the cooker and slid them onto the two plates Obi-Wan had sitting nearby.
"Well, you'd know, I suppose," he said, when it was clear that Ryn wasn't going to elaborate. Anakin's secrets were his own. "Get out another plate and give yourself some vegetables, too."

Ryn slid him her best sly wink, trying to lighten the mood. "I don't know," she said, with exaggerated deliberation. "Did Anakin pick this? Because his food choices haven't worked out so well for me in the past."

"The food is entirely benign, I promise you," Obi-Wan said, smiling. "Nothing Corellian."

"Well, then, I must bow to the skills of the renowned negotiator, Jedi Knight Kenobi," Ryn answered, with a literal bow in his direction as Anakin came around the corner, tying the short tail in his hair. "I've come to steal your lunch, Anakin."

His lips quirked in a crooked half-smile, the awkwardness of their earlier encounter apparently forgotten. "I may not give it up without a fight."

"Well, I could always duel you for it," Ryn said, hanging onto her grin in spite of a rapidly increasing heart rate. "Teach you a little humility."

Anakin raised his eyebrows. "Have you forgotten the thrashing I have you last time?"

"No, but I've been practicing since then." And she had, too. She owed it to her brother to be the best damn fighter the Jedi Order had ever seen. She spent extra hours every day, training, after Kenobi and the Council had released her. She would do it. She had to.

No mere Jedi Padawan could best her.

Not even the Chosen One.

"Speaking of needing a lesson in humility …" Anakin said, shaking his finger at her.

"That's enough, you two," Obi-Wan said, breaking in before Ryn could think of a comeback. "You can spar later, if you want to hone your skills, but you are certainly not going to fight over the food like a pair of ill-mannered rancor pups."

"I think we've just been insulted," Anakin told her, stretching up to get out a third plate and scooping a bit of the mixed vegetables from each of the full plates onto it to make three equal shares.

"That was my impression, too," Ryn agreed, trying to keep her thoughts quiet as she watched him work.

Anakin leaned past her, close enough that she could feel the heat from his skin, and keeping her thoughts quiet flew out the window as the breath caught in her throat and Ryn tried to remember how to breathe.

Anakin ignored her to hand Obi-Wan a mug over his shoulder. "There you go, Master."

He stepped away, and Ryn tried to get a grip on the shaking that seemed to start somewhere in her chest cavity and spread outward to fingertips and toes.

"Here." Anakin was back, pressing a cup of moruna juice into her hand. "Try this. You'll like it."

"That's what you said about the Corellian food," Ryn reminded him.

Anakin grinned unrepentantly. "Yes, but this time I mean it."
"If I get sick, I'm blaming you."

"Your brilliant revenge," Anakin agreed, causing Obi-Wan to snort a laugh.

They were nearly done with lunch when Obi-Wan said, "Was it difficult to get the information you had requested?"

Ryn blinked, having momentarily forgotten all about the data she'd brought him. "Oh … no. My brother did all the string-pulling."

"Oh?" said Obi-Wan. "Who is your brother?"

"Ah …" It wasn't exactly a secret, but … still, it was uncomfortable to discuss. "Kittraal Orun. Warlord of our clan."

"I'm not familiar with the structure of Lorethian society," Obi-Wan aid. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"That depends. A Warlord is the chief of all his clan's defenses and military operations. But in this case it's a bit more complicated, because Clan Orun has traditionally provided the strongest warriors. We're … like a special ops unit, I suppose you might say. We're very proud of our training programs, not to mention our bloodlines. So very often the Warlord of Clan Orun will go on to become either the Prince of his clan, or the High King's Champion, which would mean that he had to leave his clan, but also that he would superintend all Lorethian military actions."

"There's no way to tell which?" Anakin asked.

"Not at this point, no," Ryn said. "It's no secret that the battles fought in the last hundred years have disrupted the structure of our society. But he is widely regarded to be the best warrior in living memory. That would be a great asset in a Champion, but in these troubled times, it would be almost as useful in the Clan Prince."

"How is the selection determined?" Obi-Wan asked, and Ryn decided that she had been revealing enough for one day.

"It's complicated," she replied, allowing herself another shrug. "And every clan has its own rules."

"I don't think it can be right for power to be inherited," Anakin spoke up. "Your merits should decide who you become."

"I can see why you'd think so," Ryn said. "And I won't say there haven't been times when I wished I had been born a peasant. We're a bit like the Jedi in one sense: a certain segment of the population, determined largely by genetics—which is another way of saying by birth—is raised for service from the cradle. That would be my people: the noble class. From very early on we are taught that it is our duty to be the sacrifice for our people. Other people—most people—are born into the peasant class, which sounds awful, but it's actually very flexible. Farmers and laborers and artisans all fall into this category, but sometimes a peasant will pursue a military career. If he's good, it's a way to elevate his rank in society pretty quickly. And then there are the religious orders. Anybody can choose to enter those."

"I'd think there would be a lot of peasants rushing to join the military," Anakin said, and Ryn shook her head.

"It can be a way into the noble class, but that isn't enough allure for most people. It's a hard and dangerous career, and things don't get much better even if you do earn a noble rank. The nobility is
poor, and hasn't much chance of changing that, because our lives are spent in service. We haven't much time to amass wealth, and we are seldom free to marry whom we will. It is not an easy life."

"It has been my experience that such a concept of nobility seldom functions as well in reality as the ideal you are describing," Obi-Wan interjected. "The powerful quickly become corrupt."

"It does happen that way, sometimes," Ryn admitted. "But to Lorethans, that is a perversion of our way of life. With power comes responsibility. Those who fail to recognize this are doomed to lose the power of which they are jealous."

"And how do you go about removing a power-hungry despot?" asked Obi-Wan, his eyes intent on her face. There was something in his expression that made her nervous, and she swallowed carefully before answering.

"It depends," she said slowly, "on who he is, what his power bases are … a popular uprising, maybe, or an intervention by the other nobles in his clan. And in my grandfather's time, the Council of Elders actually stepped in and backed the deposition of the Prince of Clan Ardel. His son carries a grudge even now."

"And does this affect Lorethan politics?" Obi-Wan asked, still a little too searching for Ryn's taste.

She shrugged her shoulders elaborately. "Ask a political analyst."

"You're evading the question," Anakin observed, using a small scrap of bread to wipe his plate clean.

"You're damn right I am," Ryn said, casting him a quick glare. "I am not a spy, and if I were, I would be working for Loreth, not the Jedi. I will submit to Master Yoda's examinations, I will undergo the blood tests the Council is continually requesting, I will even try to help you understand Lorethan culture. But I will not sit and here an be grilled about internal political matters. That is outside the scope of my assignment."

They both stared at her.

"You're here on assignment," Obi-Wan said at last. "Does Master Yoda know?"

"I should hope so," said Ryn. "He's the one who wanted so badly to study a Lorethan." She hesitated, then added, "I believe it was Master Windu who actually handled the papers."

"The papers?"

"My civilian traveling clearance, that sort of thing. They don't let members of the Lorethan nobility go traipsing about the Republic unattended, you know. Not since we were occupied, especially."

"I heard that was a tough campaign," Anakin offered, the light of battle glinting briefly in his eyes before he managed to dampen it.

"We won," Ryn said shortly. There was no need to remember the horror, the devastation, of her home planet: it was always with her, a haunting presence that stood behind everything she had done on Coruscant.

Something subtle shifted in her sense of Anakin, an injection of warmth, and he reached out and gently squeezed her hand before going to wash his dishes: a simple human gesture, but very un-Jedi. Ryn caught a hint of disapproval, quickly masked, on Kenobi's face before he got his expression under control.
Cold Jedi, Ryn thought, and followed Anakin to the sink to take care of her own dishes.

She was getting ready to leave for the day when Anakin scrunched his brow, staring at her.

"You're nervous about something," he said, his tone accusing.

That raised her hackles a little. "So?"

"I thought earlier it was just because you saw—I mean …"

"You don't have anything I haven't seen before," said Ryn, surprised at her own audacity. "Although yours is better." She smirked a little, trying to make it a joke, then shrugged, her all-purpose gesture for any situation she didn't fully grasp. "I received a message last night that puzzled me some." She glanced at her chrono. "And it's time for me to go figure out what it's about. So if you two Jedi will excuse me …"

"Wait a second," Obi-Wan said, struck by an inconvenient flash of perceptiveness. "Who is this message from? Is it bad news from home, do you think?"

Ryn tightened her lips. "The message came from the offices of Ziro the Hutt. I won't know what it's all about until I attend the meeting."

"A Hutt?" Anakin exclaimed, about as gracelessly as she'd expected.

"You can't seriously be planning to go alone," Kenobi said, looking at her as though she were an errant Padawan.

But I'm not. So too bad, Master Obi-Wan.

"I have to," she said grimly. "The instructions were very clear. They specifically forbade me to bring any Jedi. And for all I know, this could be related to a matter of Lorethan security. In which case it would be not only stupid, but also quite possibly treasonous, for me to bring anyone along."

Obi-Wan lifted his eyebrows. "And what does Ziro the Hutt have to do with Lorethan security?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. But we have non-hostile relations with the Hutts--for now, at least. It's conceivable that he has something to discuss with a duly inheritrix member of the nobility, and in that case, I am the only one within a hundred parsecs."

"It is also entirely conceivable that Ziro wants to kidnap you, or something worse," Obi-Wan said darkly. "You could be walking into a trap."

Ryn started to shrug again, reminded herself that she had to quit doing that, and said, "That is possible, yes. Hence the nervousness your Padawan mentioned."

"And yet you're going anyway," Obi-Wan said flatly, while Anakin stood by with his arms folded, watching.

"It's a risk I have to take," Ryn told them both, with what she hoped was a lot more confidence than she felt. "If Ziro does have a legitimate reason to meet with me, and I don't go, I could jeopardize everything my people have spent the last few years rebuilding."

"Like good relations with the Hutts?" Anakin almost snarled, and Ryn knew she didn't quite keep her face smooth.

"Yes," she said, not backing down. "The Hutts only want our money. The Republic wants our
"Slavers and murderers!" he snapped back, and Ryn wondered again what exactly had been his experience on Tatooine.

But since it seemed highly unlikely that the notoriously close-mouthed Padawan Skywalker was going to choose this moment to open up about his shadowy past, Ryn only rubbed her left hand, soothing away a remembered pain, and said quietly, "I know."

"Then how can you"—Anakin began, then cut himself off.

"Because I have to," Ryn said. "Now. I must leave for my meeting, or I will be late, and Ziro might take offense, and if you have never seen an offended Hutt, you can take my word for it that you don't want to." She turned, but at the door she paused.

"Oh, and if you don't see me for a couple of days? Please report me missing."

Chapter End Notes

Feedback is love! :)

Celibacy and non-attachment are not the same thing. Meanwhile, Anakin is worried about Jedi ethics.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Anakin felt his Master's eyes on him as the door slid shut behind Ryn Orun's retreating footsteps. "There goes one brave, but remarkably foolish, young woman."

She had guts. He'd give her that. "Yes, Master."

"For all the good it will do anyone if she gets herself killed."

But he had felt her grim determination in the Force before she left, not quite masking the fear that tightened her chest and made it harder to breathe, and he recognized it instinctively: the desire to not fail. Not herself; the people who might be counting on her. She had already gone over every argument he and Obi-Wan could have offered against going, and decided that they were meaningless when compared to the possibility that the message was genuine, the chance that someone on her homeworld needed her help. It wasn't foolish at all.

He respected her for it, a little unwillingly.

"Of course," Obi-Wan continued, "recklessness is not a quality entirely absent in some Padawans I know, who could use this as an example of the kind of nonsense you can get into when you fail to look before you leap."

Anakin winced. "She looked, Master," he said slowly. "She just didn't care what she saw."

Obi-Wan snorted. "And is that supposed to make it better?"

Anakin shrugged. "She's trying to do the right thing, Master. That isn't always the same as the wise thing." Maybe he had a bit more sympathy because he felt that the Jedi too often made the opposite choice. Not Qui-Gon, certainly, and he hadn't yet seen Obi-Wan do it, either, but … he had a hazy sense that far too many Jedi would, if they were pushed.

He didn't like that line of thought much. The Jedi were all that was good and pure and right with the galaxy. If he feared that sometimes they chose expediency over fairness in settling a conflict, even when the law was on their side … well, maybe he was the one who was wrong, who didn't understand all the nuances because he wasn't trying hard enough. He just had to work a little harder, be a little better … because the Jedi didn't make mistakes. They couldn't afford to. The galaxy couldn't afford for them to.
But this one time, he felt he understood Ryn Orun a little better than he would have liked.

"Follow the Force, Anakin, and you will be neither wrong nor foolish."

To say that Ryn didn't have the Force-sensitivity of even the youngest Padawans--or if she had, she wasn't using it; Anakin got very odd signals from her sometimes--and therefore couldn't really be expected to use the Force for guidance would have been obvious, and possibly open the way for a lecture on how lesser beings, deprived of the Force's promptings, were able to make those decisions, so Anakin just inclined his head and said, "Yes, Master," as respectfully as he could.

His deference was hardly heeded, because Obi-Wan was already moving on to his next topic. "You shouldn't let her reactions to you make you so uncomfortable. Ryn is not a Jedi, trained to be mindful of her feelings. She can't help feeling the way she does. And, you must remember, she is only a very young girl."

Not that young, Anakin thought, a perspective he wouldn't have entertained before today. But earlier, when she had accidentally caught him coming out of the 'fresher … She had been embarrassed, yes, blushing as furiously as any girl with newly active hormones; but in that split second before the embarrassment caught up to her, the product of cultural conditioning that informed civilized beings everywhere that they should not gape at members of the opposite sex half-naked, he had caught her wide-eyed stare, and her presence in the Force, usually muted, had flared glowing-hot and easy to read, and he could feel her frank admiration … and there was nothing childlike about it.

He was flattered, but he wasn't interested, and he thought Ryn was probably smart enough to figure that out on her own, but it made things a little more complicated, because it wasn't what he'd thought at first: a kid, picking the Chosen One for her first crush the way some kids picked Holovid stars for theirs. Ryn wasn't interested in the Chosen One at all. She was attracted to him, Anakin Skywalker, not because of some prophecy, not even because of his Force-ability, but because of … him.

That was going to be a problem. Because he didn't have any experience turning women down gently, or harshly, or at all. Somehow that lesson must have escaped Master Yoda's vigilance.

Back to Obi-Wan. "I know she can't help it, Master. But it still makes me uneasy."

"There is no emotion; there is serenity," Obi-Wan reminded him, sounding as if, for him, it were true. Anakin had a sinking feeling that it was never going to be true for him, but he stuck to the issue at hand. "That might be true for you and Master Yoda, Master. But Ryn has feelings, and sooner or later I'm going to have to hurt them."

"If she is wise, there will be no need for that. She will remember that the Jedi Code forbids attachment and know better than to ask anything of you."

Ask? Anakin didn't know Ryn well enough to guess whether she would be bold enough to actually come out and ask, but he was pretty sure that simply refusing to verbalize a request, or a denial, was not going to keep her from getting hurt.

Maybe it's just hormones, after all. Maybe she won't get all emotional about it. She was playing it pretty cool so far; maybe it was just a passing thing.

But Anakin wasn't placing any bets, because ever since he had fallen on top of Ryn Orun in the corridor and watched her black hair spill like the juice of some inky berry across the pale marble floor, he had had a bad feeling about this.

He tuned back in to realize that Obi-Wan was saying something that made that bad feeling a little
sharper and fired all his instincts for danger.

"Of course, in time, Anakin, if you both feel some sort of physical attraction, there is no reason why you can't indulge it a little. Jedi are not required to be celibate, only to remain free of attachment."

Anakin frowned. "What's the point of physical intimacy if there is no emotional attachment?"

Obi-Wan didn't quite blush, but Anakin felt a subtle shift in his Master's presence that warned him it was a close thing. "You will have to discover that for yourself, my young Padawan."

But Anakin didn't think he would. There was only one woman whose smooth skin he wanted to touch, whose soft lips he longed to kiss. It wasn't Ryn Orun, and it was never going to be, which was a real shame, because that would have been a lot more convenient, for both of them. There was none of this that he could explain to Obi-Wan, of course, so instead he just said, "She's a little young for me, Master," which was also true. Five years his senior was a much better age.
Ziro the Hutt knows how to turn a profit.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Ryn took a series of public transits to Ziro the Hutt's Coruscant offices, a set of route changes and kicking her heels at the transit stops that took the better part of three hours, after sneaking out the back door of the Temple, never an easy thing to do.

She had realized early on that Skywalker and Kenobi knew nothing of her de facto imprisonment; they considered her as free to come and go as they were themselves—and, when she was with them, she usually was. But that didn't change the fact that any attempt to leave the Temple precincts alone was going to draw suspicion, and awkward questions, and possibly a polite-but-firm refusal to allow her egress. Ryn had seen all that before, and she didn't have time for it now.

So she had gone out with the trash.

When she first came to the Temple, she had believed, or at least hoped (with all the naiveté of youth), that good behavior—a patient, respectful attitude, impeccable manners, attention to whatever duties were hers for the moment—might gain her some freedoms. But she had long since come to understand that that was never going to happen, because the Jedi, before they ever met her, had determined that she was a dangerous form of some exotic wildlife, and adopted attitudes and expectations accordingly. The fact that Ryn had been a model student and a quiescent specimen for examination, or that her sole focus was on her duty (which for now meant doing whatever the Jedi Council asked of her) made no difference, because the case was already closed.

That was it, plain before her eyes, stark and unavailing: the knowledge of what would finally—in a year, or a lifetime, she couldn't know—destroy the Jedi Order. An inability to change, the inevitability brought about by a blindness to the need for change, in things great and small. It was inertia, plain and simple. Entropy. Calcification. The loss of the right questions, because they thought they had the answers. As static as death.

At the same time, her own situation revealed a somewhat darker aspect of the Jedi's problem. Ryn Orun was, to all intents and purposes, on loan to the Jedi Council, from Loreth. She was a noble hostage, a condition commonplace among her own people: the best and brightest members of the nobility were often traded off, for a period of months or years, to other Houses—to repay some large debt, or as part of a post-conflict treaty. It was accepted practice, just one of the duties a child born to a noble family might be expected to fill one day; and, despite the title, such hostages were usually treated with respect, as valued members of the community.
So Ryn might be lonely, and she might dislike Coruscant, but she had no problem, on principle, with the task assigned her.

The Jedi were another story. After generations of decrying the Lorethan way of life as barbaric, they were now willing to take advantage of that "primitive" system. They were more than happy to make one young woman their effective prisoner, for their convenience, to study at their leisure. And they didn't even seem to be aware of the moral dilemma facing them.

No Lorethan clan would be so barbaric.

There was a bright spot, she supposed. The fact that Skywalker and Kenobi were ignorant of the full extent of her captivity meant that no one had told them; and the most likely reason to have withheld that particular morsel of information must be that the Jedi who had hatched this plot—Mace Windu, she was almost sure of it—didn't want them to know. Skywalker's opinion they wouldn't care about--because, despite all their blather about the Chosen One, most of the Jedi saw Anakin primarily as an inconvenience, a problem to be solved rather than a voice to be respected. But Kenobi … Obi-Wan Kenobi had not been told, even after he began working with Ryn, because he would most definitely not approve. He was that painfully rare specimen: a Jedi with a real, working conscience.

Which was why, when the message from Ziro's office had been about to lead her into a dangerous minefield of a situation, there had been two beings on Coruscant whom Ryn knew she could trust, two beings who would be discreet and who would care what happened to her.

Even if she was low on the list of people one of them would like to be stuck in a turbolift with.

So now, entering Ziro's palacial offices between two armed guards—they weren't actually enough security for Ryn Orun, if she really wanted to get away, but she tried to act appropriately cowed, because nothing beat being underestimated—she knew that, if the Hutt turned out be (predictably) untrustworthy, all she had to do was hang on for two days, and help would be on the way.

Maybe it won't come to that, she told herself—because, really, a little optimism never hurt anybody.

At first, it seemed as though that optimism might be justified. Instead of being led straight to Ziro's audience chamber, the guards took her down a long side corridor to what looked like a glorified accounting office, with bland furnishings, two chairs in front of the desk, and a smug-looking Bothan behind.

"Ahhh," he said, sounding satisfied, his fur waving gently. "The esteemed Lady Ryn Orun, isn't it?"

You know kriFFing well who I am, Ryn thought; but instead of saying that aloud (for all the good it would do her), she inclined her head. "Your recognition honors me," she said politely, "but I am afraid I cannot return the compliment."

The Bothan waved her off with a markedly human gesture of nonchalance. "No need, no need. I am only a secretary. But you must be anxious to learn why we asked you to come here."

"Ahhh," he said, sounding satisfied, his fur waving gently. "The esteemed Lady Ryn Orun, isn't it?"

You know kriFFing well who I am, Ryn thought; but instead of saying that aloud (for all the good it would do her), she inclined her head. "Your recognition honors me," she said politely, "but I am afraid I cannot return the compliment."

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"I have to admit to some idle curiosity," Ryn agreed, folding her arms to hide the shaking in her hands.

That turned out to be a mistake, because the Bothan wanted to hand her something: a rectangular box, a little wider than her hand and a little longer than her forearm. She focused on it for just a second as the secretary laid it in her hands and fought to keep her expression smooth as a jolt of recognition flashed through her and her fingers tightened involuntarily around its edge.

The Bothan watched her for a moment, and Ryn wondered what he was seeing: not the cool, steady
mask she'd wanted to project, certainly. Then, with a ripple of fur, he said, "Aren't you going to open
it?"

Ryn's jaw was shaking so hard she could barely form the words. "No need," she said. "I know what
it is."

She bowed over the box, held at waist-level. "I thank you for the timely delivery of this package. As
always, it is a great pleasure to do business with this office."

"Not to be rude," said the Bothan, "but there is the question of payment."

Here it comes. "I'm sorry. Did not my brother pay your agents when he requested that you deliver
the item?" Of course he had. Ziro wanted more. Well, that was fine. For proper receipt of what she
held in her hands, Kitraal would pay a king's ransom.

"He paid us half of the agreed charge," the Bothan said carefully. "The rest was to be paid on
delivery."

That sounded reasonable enough, as far at it went, but the Bothan was definitely on edge about
something, and Ryn was sure that whatever it was could not be good for her health.

"I understand," she said, still trying to get a handle on the shaking. "Allow me to comm my brother,
and I will inform him that I have received the package and request that he make a deposit to Ziro's
account immediately." Act naïve. Let them keep underestimating you.

"Of course," the Bothan said, evidently determined not to tip his hand, and swiveled the comm
controls toward her.

It was an unfamiliar system, but Ryn had no trouble working it out—enough to comm. Lorethan
Command, anyway.

"This is Ryn Orun," she said when she got an operator. "I need you to patch me through to my
brother."

"Receiving," the slightly staticky voice at the other end said. 'Unable to voiceprint. Confirm personal
identification code."

"Negative, Command. This is not a private channel. But I am Ryn Orun, and I still need to speak to
my brother."

"Understood," Command replied; but the operator didn't sound happy about it. "Putting you through,
audio-only."

"Thank you."

It was a few seconds before Kitraal's voice, warm and rich even though the static of several hundred
lightyears, reached her. "Kitraal Orun here."

"Kit, it's Ryn."

There was a pause while Kit recalled that the sister he hadn't spoken to in months wouldn't be calling
him at work for fun.

"What is it?" he asked finally, and Ryn wondered if he had gone into his office for a little privacy.

"I'm comming from the offices of Ziro the Hutt, on Coruscant, to confirm receipt of the package.
You can deposit the remainder of the payment immediately."

Ryn heard a faint breath of hesitation before he said, "Understood. Ryn, comm me again when you get back to the Jedi Temple, will you?"

That was going to be a problem. But Kit wasn't just her brother, he was her superior. So she just said, "Yes, sir," and knew she had to find a way.

"Excellent," said Kit. "You may inform Lord Ziro that transfer will begin when I receive confirmation of your safe arrival in the Jedi Temple."

Ryn caught a hint of exasperation in Kit's voice, but whether at his sister or the Hutt remained unseen.

"Be well, Ryn."

"Be well, Kit," Ryn answered, hearing the click of a terminated transmission before she even finished speaking.

She lifted her eyes to regard the Bothan warily. "There, you see? You'll get your payment in less than a standard hour."

"I'm afraid not," the Bothan said, "because you won't be returning to the Jedi Temple just yet."

Great. So Ziro's people had taken a good look at the security measures on this box and decided that whatever lay inside must be valuable. Which it was, but not to them.

Ryn decided to play confused, for no real reason other than that it bought her a little more time than leaping straight to cursing and throwing things. "Don't you think that might slow your payment a little?"

The Bothan made a noise that Ryn thought might be construed as unkind laughter. "Oh, we'll be paid. Your brother will pay very well indeed to get you back."

No, he won't. Neither the Lorethan government nor Clan Orun had money to waste on ransoming a twelve-year-old noblewoman clumsy enough to get herself kidnapped by Hutts.

"In turbolaser bolts, maybe," she said aloud. "We don't have the money for a ransom. But he will probably feel the need to avenge my death somehow. Say, by taking out his frustrations on an overpaid Bothan secretary."

She tried to put some menace behind the words, but it was hard, because she was roughly half the size of the next smallest being in the room.

The Bothan made a gesture that the cultural database at the Temple had equated with a shrug. "Maybe, if you show us what's in the box, we could let you go a little … sooner."

Yes, but that would blow my cover. Chances were the Hutt's underlings wouldn't see any need to report what they had seen to the Temple, even if she didn't kill them all, but the best way to keep a secret, after all, was still to tell no one. It was simple, yet effective.

Well, getting my head blown off is going to be simple, too. And those blasters look pretty damn effective.

Easy. You're focusing on the negative. You may be inside the compound, but there are only two
blasters within shooting distance. Just take out these three goons before one of them can sound the alarm.

"Mr. … uh … Secretary, I assure you that the contents of this box could be of no interest to your master. They are personal effects, of no value to anyone but myself."

The Bothan's fur rippled with ill-contained glee. "Those locks say otherwise," he reminded her smugly.

Voice-code access and a word-puzzle password. Typical Kit style.

"I am certain my brother merely wanted to prevent any … tampering … in transit. It does not follow that the contents possess a high monetary value." Except to minds like yours, that think of nothing but credits.

"Nice try, Lorethan. But you have failed to deceive me." The Bothan flicked a claw. "Take her away."

And that was her chance.

Ryn jumped straight up, kicking out with both feet and knocking the blasters out of he guards' hands. Lurching forward, she swung the box and made sharp contact with the Bothan's skull. He went down, unconscious, and as she spun for the door Ryn reached through the Force to pull one of the dropped blasters into her hand -- a neat trick she'd learned in the Jedi Temple, not that she had much control over it yet -- and opened fire on the guard who'd reached his. He dropped like a stone with a hole through his chest—not a killing wound, probably, but no fun, either—and then she shot the commlink out of his companion's hand before making a flying leap through the doorway.

A quick spurt of blasterfire lit up the corridor behind her, but Ryn was too busy zigzagging away from its origin to return fire, and she whipped down the first side-corridor that didn't give off a sense of life nearby and switched to a straight-line run, flat-out, with no idea where she was going, and when she saw an air-vent high up on the wall she jumped for it, using a combination of muscle power and the Force to rip the grating free, and then settle it back into place behind her, only a little bent.

*Good.* She eased away from the grating, just so no one smart enough to look would see anything, and sucked in air, trying to get oxygen to her muscles before the acid could build up, trying even harder to breathe quietly, so someone passing by above or below didn't hear this ragged gasping and wonder what the blazes was going on.

It wasn't really exertion that was making her heart race like this anyway, she knew. Ryn had been in combat training since she could walk, as demanding as any Jedi conditioning program. She hadn't quite reached her prime, yet, but still, she was probably the toughest twelve-year-old on Coruscant. Physically capable of out-running, out-jumping, and out-shooting almost anything Ziro decided to throw at her. She just had to keep her head.

That was going to be a whole lot harder.

Ryn drew in one more deep, chest-expanding breath, and let it out slowly. Then she rose to a crouch and began to follow the air duct back, away from the corridor she had just left. If they decided to use internal sensors—and what Hutt would be without them?—then the farther she was from her last known location, the better off she was likely to be.

*Not that anything will save me for long,* she thought dully, and then stamped on the thought. *No*
point in giving up just because there is no hope.

The thought had her grinning.
A Right Turn at Awkward

Chapter Summary

Breaking out of Ziro's palace is no cakewalk. Meanwhile, a rogue Force-sensitive is looking for Anakin.

Chapter Notes

I'll admit it, I have a secret passion

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CHAPTER SIX:

Ryn crawled through the ventilation shaft until it reached a junction where a heating conduit crossed the shaft that she thought was radiating enough energy to mask her biosigns, at least for a few minutes. There she stopped and hunkered down with her back to the heating conduit to look at her package.

It wasn't the first box her brother had sent her since her arrival on Coruscant, but it was certainly the largest, and it was the only one not to pass through the Jedi Temple, for reasons that Ryn thought were fairly obvious: any Jedi could certainly sense in the box what she had known as soon as it was placed in her hands.

The security measures Kit had installed were typical of him—excessive, probably, but easy for his sister to guess—and Ryn had no trouble cracking his codes.

Inside, wrapped in layers of soft white wool, was her lightsaber, the one she had made last year after she had lost her old one in a disastrous scouting mission.

It felt good in her hands, right, and she sat there for a long moment, just holding it, getting the feel of it in her hands again, like learning the feel of a lover's skin.

When the weight of it in her palm felt not just familiar, but natural, as though it had never been gone, she slipped it into a hook on the inside of her jacket and reached into the box for the two things she hadn't anticipated: a chunky, silvery arm-band, and a letter, written on fragile flimsiplast.

It was nearly two pages long, filled with inconsequentials, but a quick scan revealed that only one paragraph was important. It said:

*One of your Ardel cousins will be visiting Coruscant soon. She makes pilgrimage to some sort of new Jedi called the Chosen One. Be sure to greet her in all courtesy.*
Ryn let her head fall back against the heating conduit, then jerked forward when she smelled hair singing.

*The Chosen One,* she thought. *Skywalker. What does Ardel want with him?*

She wasn't going to find out just sitting there. She shoved the armband well up her left arm, beneath the sleeve of her jacket, folded the letter small and stuck it in an outer pocket—not where it would be easily noticed, but where no one finding it would automatically assign it more importance than a simple letter from home. The box itself she left sitting where it was, after carefully erasing the codes. Then she got once more on her hands and knees and began crawling through the shaft.

Some distance from the heating conduit, the ventilation shaft reached a T-intersection. Ryn stretched out her feelings and went left, sensing less sentient life in that direction. With any luck, she reasoned, that ought to lead her to an empty area of the palacial building —waste reclamation, maybe—and from there she could make her way outside without too much trouble.

If it wasn't for bad luck, she'd have no luck at all.

Ryn found herself peering through the grate into what appeared to be a dingy and altogether deserted corridor.

*Perfect.*

She worked the grating free—not without a little careful work with her lightsaber—and dropped to a crouch on the floor below, the lightsaber safely concealed once more.

She headed down the hallway, hugging the left wall and making for one of the exits she could see opening to either side at the far end.

She had almost made it when she sensed another presence, close by—too close to do anything about it, because even as Ryn cast a frantic look for cover, Evinne Ardel turned the corner on the left and froze, just for a second, her face registering the same shock that Ryn knew was written all over her own.

Then the blasters were out. Ryn had the one she'd nabbed in the Bothan's office—she hadn't wanted to leave it behind---Evinne had her Lorethan-make, precision-firing hand-held. It wasn't as powerful, but it was plenty to kill at this range, and it had better aim than the BlasTech Ryn had snatched.

And Evinne had four more years of experience.

"Well, well. Ryn Orun, isn't it?" Evinne's pose was casual, but Ryn noticed that her gun hand was perfectly steady, aimed right at her throat.

She paid attention to things like that.

"Thought you'd be in the Temple," she went on. "Deserting your post? That hardly sounds like the dutiful Clan Orun we all know and love."

"Don't worry, I'm here on authorized business," Ryn said. "As I'm sure you are, as well."

Evinne smirked. "Of course."

This was going nowhere. Ryn felt the frustration rising, tamped it down. There was no point in losing her temper just because Evinne was tall, blonde, and catty. There were a lot of beautifully
unpleasant women out there. It hadn't been the end of the galaxy yet.

She took a deep breath. "If you picked today for an armed robbery, I have to tell you that it's probably a bad time. I was about to make a rather hasty back-door exit, and I suggest you do the same."

"Cute," Evinne said, lifting her blaster a little so it aimed at the perfect center of Ryn's forehead. "But if I return a pesky little fugitive to Lord Ziro, that might improve my standing, don't you think?"

"No, I think he'd slap us both in chains, just to make him look like a bigger man. Well, slug. And I think that selling another Lorethan out to a Hutt is a little low, even for an Ardel." She frowned. "What do you want with Ziro, anyway? He's not the most impressive Hutt I've ever seen."

"But he's the only one on Coruscant," Evinne reminded her. She eased her finger down on the trigger. "What are you doing here?"

Stay cool, stay cool ... oh, hell. "What are you doing here?"

Evinne's blue eyes narrowed to chips of frost, but there was a tiny tic in her cheek that said she wasn't just angry, she was nervous. Ryn couldn't decide whether that was good or bad.

"I asked first."

"So you did." Ryn took a deep breath, trying to sound out Evinne's presence for clues; but there wasn't much. She risked trading on their common heritage anyway. "I got a message from Ziro's offices, asking me to come here. Kit sent my lightsaber." She waved her blaster slightly, just to remind Evinne that she still had it. "Your turn, Ardel."

Evinne hesitated, just a second. Something vaguely like shame washed across the surface of her consciousness before disappearing again. "I'm doing a job. Private contract."

That meant someone had hired her to steal from Ziro.

This is not good, Ryn thought, but she tightened her grip on the blaster and tried to look reasonable.

"Look. Neither of us wants to get caught today. And I've got nothing against you except your father, which you can't help. So let's stay out of each other's way, all right? No harm."

Evinne shook her head minutely. "I can't trust you. How do I know a lightsaber's all your brother sent you? Why wouldn't he just send it to the Temple? Why wouldn't the Jedi help you make one?"

"The Jedi won't let me sneeze without trying to test my snot," Ryn said, indelicately but accurately. "I'm just glad to get it. But it doesn't affect you. I'm not here to interfere with whatever you're doing. Screw Ziro for all he's worth, if you want. My blessing on it."

Evinne's eyes looked bleak. "I'm sorry. I--you don't know what it's like, back home. I can't take a chance."

"Evinne," Ryn said, injecting the snap of command into her voice, "we've fought together, sweated and bled together. We're on the same side."

"Sorry," Evinne said, and pulled the trigger.

She was too late because Ryn had seen it coming, even if she couldn't make herself believe it, and was already diving to the side. The blasterbolt meant for the center of her skull barely singed her hair
in passing and she jerked forward again, firing at Evinne's midsection, but this time Evinne was too quick for her and a blasterbolt slagged half the weapon in her hand and Ryn was left holding nothing but melting metal.

She dropped the blaster like it was hot—well, it was—laced her fingers together, and swung upward, hard, right at Evinne's jaw, and the impact sheared pieces of burned skin from her bleeding right hand even as it rocked Evinne back on her heels.

She moved to leap clear, but Evinne hadn't earned her reputation knitting, and a knee jerked sharp into Ryn's left elbow, jarring her stance, and as Ryn stumbled backward, reaching for her lightsaber, Evinne spun and delivered a short jab to the left kidney that buckled Ryn's knees, and then an uppercut to the chin that lifted her upright again, and while she was still trying to regain her lost balance, she felt the sharp jab of Evinne's spiky boot-hill stabbing through the skin of her lower abdomen.

She could have drawn her lightsaber then, but she was willing to bet Evinne had her lightsaber, too, so at the very best it would be an even fight—not likely, given Evinne's greater size and experience—and she'd much rather leave while neither of them was dead.

*That ought to be enough fight for anyone,* Ryn thought, reeling with pain, but she had a family reputation to uphold and Evinne wasn't exactly being cooperative, so she launched a kick at Evinne's knees, which Evinne neatly evaded, jumping back out of reach.

"All right," she snapped. "That's enough with the heroics. No more of this hand-to-hand business. I've got the blaster. Cut it out and I'll deliver you to Ziro and make sure Kit gets a ransom message. I don't want to see you dead. You won't get fairer than that."

But then blasterfire spat from behind her, and Evinne spun in place to redirect her weapon, and Ryn threw herself into a roll out of the line of fire as she yanked her lightsaber free.

She'd rolled right around the corner, but as she leapt to her feet she leaned back to see how Evinne was doing.

Evinne hadn't brought out her lightsaber, which was confusing, but she was holding her own, which was no surprise.

Then the big guns arrived: three Mandalorian mercenaries, behind Ziro's blaster-toting Rodians, and Ryn swallowed hard. Good as Evinne was, those were lousy odds. And if she'd guessed wrong and Evinne didn't have a lightsaber on her ...

Ryn was tensing for action, igniting her lightsaber to spring around the corner when she heard someone yell in Rodian, followed by rapid blasterfire.

*Too late,* she thought, sick, but she leaned around the doorway anyway to see what was going on.

The Rodians were on the ground, and one of the Mandalorians was handing Evinne a box.

"Good work," Evinne said, and Ryn thought, *That sounded bad.*

One of the Mandos caught sight of her and growled, firing without waiting for information—shoot first, ask questions later was a pretty common Mandalorian dictum—and Ryn dove down the hallway again, pretty sure that whatever Evinne was doing, she didn't want Ryn's help.

No blasterfire followed her less-than-graceful exit, which meant that Evinne wasn't too interested in killing or catching her. She didn't have the slow-burning rage of her grandfather, or the casually
homicidal tendencies of his father.

_They just don’t make psychotic mass-murderers like they used to_, Ryn thought, struggling to hold her speed as she burst around the corner into what was clearly a service area, packed with droids—and, more importantly, guards.

Blasterfire erupted on all sides and Ryn hit the deck, panting and scrabbling for her lightsaber. She found it and rolled to her feet, deflecting sizzling slashes of red light and making tracks for the far door—not because it looked like a particularly effective escape route, but because she stanging well couldn't go back.

She made the door and barreled through it, only to face the worst storm of blasterfire she'd seen in—oh, since the last time she was in a firefight.

She cursed and threw herself right and down, taking off a guard's leg on the way to the floor. She felt bad about that, but she figured it was nothing compared to the way she'd feel about dying.

Also, she now had not just a survival instinct, but (what meant more to any Orun) a mission. She'd been willing to give Evinne the doubt and assume that either she wasn't the Ardel in Kit's letter, or her motives were no worse than usual; maybe she really did want to see the Chosen One, unlikely as it seemed. But it was stretching coincidence to think that there was _another_ Ardel headed for Coruscant, and Evinne was not exactly toeing the line. Skywalker definitely needed to know that he'd just become fascinating to some very unprincipled people.

_Anakin_, she thought, and the wave of feelings that rose in her chest then distracted her for a critical second and she took a blasterbolt to the outside of her right shoulder—not bad, but bad enough.

_No no no, this is a stupid way to die, I won't …_

There was a window on one wall, and she threw herself at it, lightsaber first.

A bolt zinged through her jacket and another singed her left calf, but then she was falling, and too soon she was _landing_, hitting the ground feet-first, knees bent to absorb the impact, in Ziro's private pleasure garden.

There were plenty of places to hide here, lots of cover, and so Ryn dove behind a particularly robust statue and cut her way through the duracrete wall that enclosed the garden, and she jumped through the gap and fell two stories to hit the roof of an air taxi and bounce off, but the next time she hit the roof of a speeder, it was feet first, and she snapped out her lightsaber to deflect a few more blasterbolts from above, but the hard part was over, and when the driver swerved to the side, eager to be rid of his uninvited passenger, she gathered what was left of her strength and sprang for the narrow sidewalk.

She missed the jump, but she caught the edge of the sidewalk with her fingers and swung onto the next level down. It wasn't more than fifty meters to the nearest public transit station, so she limped onto the first vehicle headed in her general direction and found a seat near the back where she could press the blasterburn in her right arm against the wall and not be too noticeable.

She had to change transit lines five times before she finally came within walking distance of the Jedi Temple, the edge of the broad plaza that surrounded the base of its great pyramid.

She knew Anakin was nearby, because she could feel him, a fiercely energetic thunderstorm held in check by force of will alone. What she didn't expect was to find him waiting for her, pacing the steps
of the Temple like a caged nexu.

"What were you thinking?" he demanded, when she finally stood on the step below him. "I've been going crazy, worrying about you. I knew you were in trouble, but Master Obi-Wan said we had to give you your two days." The stormy look faded from his eyes, just a little, as they ran over her again. "You look awful."

"I feel awful," Ryn replied, beyond the need to put up a good front.

"So it was a trap, after all. There was no message from home."

"There was a package," Ryn said. "We had a disagreement about who should get to keep it. And then I ran into an old friend." She tried not to load the word friend with venom; she and Evinne had at least been allies during the war, and whatever she was doing with Ziro, that was her business.

As long as she stayed away from the Jedi Temple and left Anakin alone.

Anakin's eyes held hers, so intense she didn't think she could have looked away, even if she had wanted to. "Well?"

Ryn took a deep breath that burned her belly wound. "Anakin, I have some bad news. There is a member of Clan Ardel here, on Coruscant. At least one. And she might be looking for you."

Anakin's eyes flew wide. "What? Why?"

Ryn shook her head, about to say she didn't know, but Anakin cut her off. "No, wait. Nevermind. It can wait until you've seen a healer."

And then he did something entirely unexpected: he bent and caught her in his arms, literally sweeping her off her feet. It was, without a doubt, the most romantic thing Ryn had ever even heard of, except that Anakin so obviously didn't share her feelings about it.

Ryn knew she was being weak. She knew she should protest, should tell him to put her down and let her walk on her own feet. She didn't care. She let her head fall back against his hard shoulder and let Anakin's fierce protectiveness wash over her; surrendered herself to the experience and, for a few minutes, lived out every forbidden fantasy she'd ever had, because until she'd met Anakin, she'd never had a forbidden fantasy.

She caught something in Anakin's aura, a flash of guilt and embarrassment, and (rather painfully) brought her right hand up to rest on the larger, more tanned one that cupped her waist. She squeezed once, very gently, and smirked a little because she knew he could feel her smile even without looking. "That's what you get for spying on my private fantasies."

Anakin snorted. "Think quieter."

But something was there, something warmer than usual: a sense of affection she hadn't felt from him before. He'd come looking for her. And he wasn't impressed by her romantic fantasies ... but he wasn't disgusted, either. Very, very carefully, he squeezed back, with the hand that cradled in the hollow of her stomach.

They'd turned a corner. Ryn could feel it. It felt a lot like acceptance.
A Thousand Years of Secrets

Chapter Summary

Anakin plays doctor, while Ryn demonstrates her skill as a storyteller and Obi-Wan explores a history of political dissidence.

Chapter Notes

I had great fun writing A Brief History of Loreth, Part One. Haha, no, I loved trying to make Ryn sound like she came from an oral culture, applying things I'd learned in my Folklore classes ... I'm not sure how well it worked, but you can read it and let me know! In the meantime ... there's Anakin fluff, and Obi-Wan puts his mind to some political problems.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Ryn would have liked to have snuggled in Anakin's arms for a while -- a day or two, at least -- without doing any serious thinking, but this business about the Chosen One was worrisome, and he needed to know, and they were as private as they could count on being for some time.

"The message from my brother might have had something to do with you."

Anakin looked startled; he stopped, eyebrows raised, and looked at her for a beat before starting walking again. "With me?"

"He sent me an arm-ring," Ryn said, and a lightsaber, "but with it was a letter that included, among other things, the information that a member of Clan Ardel would be coming to Coruscant on a pilgrimage to the Chosen One. I haven't heard of any other candidates for that position."

"There aren't any," Anakin said, sounding grim. "But when is this person coming, and what does he want with me?"

"She," Ryn said, "and I think she might already be here. I ran into an Ardel in Ziro's palace on my way out. She didn't mention any pilgrimage, but I'm not sure I believe in that much coincidence."

"So what does she want with me?" Anakin persisted, and Ryn gave a small sigh, wincing when the motion pulled at her stomach wound.

"The letter didn't say," she admitted. "I can't even begin to imagine. If I'm right, and the pilgrim is Evinne, I don't remember her being terribly devout."
Anakin tucked his lower lip in slightly, a sign that he was thinking hard. "I get the feeling you don't like this Evinne much," he said.

Oops. "I don't dislike her," Ryn said cautiously. "But she was not happy to see me. We ... fought."

Anakin's hands tightened on her. "She hurt you?"

"Not badly. I think she mostly wanted me out of the way of whatever she was doing. She wasn't going to kill me."

"It sure looks like she tried."

"No, the blasterburns are from Ziro's goons. The puncture is from Evinne, though."

"Puncture?"

Ryn pulled the leather of her jacket up to expose the bare skin just above her hipbone, where an ugly puncture wound marked the entrance and exit of Evinne's sharp heel.

Anakin hissed through his teeth, touching the reddened, swollen skin lightly with his fingertips. "Enough talk," he decided. "We can discuss this problem with Master Obi-Wan after you've been to the medcenter."

That was going to be a problem, and Ryn had ignored it long enough.

"About that," she said. "Don't you think it's going to be remarkably difficult to explain where I got all these injuries? Sooner or later Master Windu will find out, and then there will be hell to pay." She heard the tension in her voice, an ache in the back of her throat that she couldn't shake. "I'll be confined to quarters. And I can't—Anakin, I can't—be confined right now. I have to do something."

"We'll just have to explain that to Master Windu," began Anakin, apparently laboring under the delusion that he was being reasonable.

Ryn cut him off, a low growl of frustration vibrating in the back of her throat, and she shook her head sharply before speaking in a fierce whisper.

"No! Anakin, the less anyone on the Council knows about this, the better. They'll never let me have any freedom of movement if they think I'm in any danger—I'm far too valuable as an object of study."

Anakin frowned at her, wary but not denying her outright. "That's ridiculous. You make it sound like you're a ... a slave!"

Ryn narrowed her green eyes, refusing to give ground. "You said it, not me."

"That's not fair!" Anakin protested, and Ryn could feel his temper rising. "The Jedi are good people, Ryn. They would never hold slaves. People come to the Jedi of their own free will."

"You came to the Jedi of your own free will," Ryn said. "I was ordered here. Most of the beings in the Temple were surrendered to the Jedi when they were mere infants, too young to know what was happening to them."

She saw Anakin's scowl darken, then watched as he forcibly smoothed his features. "We can argue about philosophy later," he said gruffly. "We need to get you patched up now." Catching her look, he sighed. "We'll see what Obi-Wan thinks."
Ryn didn’t find that particularly reassuring, but she held her tongue, knowing Anakin could sense her concerns anyway.

"It will be all right," he said, shortening his stride to accommodate the limp she couldn't quite help as they made for the quarters he shared with Obi-Wan. Ryn tried to suppress an unreasoning regret for the intimacy of being carried cradled against his chest.

She knew she’d failed when Anakin offered, "I can carry you again, if you'd like. I just thought you were trying not to attract attention."

"No!" Ryn agreed hastily, feeling a brilliant blush staining her pale skin. "You're right. Someone would notice."

"Don't worry," Anakin said, exercising his seemingly boundless impulse to reassure everybody. "We're almost there. You'll be fine." Pause. "And I do not have to fix everything."

Listening in on her thoughts again. "Sure you do," Ryn said, stepping into the turbolift and letting him take up a position half in front of her, shielding her from the casual glance of anyone joining them in the lift. "It's why you can't stand to let any of the Temple droids function at less than peak efficiency. It's how you end up saving Master Obi-Wan's butt almost as often as he saves yours. You're about to try and fix me, for kriff's sake."

"You curse too much," Anakin told her, deftly changing the topic.

Ryn smirked, even though the pain was actually making her feel sick now. How could it be getting worse? "Just practicing my Coruscanti."

"Basic," Anakin corrected her.

"Coruscanti," Ryn repeated. "Every world and region of space has its own dialect. Coruscanti are notoriously profane."

"That's the Corellians."

"Clearly you don't get out much."

"Shut up; we're almost there," Anakin said tersely.

Ryn thought about calling him on the bossiness, but she bit her tongue and followed him out of the turbolift—partly because he had a point, and partly because there was something about his effortless air of command that she (a little guiltily) found attractive, even compelling. It wasn't very Jedi, but then … neither was she.

They hurried down the hall to the rather close quarters Anakin shared with his master, Ryn limping a little and gritting her teeth against the fiery waves of pain that radiated out from each wound.

"Here," Anakin said, and practically shoved her through the door. "Sit down and take off your jacket."

Another problem. "I … ah … do you think … could I visit the refresher first?"

Anakin flashed her a bright smile, obviously trying to put her at ease. Not going to happen. Mostly his kindness was making her feel sick with guilt about the secrets she was keeping. "Of course," he said. "I'll just be getting out the bacta patches."
Ryn let her forehead lean on the door of the refresher as it slid shut behind her. *Stang. Why does he have to be so nice?*

*Kriff this,* she thought as she turned to the small sink and looked into the mirror above it.

Green eyes too old for the face that held them stared back at her. She couldn't remember the last time her eyes had gleamed with innocence.

Maybe they never had.

Every secret, every firefight, every companion lost was etched somewhere in those depths.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt young.

*This is what I'm fighting for,* she reminded herself, taking a lost long look at those tired eyes in that smooth face. *For a world in which children don't have to kriffing see so much. Where some people never see their first firefight. And it's worth fighting for."

Slowly, carefully, she eased off the jacket, unable to restrain a strangled yelp of pain.

"Are you all right?" said Anakin's voice on the other side of the door. His presence radiated *I need to help,* and she hated that she couldn't let him, couldn't just surrender to his strength and kindness and let him take care of her for a while.

That line of thinking was awfully seductive.

*Stang,* she thought again. "I'm fine," she answered, wishing the pain weren't making her so dizzy. "I'll be right out."

Anakin didn't feel convinced; the door was no obstacle to the worry she could sense in him; but he didn't push it. "Take your time."

Carefully, determined not to botch the job by rushing or letting herself be distracted by pain, she folded the jacket around the lightsaber, over and over, tucking in the ends and sleeves, so that it made a perfectly cylindrical and reasonably secure pouch. No sign of the contents but what could be sensed in the Force. There was nothing she could do about that, except hope that maybe with so many other lightsabers in the area no one would notice one more. Then she splashed her face clean and stepped out, holding the rolled jacket under her good arm.

Anakin was waiting for her on the sofa, surrounded by bacta patches and medical bandages and Force knew what else.

She caught his eye and tried to smile. "Planning on opening your own medcenter?"

Anakin smiled back, but his blue eyes were dark with worry. "Something like that."

"You'll be well-supplied, anyway."

"Less joking, more sitting," said Anakin sternly; but the corners of his mouth quirked, just a little.

"Yes, Master."

Ryn began to lower herself, slowly and painfully, to the sofa, but before she could figure out just how to make the last few inches she felt Anakin slide an arm behind her back and another under her
injured leg, setting her down carefully with the help of the Force.

"Thanks," she said, trying to breathe normally.

"No problem." He bent closer, examining the puncture wound again, exposed now by her sleeveless midriff top. "Better start with this one. It looks pretty ugly."

"You sure know how to make a girl feel special," Ryn said, and Anakin gave her what he probably thought was a disapproving look.

"Do you have a joke for everything?"

"Just the stuff that's not funny."

That actually drew a chuckle from Anakin, but Ryn barely heard it over her own gasp of pain as he filled the wound with an antibacterial cleansing agent that burned like a lightsaber.

"Sorry," Anakin said. "I don't have any anesthetic."

"It's fine."

"You're sure you don't want the medcenter?"

"And deprive you of—ahh!—the chance to show off your medical skills?"

"Then give me back my hand. I have to search the wound."

Ryn glanced down to see that she did, in fact, have Anakin's left hand in a death grip, her knuckles white over his.

"Picky," she wheezed, forcing herself to loosen her fingers one by one.

"That's me," Anakin agreed cheerfully, peering into the fiery hole in the white skin below her navel. "I think the muscles broke the thrust. You must have great abs."

"Average," Ryn grunted. "She wasn't going for the kill."

"Remind me never to make one of your people angry."

Ryn shook her head as Anakin packed the wound with bacta. "I told you, the blasterburns are not her fault."

"And what about the cuts and scratches? You look like someone tried to shred you."

Ryn glanced down and saw a maze of scratches crosshatching the skin of her chest and arms, where the jacket had evidently not been enough protection. "Oh. That's from jumping through a transparisteel window."

"Sounds like I missed an exciting time."

"Sorry," Ryn said through her teeth as he affixed the bandage. "The invitation was for one."

Anakin tipped his face to hers briefly, just long enough for her to see his bright smile before he ducked his head to his work again.

Obi-Wan walked in while Anakin was fastening the bandage on her arm.
"What—Anakin, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Master. It seems that Miss Orun, here, has been engaging in some very aggressive negotiations."

"Ah … yes." Ryn could see the worry lines easing as he took her in. "Ryn, are you all right?"

"I'll be fine, thanks to your apprentice," Ryn answered, more or less sure it was true. "But I am afraid I have some … unsettling … news."

Obi-Wan pulled up a chair and sank into it, keeping his eyes focused on her face while Anakin began peeling the ragged edges of burned leather back from her leg wound. "By all means, let's hear it."

Ryn nodded, trying to orient herself against the dark waves of pain as the cold sweat broke out all over her body, and launched into an abbreviated description of her meeting with Evinne and the mystery surrounding her possible pilgrimage.

"I'm not sure I understand," Kenobi said when she had finished. "Why would a Lorethan be so keen to meet the Chosen One? How would your people even know such a being existed?"

The tugging had blessedly stopped, but Ryn gasped and went rigid as the cleansing agent did its work. Eyes shut tight, she could feel Anakin giving her his hand again, threading his fingers through hers, letting her squeeze tight.

"It's all right," he murmured. "Almost done."

Somewhere Ryn found the strength to nod, and as the pain slowly receded, she was able to open her eyes and train them once more on Master Kenobi while Anakin applied the bacta.

He eyed her expectantly.

_How does she ... Oh. Right._

"I don't know how she would know. We hear things, sometimes; but I had never heard of the Chosen One before I came to Coruscant, so I don't know what kind of information Clan Ardel may have. And I cannot imagine what she wants with him, but I'm not sure I trust her. Evinne is ... a bit of a maverick."

"You mean she is acting without the knowledge of your government?"

"I mean I don't know. I was never a part of Clan Ardel, and I'm certainly not privy to any useful information, now that I'm stationed in the Jedi Temple. Evinne could have a genuine religious motive in seeking out the Chosen One. It's even possible that, despite the odds against it, she is not the Ardel in the message, and that my meeting with her was pure chance. And if we assume that it is Evinne, then that still does not tell us what she would want with Anakin -- or if she even knows his name. It could be anything."

"You're not giving us much to go on," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"I know, Master Kenobi. But I cannot pull information out of thin air. Whoever is looking for the Chosen One will have to come to the Jedi Temple eventually. I don't think there is much that we can do until then."
"Can't you send a message home and find something out?"

"And say what? If Ardel's presence on Coruscant was supposed to be common knowledge, Kit would have sent a message to the Jedi Council -- not to his sister, who has less than no influence. I'm afraid we're on our own." She squeezed Anakin's arm. "But we will look after you. We just have to let them -- or her, or him -- make the first move."

"Is it possible that this Evinne is a Force-sensitive who failed to be noticed by the Republic and heard Anakin's story?"

Ryn hesitated. "What would make you think that?"

"It is no secret that Loreth has not been welcoming to Jedi in the past," Obi-Wan said, clearly making an effort to phrase his thoughts politely. "It is not impossible that a few Force-sensitive children have been born there, outside the Republic's notice, even as Anakin was."

This was leading into deep waters. Ryn studied a torn thumbnail as though it held the answers, biting her lower lip and trying to smooth the jagged spot with her fingers. At last she said, "I don't think it likely that such a child -- if it existed -- would wish to come to the Jedi Temple, Master Kenobi."

"And why is that?" Obi-Wan's tone was mild, but she could see the challenge in his eyes.

_of course you feel that way. You've been a Jedi since before you can remember. You don't know any other life._

Ryn sighed, seeking a way out of this miasma without telling Skywalker and Kenobi much, much more than they needed to know about Loreth and Force-sensitivity. "Master Kenobi, what do you know about the formation of the Lorethan Free State?"

Obi-Wan frowned thoughtfully. "Not a great deal. I know that it was founded, nearly a thousand years ago, by a group of political dissidents hoping to avoid becoming entangled with the politics of the Republic."

Ryn tensed for a moment, staring at him; then suddenly she relaxed back onto the sofa, laughing softly. "Political dissidents," she repeated, still laughing. "Force! Well, I suppose that is true ... from a certain point of view."

"A certain point of view?" Anakin repeated skeptically.

"Yes, well ... I don't know how much I should tell you, when it seems your own Council has been less than forthcoming with the information. Strange; but perhaps they felt it was unimportant. For now I will give you the short version, as it were."

She cleared her throat and began: "Nine hundred odd years ago, the war between the Jedi and the Sith was fresh in the minds of many people, certainly in the minds and hearts of the Force-sensitive. The Jedi were working tirelessly to preserve order and civilization, the undoubted guardians of peace and justice in the Republic, and they did much that was good. The Sith, of course, were believed to have been destroyed. But there were some—a few—who feared that by allying themselves to the government—however benign and legitimate—the Jedi were treading a dangerous path. Power corrupts."

"The Jedi use their power for good," Anakin protested, and Ryn let her eyes rise to his.

"Who decides what is 'good'?” she asked him. "Good for whom?" She let her eyes fall to her hands,
staring at the burns on the right one. "No one is perfect, Anakin. Not even Jedi."

"Your tale," Kenobi reminded her, and she refocused her thoughts.

"It was into these … uncertain … times that a Padawan named Loron was coming of age, nearing the time for his trials. A perceptive and gifted young man, he was nevertheless troubled as the time drew nearer when he must take up the mantle of Jedi Knighthood in his own right. So he asked his master for permission to spend a few weeks in the quiet of deep space, meditating and seeking the will of the Force.

"The master was wise enough to see that the young man needed some time alone with the Living Force, and so he let him go.

"Loron traveled for some weeks, from star system to star system, but the peace and clarity he longed for eluded him. At last he passed into the Outer Rim, which was then yet more sparsely settled than now, and admitted to himself that he must soon turn back—tomorrow, he promised himself. But on that last day, as he passed a small system off his port … he felt himself drawn to it, and changed his vector for a closer look.

"In that system he found a planet: small, vividly blue-green, covered by the swirling white of clouds—and it caught his eye, so that he ventured closer still, reveling in the sheer vitality the planet radiated in the Force.

"Acting on pure impulse, he decided to land. He took his ship down on one of the small island continents—for much of the planet was covered in water—and set down in the midst of a rainforest, where the ground and the air alike were full of living things, green and growing.

"A path led through the forest, and he thought that strange on a world that had betrayed no sign of sentient life, so he followed it. Up the harsh black slopes of an extinct volcano it led, covered by bright green growth so thick he could see but a little way ahead, and so must trust to the Force to guide his steps.

"At last, Loron emerged upon a plateau, set high amidst the white clouds. There on a pinnacle of rock he saw a woman standing, her hands raised to greet the dawn—for he had walked all night, drawn to this place.

"'I give you good greeting, Stranger', the woman said to him; and Loron fought to recover his speech, for the sight of her had driven words from his mind.

"'And I return your greeting', he said at last, 'and tell you, if I may, that you are as beautiful as the angels on the moons of Iego'."

Anakin, who had been rhythmically tracing delicate circles just above her knee—apparently under the impression that this would be a soothing gesture and not, say, a strong motivation for her to lean forward a few inches and kiss the soft curls around his hairline—suddenly froze, but since Anakin would undoubtedly have spoken up if he had had anything he wanted to share, Ryn kept talking, and a minute later the Padawan resumed his stroking.

"The woman's name was Ethyn," Ryn went on, "and from the moment he saw her, Loron knew that he would always love her.

"But there was still the matter of his Knighthood, for, then as now, the Order forbade personal attachments as being dangerous and distracting. And Loron would not disappear without a trace, leaving his old master to suppose him dead in the darkness of space. So he left Ethyn on the planet
where he had found her, and returned to Coruscant to formally depart the Jedi Order.

"The Jedi were not best pleased with this, least of all his former master, but Loron would not be persuaded, and they let him go, knowing that each being must follow its own path.

"So Loron returned to the blue-green planet, and his beloved Ethyn, and they made their home there, and welcomed travelers to a place of study and contemplation, where Love was held to be the greatest of all goods. And in time some stayed, and loved, and left behind children, who named their home planet after the first two sentient beings to make a home there."

Ryn heaved a sigh. "To make a very brief history of the years between then and now, my people believe, very deeply, that children must be raised at home, with love. It is central to our society, our way of life. To give a child up to strangers in its infancy, Force-sensitive or not … we find the idea frankly appalling. And of course the Jedi do not allow adults to enter by choice. This refusal to allow the Jedi even to test for midichlorians has long been a point of contention, so that now we are wary of each other, when all should be fighting the Sith."

"But attachment is a path to the Dark Side," Ob-Wan reminded her. "It is dangerous to allow Force-sensitive beings to be raised without the care and instruction of the Jedi Temple."

Ryn indulged her feelings in a shrug, then instantly regretted it when the motion sent a bolt of pain lancing through her right arm.

"Kriffing near anything can be a path to the Dark Side," she gritted, goaded by the pain and by Kenobi's immovability. "If I had an obsession with kava root juice, and I was willing to slaughter the population of its native planet in order to gain control of its production, that would be pretty Dark. But you wouldn't blame the kava root juice." Over Anakin's chuckle, she added, "It is what we do with our feelings that matters."

"Let us set aside the perils of attachment for the moment," Kenobi said, with a troubled glance at his apprentice. "If this Evinne does appear at the Temple, it should be an easy matter to discover what her aims are and address them accordingly. Surely the situation does not call for the anxiety you seem to be giving it." He hesitated, then added, "I can feel your worry, young one. But Anakin will be quite all right. There is nowhere safer for him than here."

"And how safe is that?" Ryn thought, but she couldn't explain her tension to Obi-Wan -- she wasn't even sure she understood it herself -- so she took a deep breath and grimaced, hitching herself forward to rest her elbows on her knees. "I know that you are right," she conceded reluctantly, "yet I am uneasy. Master Kenobi, something is wrong here." She dropped her head to her hands and concluded dully, "I've got a bad feeling about this."
"So you want less Galactic Unity, and I wish the Senate would speak with one voice," Anakin laughed. "I guess it's a good thing we're not on one of those Senatorial committees. We'd be working at cross-purposes."

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Anakin watched Ryn go, her pale skin unnaturally white with pain and worry.

"Well, Anakin?" his master's voice said behind him, and Anakin turned to meet Obi-Wan's gaze over his shoulder. "What do you make of all this? Do you sense anything from Miss Orun?"

Anakin glanced back at the door through which Ryn had just left, letting himself sink into the Force, listening for any promptings it might offer. But there was nothing but what he had already felt.

"I sense many things from her, Master. Pain, fear, frustration … a great deal of concern. But nothing that offers a clue as to how to proceed."

"All information is valuable, Padawan," Obi-Wan instructed him gently. "It is only a matter of learning how to interpret that information."

Anakin ducked his head in a gesture of acquiescence. "Yes, Master."

"Be mindful of your feelings, always; they can teach you much."

"Yes, Master."

"Good. Now: Did it seem to you that Orun was not telling us everything?"

"I'm sure there are many things she was not telling us," Anakin said. "It does not follow that deliberate deception is intended."

"Very true," Obi-Wan admitted. "Yet I feel uneasy."
"So does Ryn," Anakin pointed out.

"Yes, I know … and yet I can't help but wonder if we are uneasy about the same things. Ryn Orun's goals and concerns are not necessarily those of the Jedi Order."

That was a difficult statement to argue with, as Ryn herself had plainly stated her disagreements with the Jedi Order several times, so Anakin said nothing, merely regarded his master to see what else he might have to say.

In the end, though, Obi-Wan couldn't reach any conclusions, either. He shook his head with an air of finality. "I must meditate on this. I suggest you do the same."

*

Back in her quarters, Ryn went to some lengths to hide her lightsaber securely. Then she pulled several pieces of equipment from disparate parts of the room and assembled them into a parabolic shape about the size of her palm, resting on a small stand, with a wire protruding from the center of the small dish.

Carefully she adjusted the codes that would encrypt her transmission, then those that would piggyback it on the HoloNet broadcast signal. She recorded her report, concise and direct, and flicked a tiny switch with the edge of her thumbnail to send.

Then she waited.

*

The reply came the next morning, and indirectly. Ryn was sitting in the square of sunlight in her floor, meditating as Master Yoda had instructed, when the intercom called her name.

"Ryn Orun," said a well-modulated voice, jerking back to an awareness of her surroundings, "we are receiving a holotransmission from a Lorethan ship just outsystem. Please proceed to the communication center to accept the communication."

Ryn winced; the transmission center was three floors down, on the other side of the building, and her lower left leg still burned like … well, like it had been shot by a blaster, which it had. No choice.

"On my way," she said briskly, and limped for the door.

*

The communications center was familiar and yet strange: a place Ryn had visited enough to recognize and find her way around easily, but not enough to grow comfortable. Her heart hammered in her chest and her fingers trembled with nervous anticipation as she walked through the broad doorway.

She found a large desk in the center of the room, manned by a pain of Padawans about Kit's age, and stated her purpose.

They gave her twin looks of suspicion, but their screen did show that she had an incoming transmission, so they assigned her a booth with a sort of grudging politeness. Ryn tried not to take it personally.

She activated the receiver and waited while the link was transferred to her terminal.
Her brother's lean stern face—much like her own, though longer and with more years on it—greeted her in blue-scale.

"Ryn," he acknowledged. "It is good to see you looking well."

"And you," Ryn answered politely, although the bald truth was that they both looked the worse for wear.

"I understand you received my package?"

"I did, and I am grateful for its contents."

"You have deserved as much or more for a long time now. Tell me, have you met your cousin Evinne since she came to Coruscant?"

You know I have. But Evinne wasn't her cousin, either, so clearly this was not a time for strict interpretations of fact. "I spoke with her briefly yesterday," Ryn said cautiously.

"I see. Well, you must be friendly. Keeping good relations within the family is important, you know. "Do I?" I am glad to hear that she made the trip to Coruscant safely. Since she intends a pilgrimage to the Jedi Temple, I trust you will see her soon. You must be polite to her. She's a long way from home."

Ryn sighed. "I'll do my best."

She left the communications center, feeling disappointed and disgruntled; Kit had been neither helpful nor informative.

Waste of time, she thought, not without a trace of bitterness. It wasn't Kit's fault, strictly speaking; it was this damn war. Kit had to assign someone to this mess; she was here because he trusted her. Which meant that sometimes he had to trust her to sort things out for herself. Yeah. Maybe you could trust me a little less and help me a little more.

Ryn sighed again, knowing it wasn't going to happen. All she could do was to lie low for a few days and wait for Evinne to make her appearance.

* 

Anakin frowned as he headed down the corridor toward the area where he felt the gentle tug of Ryn's presence, guiding his footsteps through a section of the Temple he had seldom visited before. He still wasn't sure that paying her a visit was such a good idea—what if she interpreted his friendly concern as something else, something more? He wasn't going to grow comfortable with the way she felt about him any time soon. But staying away just seemed so cold. After what she'd been through, Ryn definitely needed a friend. Clearly she hadn't made many on Coruscant; Anakin had to admit that it wasn't all that surprising, considering how hard many of the Jedi were to get to know. Real closeness was as rare in the Temple as Kessel spice; sometimes he thought it was something he had left behind on Tatooine.

He could have asked Master Obi-Wan to go with him, of course, or even to go in his place, and the older man would probably have done it. But amid the roiling fog of emotions Anakin had picked up from Ryn yesterday afternoon, there was one he hadn't even bothered to mention to Obi-Wan, because he knew his master wouldn't understand it, even if Anakin tried to explain. Loneliness was a concept wholly foreign to the Jedi. Right now, Anakin was the only person in the Temple who had a chance of actually understanding at least a part of what Ryn was going through. It would be wrong of him not to offer her what comfort he could.
It wasn't easy, never having been to Ryn's quarters before, to pick the right door, but by focusing intently, he managed it—although more by following the echoes of misery than by sensing the faint ripples her presence created in the Force. She was calmer than yesterday, but not happier: a quiet mire of loneliness and confusion.

Cautiously Anakin tapped on the door with his knuckles.

It slid back to reveal Ryn standing still, facing the door, in the middle of a very small bedroom; apparently she had no sitting area. Her normally clear green eyes were shaded with pain and weariness, and there were little white marks around her mouth.

"Anakin," she greeted him, and though she used his first name, the stiffness robbed the greeting of most of its warmth. "I wasn't expecting you."

Anakin quirked a brow. "You didn't sense me coming?"

"No … well, I mean, yes … I did, but I didn't know you were coming here," she answered vaguely, waving at the bare little room.

Anakin gave her what he hoped was a gentle, reassuring smile, and lifted his left hand, holding a bag of food. "I brought us some lunch," he offered.

* 

They ended up eating in the floor, their backs against the bed and their legs stretched out in front of them. The space was small enough that Anakin's feet almost reached the far wall; but Ryn seemed to take no notice, settling down with a cheerful smile that belied the muted unhappiness suffusing her presence in the Force, stretching out with her long bare legs reaching across the floor, one of them marred by a patch of bright red where the bacta treatment was doing its work. All her wounds were exposed, actually; Anakin could only assume that she had chosen such a revealing outfit because the chafing of clothes against her still-healing flesh was uncomfortable.

"How's the bacta holding up?" he asked her now, reaching into the bag he had brought and fishing out his fried tubers.

"It's all right," Ryn said. "Itches like crazy, but I guess that means it's working." She gave his package of tubers a dubious look. "Anakin, is that Corellian food?"

Anakin grinned. "Yes, but don't worry," he assured her. "This is my Corellian food. I brought you Nubian vegetables."

Ryn eyed the box he handed her suspiciously. "Is Nubian food safe?"

"I never heard of anyone getting sick from it," Anakin answered. "But I suppose you could be the first."

"I'll try not to blaze any trails."

Anakin handed her a pack of sauce and pulled out his own nerf sandwich. "What do you eat on Loreth?" he asked her around his first bite.

Ryn took an experimental nibble before answering. "Depends," she said thoughtfully. "In the equatorial rainforests: lots of fruit, and some fresh meat, mostly from wild gorra. I'm from the Northern Islands: fish, some vegetables when they're in season, salted meats. We send out hunters in the autumn, and they take down wild wyrytal in the ancient way, with bow and arrows. In the
Southern desert … well, not much lives there. Food is imported."

"Have you ever gone out with a hunting party?" Anakin asked, trying to head off the wave of homesickness he felt rising in her.

Ryn shook her head. "Not often," she said. "Girls don't; at least, they didn't usually, before the invasion."

Anakin frowned, assimilating this as he munched a tuber. "What did the invasion have to do with it?"

Ryn chewed and swallowed before answering. "Our militia was largely male," she said slowly. "And fatalities were … heavy." There was a galaxy of loss behind the last word. "The demographic shift means that we don't have enough men left to fulfill the roles traditionally reserved for them. A woman who can fight, can hunt, now must do so."

"It sounds like a very patriarchal society," Anakin suggested; but Ryn shook her head in a quick negative.

"Not as much as you might think," she countered. "Many of our most important consular and political posts have been held by women. But because women are the Guardians of Life, it is unusual for them to become warriors. Or at least it was."

"Guardians of Life?" Anakin repeated, watching her dip another vegetable in the rich, spicy sauce. "I don't understand."

Ryn frowned, still chewing. "Humans are a mammalian species," she explained, as though this might have escaped his notice. "Only the female can carry offspring."

"Oh." Anakin finished off his nerf sandwich, trying to work out where she was going with this. "So women fill a religious role in your society."

"I had not thought of it so," Ryn said. "But this view of women's place stems from our devotion to the Living Force: there is no higher purpose than to create and nurture life. So, in a sense, you are right. That is why, for some of my people, the sex act is sacred."

Anakin was so startled by this that he almost choked; he hadn't quite gotten that whole unflappability thing down yet. But he caught himself in time and managed to turn a gasp of surprise into a deep breath of acceptance. *Jedi are not prudes,* he reminded himself. *In principle, Jedi accepted all parts of life as natural; in practice, beings whose lives were totally free of physical intimacy often found its appeal difficult to grasp. Anakin didn't have that problem, probably because he remembered what it was like to be touched by someone who loved him; but still, Ryn's perfectly deadpan, matter-of-fact way of referring to activities most beings regarded as private was something he could never hope to master.*

Then he caught it: the barest hint of smugness, floating in her essence, an almost imperceptible twitch at the corner of her mouth. She'd been trying to shock him, and she'd succeeded.

"You're teasing me," he said, half angry, half relieved. He *hated* it when people tried to make him look *stupid,* he wasn't anybody's *pawn,* not ever again …

But Ryn just laughed. "Maybe a little," she admitted. "Jedi can be so stiff about these things. It's hard not to poke fun sometimes. But every word I said is actually true; I didn't just make it up." Her eyes took on a faraway look as she smiled. "You should have seen the look on Master Windu's face when I told him."
Anakin allowed himself to laugh with her, letting go of his sudden anger. "You ought to be careful," he warned her. "It's not wise to upset Master Windu."

"He is very stern, isn't he?" Ryn agreed. "But he asked me to describe Lorethan religious practices; what was I supposed to do?" She dipped her last piece of vegetable in the sauce. "Anyway, Master Yoda thought it was funny."

Anakin tried to picture Master Yoda finding anything funny, but the image wouldn't quite come into focus. Frowning, he shook his head and pushed those thoughts aside. "You don't like Master Windu much, do you?"

Ryn finished chewing her last bite with a thoughtful expression. "I'm not sure," she said at last, dropping her empty package back into the bag. "I've never really thought about whether I liked him, as a person. But we don't often see eye-to-eye on things."

Anakin picked up the bag and carried it to the waste recycling unit in the corner. "Why?"

Ryn wrinkled her nose, moving more stiffly than usual as she shifted from the floor to the bed. "He sees me as an undisciplined rebel; I think he suffers from cognitive dissonance."

"Cognitive dissonance?"

"The inability to accept or cope with concepts that fail to harmonize with one's previously determined worldview."

"I know what it is," Anakin said impatiently. "I meant; why do you think Master Windu suffers from it?"

"Oh." Ryn blinked. "Well … because he sees the Jedi way as the only way, for Force-users especially. And because he can't accept the need for change in the Order, even though the times are changing around you. One might say that he is attached to the way things have always been done." She shrugged uncomfortably. "He's brilliant, powerful, committed … but inflexible. I don't think it's healthy."

Anakin watched her closely as he walked back to take a seat beside her on the bed, his eyes wide. "You feel very strongly about this, don't you?"

"I guess I do." Ryn gnawed her lower lip, plainly thinking, and Anakin let her take her time. "I don't like what I sense when he speaks with me," she said at last. "When I'm talking with Master Yoda, even when he is questioning me closely, I sense … genuine curiosity—wary, perhaps, but gentle. With Master Windu it's more like … a hunter studying his prey. He makes me nervous."

"I think the Jedi in general make you nervous," Anakin said. "I make you nervous, and I'm just a Padawan learner."

Ryn laughed, but there was an edge to the sound. "That's not because you're a Jedi."

"Then why?" Anakin asked, and then wished he'd bitten out his tongue instead when her sense in the Force spasmed with pain.

She answered him anyway, an act of courage Anakin wasn't sure he could have matched.

"Because I feel things when I'm with you that I've never felt before. It throws me a little."

Anakin shifted uncomfortably. I made her talk about this. "I'm sorry," he said, belatedly
remembering their brief, shirtless encounter yesterday, the messy knot of feelings that had burst from her into the Force.

"It's all right," Ryn said. "I just have to get used to it."

"It must be harder, missing the traditional isolation period," Anakin suggested, happy to steer this conversation in a new direction.

Ryn frowned and shook her head. "My hormonal changes are … noticeable, but not out of control, especially as I know what to expect. According to the doctors here, I am putting a fair amount of pheromones into the atmosphere, but those don't really affect me, of course. And Jedi seem to be pretty resistant to my charms, chemical or otherwise. So … I'm doing all right. It's almost like being cloistered, really. I probably have even more time to meditate and get control of my feelings." But her presence in the Force said something else, something about misery and isolation and a desperate, aching loneliness.

"But you miss your home," Anakin guessed, recognizing the feeling only too well.

"Yes. Well … my brother, mostly. It seems like forever since I had someone to lean on, you know? Somebody to hold me. Jedi don't touch, have you ever noticed that?"

Anakin swallowed hard. "Yeah," he said softly. "I noticed." Memories beating against the locked door in his heart, where they would never quite leave him alone, whispering to him in the dark and quiet of night, reminding him of the mother he had left behind, the love and warmth he'd lost, the gaping hole in the center of his being that he could never tell anyone about, because he could still hear Master Yoda saying, "... much fear in you ..." and Ki-Adi-Mundi murmuring, "Your thoughts dwell on your mother," and they would send him away and never let him become a Jedi if they knew, if they ever even guessed. "See through you, we can," Yoda had said. And Anakin thought now, just as he had thought all those years ago, when Obi-Wan reluctantly took him as his Padawan: We'll see about that.

But right here, right now, Master Yoda wasn't watching, and Ryn didn't have any pretense of dispassion to keep up, anyway: she didn't even want to be a Jedi.

Ryn was looking at him with concern in those green eyes that saw too much. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Anakin said. "I was just thinking, that's a problem we could do something about."

"What?" Ryn said; but when he put an arm around her hard shoulders, carefully because of the blasterburn, she got it. And when he brought the other arm up to wrap her securely, she held herself very still for just a second, and then slid her arms around his waist and hugged him back, hard.

Anakin stretched his legs out across the bed and leaned back against the wall, pulling Ryn down against his chest, trying to send her waves of calm and comfort through the Force, which was hard, because he'd never had much calm and comfort to spare. He wasn't sure whether it was the Force-suggestion, or the being held, but he could feel her relax, just slightly. "Tell me about your brother," he said quietly. "Tell me all about home."

And so she told him about Kitraal Orun, in his early twenties and already a war hero and a leader; she told him about that last horrible year under blockade; she told him about the years before, about the sisters she had once had; about the Jade Temple, gleaming a thousand facets of green in the sunlight. Somewhere along the way she started crying, and Anakin felt his own eyes smart while he blushed with awkwardness, trying to decide what he should do about it … until he realized that he was already doing the only thing he could.
So he held Ryn a little tighter and murmured in her ear, distracting her with tales of home—the good parts, the things he could bear to talk about: about Kitster and Greedo and C-3PO and building his first racing pod, the only racing pod he'd ever have, now.

At this point, Ryn had a revelation to make. "I heard about that," she said. "Even before I came to Coruscant. There was a trader staying with us at the time, and he had bet on Sebulba. He was very upset when he got the news over the HoloNet. I remember. I always wondered what happened to that boy. But I didn't realize, of course, that the boy who won the race was the same one who went with Qui-Gon Jinn to Naboo. Now I know."

"Now you know," Anakin agreed. A thought struck him. "What do you know about Qui-Gon Jinn?"

Ryn pursed her lips, clearly thinking. "He came to Loreth … twice that I know of: once many years ago, and once when I was very small. I met him, but the only thing I can remember is that he had kind eyes."

"He did," Anakin murmured. "I remember that, too. But I thought Jedi were not welcome on Loreth?"

Ryn shifted, reminding him of some things about her body he'd been trying to forget. "Master Jinn petitioned for permission to visit the Temple of the Living Force to pursue his studies. The elders met with him and judged his intent to be sincere." Anakin felt, rather than saw, her smile. "My father was in his honor guard during his first visit."

"Then your family has a long history of Jedi-tolerance."

Ryn shifted again, and Anakin suddenly remembered that she was more than half naked. But that was ridiculous, preposterous, absurd … it was just a hug, he was sick for even thinking that way …

So don't. You already know the woman you're going to love forever. Ryn is just a friend. It's like she's your sister. Yeah, like your sister.

I don't have a sister.

Thank the Force, because incest is definitely not going to be an improvement.

That was when he decided that his lunch must have disagreed with him because he was clearly delusional, and he'd better go, before Ryn started paying attention and realized that her new friend was some kind of sick pervert who got all excited holding much younger girls when he was supposed to be comforting them …

But if he moved, then Ryn might mistake the gesture and think that something was wrong …

Something is wrong.

Something, he was pretty sure, much like himself.

Ryn breathed the ghost of a laugh against his chest, the soft exhalation steaming through the thin fabric of his shirt. "It's true. It's actually part of the reason why I was picked for this assignment, here at the Jedi Temple."

What?

And then Anakin realized that all his panicked deliberations had taken less than a second and that
Ryn hadn't noticed anything, because there hadn't been anything to notice: this was nothing, a fluke, a tingling of nerves brought on by an awkward position and more physical contact than he was used to, these days. All he needed to do was shift the angle at which he was sitting—there—take a couple of deep breaths, and just not panic so easy.

He drew in a lungful of air accordingly and asked, "Ryn? What is your assignment, exactly? I've never really understood."

She hesitated before answering—just a little, just enough, enough to let him know that whatever she told him next, it would not be the whole truth.

Anakin braced himself.

"I am supposed to serve the Jedi Council as a … a slave-hostage, I think … I'm not sure how to translate that, exactly. The Council doesn't call it that at all, of course … but on Loreth, it's common enough. Anyway … I am assigned to teach the Council what they wish to know of our way of life, assist them in their many endeavors, and also learn what I can about the Jedi, so that I can in turn teach my people about their ways."

Anakin absorbed that for a minute, feeling her slender body tense against his, taut with worry.

"You're hiding something," he said finally.

Ryn surprised him by being honest. "Several things."

Anakin shook his head. "You admit it? Why?"

"Because I trust you not to pry. Because I won't lie to you, ever. Because your friendship … matters to me."

"Then why won't you tell me what you're hiding?"

"They are not my secrets to tell."

"Does Master Obi-Wan know?"

"I haven't told him anything. What he guesses is harder to tell."

Anakin accepted this with a nod, since there was nothing he could do about it anyway. "So what will you teach your people about the Jedi Order?"

Ryn shifted away, just enough to look him in the eye. "That the Jedi have forgotten how to live." She rolled across him to lie more squarely on her uninjured side, and Anakin caught her with a hand on her waist as she almost rolled too far and ended in the floor. She flashed him a quick smile. "Sorry. My arm was aching."

Anakin started to rise. "Maybe I should take a look at it."

Ryn stopped him with a hand on his chest. "Later. Please. I feel safe here, with you. I haven't felt safe in so long."

Anakin refrained from pointing out that she could be safe with him just as easily while he checked her injuries, because he was reasonably certain that she was smart enough to reach that conclusion on her own … if she wanted to.

Instead, he pushed a strand of Ryn's black hair off his chest and searched for a way to say what
needed to be said.

"Ryn, I don't want to give you the wrong idea …"

The look on her face stopped him, as though she were trying to smile and having a hard time with it. "Anakin, you've been here for over an hour and you haven't made a move. I'd say the purity of your intentions speaks for itself."

She didn't sound happy about it.

"Aren't women usually a little more cheerful about men not taking advantage of them?"

"Not that I've noticed."

Anakin raised his eyebrows at that, and Ryn grinned briefly. "Some of those female Padawans are rapacious."

Her expression fell and she shifted again. "And back home, ever since the war, it's hard for a woman to find a man. The competition for men is fierce—almost a reverse of the way it's been for most of our history, but far more pronounced."

She shuddered in his arms. "I don't look forward to wading into that mess. It's more confusing, because girls are being introduced into society younger and younger. Families don't want to hold their daughters back and hurt their chances of finding a life-mate."

Anakin tried to be fair. "Maybe it's a good thing for restrictive customs to be abolished."

Ryn favored him with a look of deep contempt. "You think it's a good thing for girls younger than I am to be throwing themselves at men they hardly know, desperate to improve their circumstances, the lives of their families?"

She shook her head. "This is not healthy."

He couldn't argue with that. "What will you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"How will you find a husband?"

"Oh." There was a pause before Ryn said, very quietly, "I don't think I will."

"Sure you will. You're attractive, personable"—

"No, I mean: I don't think that will be my path. I knew, when I accepted this mission, that I was taking a step away from everything I knew, everything that once mattered to me, and there is no going back." She took a deep breath that was not quite a sob. "You can never go home."

But Anakin had noticed something in her choice of words. "Why did you take it? If you had a choice, why did you come to Coruscant?"

Ryn didn't move, but somehow she gave the impression of a shrug anyway. "It had to be someone reliable, who was also expendable. That was a short list. And I had less to lose than … well, anyone else."

"You don't make it sound like a plum position," Anakin noted, remembering his own eagerness, years before, to see the lights of Coruscant. To see everything.

"It wasn't. It was considered dangerous, with not much chance for glory to make up for it. But glory misses the point."

"What is the point?" Anakin asked her, puzzled by the philosophical turn the conversation was
taking but trying to keep up.

Her answer was simple, but it rang with conviction. "To serve."

There was something heartbreaking in the way she said those two words, as though they echoed with all the weight of a life sacrificed before it was ever lived, to duty: all the rending weight of all the sacrifices of the billions of beings who got up every morning and shouldered myriad distasteful burdens, so that others would not have to. It was so deep, so heavy, that its gravity could only be supported by the strength that said not, *I am willing to die for you*, but *I will give up my life for you, one day at a time.*

It was what the Galactic Senate lacked; it was what Anakin had recognized in the teenage Queen of Naboo years ago; it was the mark of true greatness.

It was right here, in a cramped room in a little-frequented corner of the Jedi Temple, leaning into his shoulder.

"You have a good heart," Anakin said, even though he knew that there weren't really words for that kind of goodness. "The galaxy needs more people like you, people who are willing to give up their personal needs and wants for the greater good."

"Well, if that's what I am, then the galaxy is full of people like me," Ryn said. "It doesn't seem to be helping much."

Anakin made a noise of disgust. "It's all the corruption in the Senate," he said. "All the endless, pointless debate in committees. Nothing ever gets done."

"If the Senate is as corrupt as you say, then perhaps we should be glad of its lethargy," said Ryn. "Better that it do nothing than the wrong thing, I think."

Anakin shook his head—a little too violently, by the way Ryn flinched back a few centimeters. "No! The Senate should take action on the injustices of the Trade Federation, the Commerce Guilds, the spice smugglers"—

Ryn interrupted him. "From what I know of the Galactic Senate, its members would be more inclined to perpetuate these ills than to cure them." She bit her lip. "I'm not sure a political solution is possible."

Anakin frowned. "Then what would you change?"

Ryn's face registered surprise. "Me? I think I'd dissolve the Republic altogether and start over. Loreth is an independent system, remember? But I don't think that's ever going to happen, and I doubt most citizens would want it if it did. And it's not up to me to change it for them."

"So you want less Galactic Unity, and I wish the Senate would speak with one voice," Anakin laughed. "I guess it's a good thing we're not on one of those Senatorial committees. We'd be working at cross-purposes."

"I guess so."

A thought struck him. "Have we ever agreed on anything?"

Ryn looked as though she were trying to remember. "Nothing comes to mind."

Anakin sighed. "It probably doesn't matter, since we're not in charge. Sometimes I don't think I'll
ever be in charge of *anything*.

"Nobody is ever in charge of anything, save his own actions," Ryn said. Something about the way she said it made him think it was a quote, but he couldn't place it.

He didn't have an answer for it, either, so he sat up straight and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, gently displacing Ryn. She didn't protest this time.

"Come on," Anakin said, smiling to lighten the serious mood that had settled over them. "Let me check those bacta patches, and then I'd better go. Master Obi-Wan will be looking for me."

A shadow passed over Ryn's face. "I'm sorry. I've taken up far too much of your time. That was very selfish of me."

"No, it wasn't," Anakin said. "Well, maybe just a little. But I didn't mind. You're not bad company, when you're not being all stiff and formal."

"You mean polite," Ryn said sternly, as Anakin gently lifted the edges of the bandage on her leg; but her eyes were laughing.

The healing skin beneath the bacta patches still showed raw and pink, and probably (if half the stories were true) very itchy; but it was growing well and evenly, no sign of infection or scarring, so Anakin put fresh patches on and let it go.

"They should all be healed by tomorrow, except for maybe the burn on your arm," he told Ryn, handing her an extra patch just in case. "If I'm not around by then—and Master Obi-Wan thinks we might be sent to Corellia for a few days soon—you can use this patch. Hopefully it won't take any more than that."

Ryn's fingers closed over the sealed patch in acceptance, but her mind was elsewhere—Corellia, as it turned out.

"What's on Corellia?" she asked bluntly. "Can you talk about it?"

"I'm not sure," Anakin admitted. "Obi-Wan wouldn't tell me why he expects a mission; I guess he wants me to figure it out for myself. But I'm much better at doing than thinking."

"I suppose that must be why you have a reputation for rashness," Ryn said. "But my mother used to say, 'Look before you leap, and you'll make a better jump'. Maybe Master Kenobi is trying to teach you the same principle."

"Then he must be disappointed," said Anakin, laughing. "I'm a very slow learner."

"That only teaches you patience," Ryn countered cheerfully; and Anakin's face was already settling into a scowl when he caught the telltale twitch in the left corner of her mouth that said she was teasing.

He gave her a playful swat—the kind of thing he hadn't done since the last time he'd played with Kitster on Tatooine—and stood up. "I really do have to go," he said. "I'll stop by tomorrow, if I can. And be *careful* until I get back. I don't want to have my patch job all ruined."

Ryn's grin stayed with him long after the door had closed behind his back.
CHAPTER NINE:

Ryn Orun was hard at work in one of the courtyards dedicated to lightsaber practice, applying all her focus to flowing smoothly through the moves of Form I lightsaber combat. It was about the most useless exercise she'd ever been asked to complete, sliding from one stance to another in front of a holocam, with no actual opponent present to gauge distance or measure her skills against—not even a remote! But Master Yoda had requested a full demonstration, and thinking it was embarrassingly stupid was insufficient reason to refuse, so Ryn set her mouth a little firmer and shifted into the next stance.

Her mind was elsewhere. Anakin and Master Kenobi had left three days earlier for the mission to Corellia. That hadn't been a surprise—Anakin had mentioned it, the day he came to her quarters (that had been an unexpected), and Kenobi had very graciously sought her out to bid a polite farewell before departing—but she could not help feeling their absence, Anakin's especially, and listening hard for any word from Corellia.

There hadn't been any, but even in her impatience, Ryn had to admit that it was early still. At soonest the Jedi could hardly have arrived more than two nights ago, which was plenty of time for Anakin to get into trouble (apparently he was infamous for doing that quickly), but not much for resolving a diplomatic incident of any kind.

*So calm down,* Ryn told herself, executing a double backflip more from muscle memory than conscious thought. *If anything really bad had happened, you'd know.*

That was probably true, but didn't make her feel much better as she finished her demonstration of Form I and prepared to start over with Form II. *A full demonstration,* Master Yoda had said. She wasn't going to give him cause to complain. In the meantime, she knew that Anakin was fine, because she could *feel* him, lightyears away. Granted, Corellia was a Core world, but still … she'd never been able to sense anyone but Kit at that kind of distance. Ryn wasn't sure what this meant, but she knew it scared the spit out of her.


*I feel ridiculous.*

"Young Orun!"
Ryn brought her practice saber down to a resting position and turned toward the age-roughened voice, bowing politely. "Master Yoda," she greeted him. "I have not yet completed the demonstration of lightsaber techniques you requested. I hope that this evening will not be too late?"

Yoda waved one three-fingered hand at her dismissively. "Watching you, I was. Practicing with young Skywalker, you have been, hmm?"

It took Ryn a minute to understand the old Jedi's Basic, but when she had worked out his question in her head—twice, just to make sure—she nodded. "Yes, Master Yoda."

"Hm," said Yoda thoughtfully. That didn't appear to require a response, so Ryn stood quietly and waited for him to continue.

"Good for your training, that may be," Yoda said at length. "Lightsaber combat, one of Anakin Skywalker's strengths is."

"I can well believe it, Master," Ryn agreed.

"One of your strengths also, it may be," Yoda added, causing Ryn to frown.

"I am honored that you should think so, Master Yoda, but I am afraid that I cannot agree," Ryn replied cautiously, remembering vividly her early humiliations in the practice rings back home.

"Hmp," said Yoda, clearly unimpressed with her assessment. "Long have I trained Jedi. Know these things, I do."

Ryn bit back a cheeky retort about Jedi arrogance, a pitfall of which Yoda warned the Younglings often. She failed, however, to mask entirely the twitch at the corner of her mouth.

Yoda caught it. "Amused, are you, young Orun?"

Blast. "Remembering something, Master Yoda. I apologize for my inattention."

"Share your memory, you should, if humorous it is, rather than apologize," Yoda countered, a friendly gleam in his large round eyes.

Worse and worse. Ryn made one last effort. "It seems unlikely that we would share a sense of humor, Master Yoda."

"Be the judge of that, I will," the Jedi Master replied firmly. "Now tell me."

Ryn took a deep breath and gave herself up for lost. "I was thinking of how you are always reminding the Younglings to beware the trap of arrogance."

"And find this funny, do you?" Yoda challenged, twitching his ears in a gesture Ryn wasn't sure how to interpret.

Ryn felt her legs shaking and locked her knees to hold them still. In for a gundark, in for a rancor.

"I find it incongruous," she answered, "since with equal frequency you remind your companions of how much you know."

"Hmm," said Yoda, his ears drooping. "Find me arrogant, do you?"

Ryn tilted her head and regarded him skeptically. "I'm not sure about that," she said slowly. "But I find your teachings … dissonant. I have to laugh or cry."
"Hmm," Yoda said, on a rising intonation this time. "Understand this well, I do. Far too familiar, it has become. Walk with me, young one."

Ryn bowed, pulling the holocam to her hand in a way that would not have come naturally a year ago. "Of course, Master Yoda."

*

"Grown to know you well, young master Kenobi has," Yoda observed as they paced along a broad corridor. "More, I sense, than I have done in all this time. Gained your trust, has he?"

Ryn resisted the impulse to freeze in her tracks and kept moving with great concentration. Lift right foot, move it forward, set it down. Left. Right. Left.

"I have great respect for Master Kenobi," she said carefully. "I sense that he is a being of deep integrity."

"The same for his Padawan you feel?"

Ryn blinked, trying to sort out the question. "I'm sorry?"

"Feel the same about Padawan Skywalker, do you?"

Kriff. "I … like Padawan Skywalker, and admire his many fine qualities," she temporized. "I don't think he is much like Master Kenobi."

"I wonder, are you are aware that old, Padawan Skywalker was, when brought him to the Temple Obi-Wan's master did?"

"He was nine," Ryn said crisply. "I hardly call that geriatric."

"No … but much younger, our students have always been. Tell me, Ryn Orun, what would have become of such a child on your homeworld?"

Ryn's step did falter this time, and she cursed silently as she caught Master Yoda's slow rhythm again. "A child like Anakin?" she said, forgetting to use the honorific. "Master Yoda, there are no children like Anakin."

Yoda gave her an unreadable look. "Very sure, you sound," he commented.

"I am. But if you would ask, what would become of a child who demonstrated unusual Force-sensitivity, then I suppose it would depend on the family, and on the child's own inclinations," she answered. "The Temple of the Living Force is always open to those who feel a true vocation, but I have no doubt that some of our most skilled pilots and navigators have at least some Force-sensitivity, whether they know it or not." She paused as delicately as she could, then added, "But then, that might well be true throughout the galaxy."

"Hm. Interesting, your perspective is," said Yoda. "But to the question of Skywalker I would return. Suspect, Obi-Wan does, that you have stronger feelings for him than is wise."

Stang you, Kenobi. "Feelings are often unwise, Master Yoda," Ryn said neutrally.

"True," Yoda agreed. "But an answer, that is not."

"You did not ask me a question," Ryn retorted, a little more sharply than she had intended.
Yoda blinked at her, his knowing old face full of gentle disappointment. "Angry, you should not be, young Orun," he said. "Seek to spare you pain, I do."

Ryn lowered her head. "Of course, Master Yoda. I am sorry."

"Hmmm. Know the Jedi doctrine on attachment, do you?"

"Attachment is forbidden by the Jedi Code," Ryn answered dully. "I know it all too well, Master Jedi."

"Then say no more, need I. But your new friendship with Master Obi-Wan and his apprentice—surprising to me, it is. Here for more months, you were, and hardly to anyone did you speak."

*My life started over the day I met Anakin.*

"I am sorry, Master Yoda. I meant no disrespect."

"Say you were rude, I did not," Yoda countered with a glimmer of impatience. "Quiet, you were, yes. Alone, always. Now, more one of us, you are. Good, this is."

*Is it? It sounds ominous to me.*

"Still," Yoda went on, "no great surprise it would be, if miss your home, you still did."

"I suppose not."

"Some visitors from Loreth, welcome they might be."

*Visitors from … Evinne.* Ryn snapped her gaping mouth closed, swallowed hard, and croaked, "Visitors?"

"Yes," Yoda affirmed. "Very anxious to see you, they are. Anxious to meet young Skywalker, too."

"Skywalker!" Ryn exclaimed sharply, forgetting her carefully constructed detachment. "They asked for him by name?"

Yoda chuckled gleefully, as though he had just discovered a great joke. "Know something about them, you do, hmm?"

"Yes," said Ryn. But then … "No." That sounded stupid. *That was stupid, laserbrain.* "Maybe."

Yoda just watched her assessing, or maybe just waiting for her to come to her senses.

*Get a grip. Think.*

"Master Yoda, please, it's very important. Did these visitors ask for Padawan Skywalker by name?"

Yoda regarded her curiously. "They did not."

The world tilted and colors sharpened as Ryn let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She drew in another for good measure, but it was all right and she could breathe again, because Anakin was safe, at least for the moment. Now all she had to do was keep him that way.
"These visitors," she said slowly. "Is one of them a young woman, about Anakin's age, with long blonde hair?"

"Their leader, yes," Yoda said. "Very pretty she is, in the humanoid way."

_That makes me feel so much better_, Ryn thought.

"Prettier still, you will be," Yoda said, unexpectedly answering her swiftly stamped surge of jealousy. "Seen it, I have."

Ryn was skeptical about Master Yoda's qualifications for judging the relative attractiveness of humans—Force knew it was no case of takes-one-to-know-one—but she let it go, and was about to ask for further information when Yoda said:

"Tell me what you know, you should."

Yeah. Except that sounds a lot like high treason, and getting involved in things that really are none of my business, and taking a leap in the dark. Force, I need to know what Evinne's after. I'm flying blind here.

Ryn sighed. For the moment she felt older than Yoda, and very tired. _And too damn alone_. And unequal to the task of picking through what ought to be told. But she had to try, because there was no one else.

"The blonde woman is called Evinne—Evinne Ardel. She's from ... a rival clan, I guess you could say. I ... she has not spoken of it to me, but I have reason to believe she is seeking the Chosen One of Jedi prophecy."

"Hmm." Yoda closed his eyes and extended one hand toward her, probing the edges of her mind—for deception?—with the Force. Ryn stood still, shields in place, and endured the probing. "Hiding much, you are, young one. But believe what you have told me, I do. Know also, do you, why this woman seeks the Chosen One?"

That was the tricky part. "No, Master Yoda."

"Tell me more, can you?"

Ryn hesitated. If she told Yoda about Kit's message, she would be revealing her unauthorized trip to Ziro's compound. She would also be revealing that her government, or at least her brother, did not entirely trust the Jedi, which shouldn't be a surprise -- but who knew how Master Yoda might take it? And what good would the information do, anyway? She couldn't tell him any more about Evinne's motives than she already knew, which was essentially the same nothing now it had been four days ago.

She straightened her shoulders and refocused on Master Yoda with an effort. "I would like to speak with Ardel before I start making assumptions about her motivations. But rest assured, Master Yoda, I have already made Master Kenobi aware of my suspicions, and I am sure that he is taking proper precautions." _Whatever that means._

Yoda shook his head. "Trust your judgment, I will," he sighed. "For now. But cautious, you must be. Dangerous, your fellow Lorethan is."
And I hoped I was just being paranoid. Ryn bowed. "I will remember the warning, Master Yoda. And now, if I might see these visitors for myself?"

*

Yoda led her down another long passageway (the Jedi Temple hardly had any other kind) and out into a lush garden, filled with trees reaching to the top of the high walls and hanging vines whose interlacing trailers wove curtains between the branches.

Evinne was standing in an open space between two trees, looking beautifully exasperated with her hands on her hips, framed by lush green foliage and flowers as blue as her eyes.

"Weary of waiting, you have grown, hm?" Yoda suggested. "Impatient, yes. But brought young Ryn Orun, I have. Leave you alone, I will, but hope to see you again, for dinner."

Evinne bowed. "I thank you, Master Yoda, for your gracious words. I hope indeed that we may have the chance ere long to improve our too-brief acquaintance."

*

With Yoda gone, Evinne turned her hard eyes on Ryn.

"So," she said without preamble, "you went crying to big brother, didn't you? That may be the worst thing I know about you."

Ryn swallowed her retort, the bile, and a lifetime of bad memories, and said, "I'm sorry you feel that way. You should know that I have no interest in your dealing with Ziro. But I had word that an Ardel would soon be visiting Coruscant on pilgrimage to the Jedi Temple, and I was concerned to know why. The safety of the Jedi is now a priority for me."

"Oh, spare me your pontificating," Evinne growled. "I am doing nothing more than what our people have been doing for generations: learning as much as I can about the ways of the Force."

"Then you have nothing to fear from me."

"I don't," Evinne said grimly. "But you could prove your goodwill by introducing us."

*Stang. What was I thinking?

"I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"Then you wish to deny me my pilgrimage?"

"Even the Jedi aren't sure of his destiny. But if it is who they say ... he is unavailable at the moment."

"Indisposed?"

"Off-world."

"One would think the Jedi would take better care of their Chosen One."

"I'll be sure and tell them you said so."

"So you had a message from home?"
Ryn blinked at the change of topic. "Kit sent me a package. An arm-ring and a letter. News from home."

"News?"

"His courtship with Elrien ended without amounting to anything. He wishes her well. There are three new babies in the Clan."

Evinne sniffed. "Banal. But I don't doubt that Kitraal found some way to slip more interesting tidbits in amongst the trivia. He has always been … resourceful."

There was something odd about her face when she said that, an avidity, almost as if … Ryn shook her head. *It can't be. Don't get distracted.*

"Well," Evinne said, with the air of one summing up a long and arduous discussion, "you know now why I have come to Coruscant, and why I have visited the Jedi Temple. What do you intend to do about it?"

Ryn eyed her for a moment before answering, honestly, "I haven't decided."

Evinne blinked. "You aren't going to try and stop me?"

"I'm not sure," Ryn said slowly. "I will tell the one they call Chosen, when I see him, that you wish to make his acquaintance, and I will let him decide. That is fair, I think."

Evinne spat her distaste. "Always you were like this, full of yourself and eager to prattle on about philosophy. What good does philosophy do us when our families are dying?"

"It lets us know what things are worth dying for," Ryn answered. "The search for Truth and the pursuit of right action have worth of their own, which cannot be taken away. But mere scheming will never make the galaxy a fairer place, and I pity you if you rely on it."

Evinne was snorting and tossing her golden hair, and Ryn had to stand fast and pretend to be fearless.

"That sounds like you," Evinne was saying. "All bluster and no heart, in the true Orun fashion." Ryn gritted her teeth at this, but said nothing. "I suppose I can't blame you; it must run in the blood. But that is just what is wrong with Loreth: our best and strongest are gone, killed in the defense of our homes, and only the weak survive. It is the duty, now, of every able-bodied Lorethan woman to seek her way in the world. A strong man. A defensible position. And we must stand together, Ryn, against outsiders. Against those who would threaten our way of life."

*Speaking of bluster,* Ryn thought, but what she said was, "And were there no strong men left on Loreth? Or only none that would have you?"

Evinne's face reddened, but she spoke evenly. "I do what I do for the glory of my clan and the good of all Loreth—as do you, I hope." There was conviction behind her words, more dangerous than any deceit. "Do not think that I take lightly the sacrifice you make, living on this city-world in exile to pay our debt."

"I thought you opposed sending a slave-hostage among the Jedi."

"I did. I do. But that the orders are unwise does not diminish the soldier's courage." Evinne sighed. "When will I know the Chosen One's answer?"
"I don't know when he will return. But I will see to it that you receive word of his response, once he is here again."

*

Instead of going directly to Yoda to report on her conversation with Evinne, Ryn went first to the communications center and asked the Padawan at the help desk for an open channel to Obi-Wan Kenobi.

"He's on a mission," the Padawan said, tossing a headful of red hair.

"That is why I am not speaking to him in person," Ryn acknowledged.

The Padawan leveled what she probably thought was an impressive glare at her. "He can't be bothered."

Ryn didn't flinch. "For this he can."

"I'll have to clear it." She left the desk and strutted into the back room, whence she presently emerged, followed by a much older man, obviously a full Jedi.

"My Padawan tells me that you wish to speak with Master Kenobi," he said, his voice faintly crackling but not unkind.

"That is correct," Ryn affirmed.

"You are aware, I take it, that Master Kenobi is away on a mission?"

"To Corellia, yes."

"It is our policy not to contact Jedi in the field unless it is truly necessary."

"A wise precaution," Ryn said. "However, in this instance I am quite sure that it is, as you say, truly necessary."

"Yes, I can see that you are quite earnest," the old Jedi agreed readily. "But I am afraid you have yet to convince me of this urgency. Can you offer me any reason for your haste?"

Sure. All this mess needs is a few more people dipping their fingers in. Stang it.

"I fear not," she said, trying to look respectful rather than exasperated. "I am not at liberty to discuss it." Tell him to comm Yoda and confirm. No, no, no. Bad idea. It'll be all over the Temple in an hour. Think. "But if you cannot accommodate my request for a direct link, then perhaps you would be willing to leave a message with his ship, asking him to contact me here at his earliest convenience?"

The Jedi furrowed his brow at her. "I suppose I could. Is that the entire message?"

"It will have to be," Ryn said. "I don't dare send anything plainer until I know he is there to receive it. But I do ask that you call me immediately, as soon as there is a response. It is very important."

"As you say, miss." The Jedi hesitated. "Your name?"

"Ryn Orun. I am a guest of the Jedi Council."
"Just so," the old man said. His Padawan sniffed and he sent her a quelling look. "It shall be done as you have said. Good day to you."

"And to you, Master Jedi. May be the Force be with you."

*

"Hmm. Spoken with me first, you should have, before attempting to contact young Obi-Wan," Yoda said, shaking his head.

"How so, Master Yoda?" Ryn asked. "Anakin Skywalker is his Padawan. It is Master Kenobi's duty to protect him, and his right to be informed of any potential danger to his health and safety."

"Then a threat, you feel Evinne Ardel is?"

Ryn hesitated. "Evinne is a true believer, Master Yoda," she said at last. "That is always dangerous."

"Explain," Yoda commanded briefly.

"She thinks that by pursuing the Chosen One, she is serving a righteous cause—the betterment of all Loreth. I used to know her, in other circumstances. Evinne Ardel is totally selfless, completely dedicated, wiling to stop at nothing to achieve her goal. I can respect her for the courage of her convictions, but I do not trust her."

"See that much clearly, I do," Yoda agreed, tapping with his gimer stick for emphasis. "But still hidden from me, her true intentions are."

"Please, Master Yoda. I have nothing to go on. I am not hiding suspicions from you, I swear. I truly am ignorant of what she wants with him."

"Sent here to help the Jedi, you were, and not to serve Clan Ardel," Yoda reminded her, apparently dismissing this plea. "According to the customs of your own people, your first priority this must be."

"Forgive me, Master Yoda, if I find it very convenient that this is the first time you have remembered the customs of my people regarding noble slave-hostages," Ryn said tightly.

"Forgiveness you need never ask, for speaking the truth," Yoda said placidly. "Waiting, I have been, and watching you. Not in your task, your heart has been. But a change lately, I sense in you. Young Obi-Wan's doing is this, or that of his apprentice, hmm?"

Ryn felt herself blushing and cursed her pale complexion that hid nothing. "Perhaps both, Master Yoda."

Yoda gave a burst of crackling laughter. "Well said, that is. But still … tell me no more, can you?"

"No, Master Yoda. Not yet. I have promised Evinne that I will relay her request to Anakin. Well, I didn't tell her his name. But I don't see that we can do anything else until he and Master Kenobi return from Corellia. And I feel that it would be wrong of me to act now, prematurely. Anakin has a right to meet her if he chooses to do so."

Yoda gave another long hmmm, this one thoughtfully descending in tone. "Trust your feelings, you should," he concluded after a pause, stroking his weathered chin. "The voice of the Force, whispering to you, that may be."

Or something like my conscience. "I will bear it in mind, Master Yoda. In the meantime … if you are
serious in your supper—dinner, I mean to say—in vitation to my colleagues, then I think it is a good idea. It would be wise for you to spend some time with Evinne Ardel yourself and form your own impressions."

"Hmm," said Yoda again. "Trust your own perceptions, you do not?"

"It isn't that, Master Yoda," Ryn said. "Believe two heads are better than one, I do."

Yoda cackled gleefully at her rather sorry impersonation. "Afraid, you would once have been, to make fun of a Jedi Master," he told her cheerfully. "Afraid, Jedi Younglings would still be, and many knights and masters, too. But a sense of humor, you have been hiding, yes?" He poked her lightly in the knees with his gimer stick, and Ryn smiled reluctantly.

"Maybe," she conceded. "It hasn't been much in demand at the Temple."

"True, this is," Yoda allowed. "And unfortunate. Take themselves too seriously, many Jedi do."

"Too much awareness of your own greatness will do that to you," Ryn agreed, and Yoda laughed again, turning and beckoning her to follow.

"The mind of a child, you still have," the wizened Jedi observed as they made their way down the corridor. "Give that up lightly, you should not. Come. Invite your friends more formally, we will. And then some manners, you must teach me, before to dinner we go."

Ryn bowed. "Yes, Master Yoda."
The Stranger at the Gates

Chapter Summary

A sticky diplomatic situation leads Anakin into the protection of foreign nobility.

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CHAPTER TEN

At Yoda's insistence, Ryn dressed for dinner as nearly as possible as she would have done at home on Loreth: no easy feat, since the Jedi Temple was notably lacking in haute couture (or any other kind, for that matter), and the few items of clothing she had ordered to accommodate the growth spurt that had finally taken her over five feet, five inches this year were hardly appropriate for a formal dinner.

But with access to the Jedi stores and a little ingenuity, she had been able to cobble together a sleeveless burgundy wrap dress that covered her from neck to mid-thigh, held in place rather precariously by an absurdly oversized leather belt that made her look (though she hadn't voiced this opinion aloud, in case anyone had managed not to notice) like a drastically underaged dominatrix. Her hair she held back at the sides with a pair of silver combs, letting it spill freely down her back, nearly to her hips.

*Best I can do,* she told her reflection in the small mirror in her quarters.

Yoda was not so sanguine when she showed him her efforts, an hour before the Lorethan party was to arrive.

"Not good this is," he said doubtfully, poking at her dress with his gimer stick. "Think the Jedi are sexual deviants, your friends will, hmm? Heard of this, I have."

"Deviants?" Ryn asked faintly, not sure she wanted to know.

"Heh!" said Yoda, thumping his stick against the floor with such energy that Ryn flinched. "Strange customs, you humanoids have. But too much leather and not enough cloth, I know that outfit is."

Ryn thought privately that the length was flattering; she had good legs, better than Evinne's, and in a meeting of this nature she would most certainly be expected to compete with Evinne for supremacy in the field of feminine charms—something Ryn knew herself woefully unqualified to do. But she couldn't really argue about the leather.

"It's the only belt I found wide enough to hold this mess together," Ryn said, looking down at it without much enthusiasm. "But I suppose I could wear my daily clothes, without the jacket. That wouldn't be *dressy,* but it could have a sort of minimalist appeal."

"By *minimalist,* mostly naked you mean, hmm?" Yoda demanded.

"It would bare my midriff," Ryn confessed. "But it is classic black, and a typically Lorethan style, and not likely to *fall off me in the middle of dinner,* so I think there's a lot to be said for it."
Yoda barked his cackling laugh, and Ryn stood still, arms folded, prepared to wait him out until he came to his senses and realized that there just weren't any other options.

Unfortunately, neither of them had the time. The feeling of Anakin's presence that had been slowly growing all afternoon—an inexplicably, but steadily, increasing pressure—suddenly stopped dead and snapped into focus, and Ryn grew dizzy for an instant as the world realigned itself along a new axis that was Anakin, and then stilled again as she realized his presence wasn't stronger, it was closer, and that could only mean …

"Master Yoda! The situation has changed. They are insystem!"

Yoda spouted a question with more than usually garbled syntax, so that Ryn could make neither heads nor tails of it, but she caught the word who and hung on to that.

"Skywalker and Master Kenobi!" she blurted, and then realized she didn't really know that. "Sorry, sorry. I can only confirm Skywalker. He dropped out of hyperspace nearby just a few seconds ago." She put her shoulders back, snapping out her report like the soldier she was raised to be. "You'll have to confirm Kenobi's presence via commlink, sir."

Yoda blinked at her, his expression unreadable. "Change nothing, this should, if know the Chosen One's identity, Evinne Ardel does not. Speed things along, it might. Cautiously, we must proceed. But perhaps, speak with Master Kenobi before they land, you should."

"Well, you know, I tried," Ryn reminded him. "But I think, even though I was not allowed to send a direct transmission, that the call signal should have reached his ship by now. I don't know what's delaying——"

She was interrupted by the hiss of the intercom activating.

"Ryn Orun, please report to the communications center immediately. You have an incoming transmission."

Yoda pulled out his commlink and keyed in a code. "Communications, Yoda this is. Transfer Ryn Orun's transmission to my private commlink, please do."

"Yes, Master Yoda," said the voice of the duty Padawan, suddenly more alert. "Transmitting now."

The Padawan keyed off, and Obi-Wan Kenobi appeared in blue-scale miniature above the device in Yoda's hand. "Miss Orun? Oh! Master Yoda. I'm sorry to disturb you. I was trying to contact Ryn Orun."

"Know that, I do," Yoda agreed. "Here, she is," he added, as Ryn stepped behind his shoulder and crouched down to be in range of the device's reception.

"Hello, Master Kenobi," she greeted him. "I was trying to contact you because Evinne Ardel is now here, at the Jedi Temple -- or, I mean, she was earlier, and she is coming back for dinner. I meant to warn you; but since you are here, perhaps a direct approach will be best. She asked me to tell the Chosen One that she requested a meeting. I am relaying the message." She was conscious of Yoda's scowl of disapproval.

Anakin appeared, leaning at an odd angle; probably from the pilot's seat. "I don't want to meet her!" he snapped decisively. "I don't like being hunted down like some sort of curiosity!"

"If you truly want nothing to do with Evinne Ardel, then that is your choice to make. My only concern is that you be free to make it."
Anakin scowled, and disappeared: back to his piloting, Ryn assumed. Obi-Wan looked worried.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "I'm not sure I liked the sound of that."

"Sensible as always, Master Kenobi. I mean: it's not clear to me whether Evinne will be ready to take no for an answer; I suspect she may be ... determined. But it is clear to me that the only satisfactory resolution to this situation must come from an informed decision on Anakin's part: his personal choice. Therefore, as of this date, 16:37 Coruscant Standard Time, I extend the right of hospitality to Jedi Padawan Anakin Skywalker as a stranger under the roof. And I call Jedi Master Yoda to witness."

Anakin's head popped into view again, Padawan braid swinging gently. "That was a mouthful."

"I had to make sure it was legally binding," Ryn said, feeling rather breathless after her declamation.

"Uh-huh," Anakin said. "What did all that mean, again?"

"It means that Evinne will be liable for execution if she violates the sanctity of my oath by harming you before you are removed from Clan Orun's protection."

"Protection?" Anakin repeated, scowling. "I don't need your protection."

"Hush, Anakin." Obi-Wan squinted at the comm panel, and even on the holo, his expression was pinched with concern. Me too, Obi-Wan. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," Ryn said grimly. "Maybe we'll learn more tonight."

"You really think she'll take extreme measures if the Jedi refuse her?"

"I hope not. She's always been the moral center of Clan Ardel: the good one of the family, as it were. I'd hate to see her stoop to that kind of thing. But I am uncertain of her motivations. She has never been the sort to make pilgrimages, and it seems likely that she hopes to achieve some kind of political gain here. I just don't have enough information. So I am being cautious."

"Difficult it would be, to harm young Skywalker in the Jedi Temple," Yoda observed.

"Difficult, but not impossible," Ryn answered. "Evinne once held a Mos Eisley cantina against mercenaries for two days, until an extraction team could arrive to bring her team out."

She heard Anakin, out of sight again, give a low whistle; apparently he had some idea what that meant.

"An extraordinary young woman, to be sure," Obi-Wan acknowledged. "I look forward to meeting her. Anakin and I will be arriving shortly."

Obi-Wan signed off, and Ryn was left alone with a disapproving Yoda.

"Thinking clearly, are you, young Orun?" he asked. "A delicate matter, this is."

"I know, Master Yoda. But I can't deny Evinne the right to pursue her religious devotion -- assuming she's being sincere. And I don't feel qualified to judge that yet. When the time comes, it will be up to Anakin to speak to her as the Chosen One of prophecy ... or not. I won't push him."

"Hmm. Choosing for young Skywalker, you are, to meet this Evinne, when told you, he did, that interested, he was not."
Ryn furrowed her brow. "I'm not going to be the one to tell Evinne he might be the Chosen One, not unless he gives permission. I can't say whether Master Kenobi will insist he attend the dinner. But it might not be a bad idea, for Skywalker to meet her without her knowing he's the one she's looking for." She sighed. "Unless Evinne guesses it by his strength in the Force. Either way, she won't give up without a fight."

Yoda hummed thoughtfully. "A battle, you think this is?"

"I think it's a mess," Ryn answered honestly. "But Evinne will look on it as a battle, because she looks at everything that way."

"Not wise, that is," said Yoda mournfully. "Not healthy."

*It's been working for her so far,* Ryn thought, but aloud she only said, "I'd better go change, and figure out what I'm going to tell Evinne. And try to catch Obi-Wan before dinner and find out what he's got up his sleeve." She shook her head. *Later. First things first.* "Please excuse me, Master Yoda." She bowed swiftly and beat a quick retreat.
CHAPTER ELEVEN:

Anakin frowned at Obi-Wan as he signed off and sat down again in the co-pilot's seat.

"I don't like it," he informed his master, a brooding scowl of adolescent displeasure lurking about his mouth. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"I must say, I don't much like it either," Obi-Wan admitted, his own brow furrowed in thought. "But I will not force you to meet with this woman, Padawan. If your feelings warn you against it, you do not have to go to dinner."

"Thank you, Master." But Ryn was obviously taking all this very seriously, far more seriously than Anakin was inclined to do himself; he'd heard the nervous strain in her voice when she made her (not very subtle) proclamation; she wasn't happy about what Evinne wanted (whatever that was: the ambiguity, as much as anything, was unsettling), but she was doing everything she could to make sure that Anakin was free to make his own choices. He hadn't that kind of liberty since the day Qui-Gon Jinn offered him a choice; go with him to Coruscant to become a Jedi, or stay in Mos Espa, finally free. In the end it had been no choice at all, really. Now was different. But he didn't like the idea of hiding behind Ryn. As unpleasant as it promised to be, it really was better to meet Evinne and confront her -- or at least probe her -- directly.

He took a deep breath. "No, that's all right, Master. The fastest way to resolve this mess is for me to go to Ardel in person, tell her up front that I'm the Chosen One, and whatever she wants, she can't have it from me. It will be better, that way, than getting the Jedi Council involved—now, when relations with Loreth are just beginning to improve. And I'm not going to make Ryn do it for me; this whole situation has her as nervous as Jar-Jar in a room full of battle droids."

Obi-Wan smiled. "Fortunately, I don't believe our young friend is acquainted with Master Binks. I doubt she would appreciate the comparison."

Anakin had to laugh as he adjusted the ship's pitch again, aiming for a large public docking bay a few kilometers south of the Jedi Temple. "Jar-Jar's all right," he said. "He can't help being clumsy. He's got a good heart."

Obi-Wan didn't look at him, but Anakin felt a surge of warmth in his master's Force-presence; evidently the older man approved of this tolerant view. Or maybe he was just remembering Jar-Jar fondly; with Master Obi-Wan, it was hard to tell. Anakin certainly remembered some aspects of that mission—his first mission with the Jedi, even though he hadn't been accepted as a Padawan yet —very fondly.
Padmé, walking into Watto's shop on Tatooine, not a queen but an angel, and he didn't even hesitate before throwing his heart at her feet, because how could anyone? She was so good, so pure, so full of light …

"Anakin? Did you plan on letting docking control know who is landing in their bay, or are you just going to glide on in and hope they're feeling friendly?"

What? "Oh! Uh. Sorry, Master." Anakin keyed for the transmit sequence. "Docking control, this is Jedi Padawan Anakin Skywalker and Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi on board the Lazy Gundark, requesting permission to land."

The comm spat static; give him half a day and he'd fix that, and ten or so other annoyances onboard this ship. But it was a loaner, not theirs to fix, and he'd done as Obi-Wan asked and kept his hands out of the wiring. No matter how much the myriad minor problems on a neglected ship bothered him.

"Lazy Gundark, this is docking control. You are cleared to land."

Obi-Wan murmured a polite thank-you as the controller signed off, giving Anakin a sharp look to show that he hadn't overlooked the slip.

Oops.

And that, in a nutshell, was life with Obi-Wan: warm approval one minute, muted exasperation the next. It seemed like however many things he did right, he was destined to do an equal number wrong.

Every action must have an equal and opposite reaction.

But he kept trying, anyway.

***

Ryn stood quietly behind her chair in the mess—what she would have called the refectory—where, on her advice, the Council had elected to hold their dinner with the Lorethan guests. Private dinners were nearly foreign to Lorethan noble families; inviting someone to a "private dinner," Ryn had explained to Yoda during their planning, was tantamount to saying you wished to initiate an illicit liaison. More to the point, Evinne's deposed grandfather had been infamous for hosting such dinner parties for his favorites. These entretenues had become (not quite unfairly) the symbol of his wanton corruption, and Clan Ardel had avoided them meticulously ever since. They were understandably sensitive about it.

For the moment, Ryn was the only Lorethan in attendance, having arrived politely early, and she stood very straight, her hands on the back of her chair, waiting for the guests to arrive. The air in the mess was chill on her bare midriff, and she was conscious of its exposure in a way that she would not have been back home. It was Jedi practice, in the usual way of things, to wear a good many more coverings than she had on at the moment; and while she could feel them trying not to stare, or to look at her askance, the only ones who were really succeeding were Yoda, Ki-Adi-Mundi, and Adi Gallia. Ryn thought that Shaak Ti would probably have approved the outfit, despite her own predilection for much heavier gear, and Aayla Secure would surely have understood, as she showed a noted preference for similarly revealing costumes; but neither of these ladies were present, and Ryn
was left to bear the hastily withdrawn glances with what grace she could muster on her own. The honor-band, snug on her right bicep, helped a little.

A presence tickled the back of Ryn's mind, and she snapped her spine even straighter, like a soldier coming from parade rest to full attention, as Evinne and her companions swept into the room with the lethal grace of a pack of hunting cats.

Evinne, Ryn noticed with a tight smile, was wearing an outfit nearly identical to her own, set against a bare-shouldered cutaway black cape that could not possibly serve any purpose, except as a backdrop for her magnificently bare white torso, so cut and defined with lean muscle that she seemed a moving statue, a living work of art. But as mesmerizing as her whittled waist was, Evinne had, not surprisingly, chosen to truly upstage her fellow Lorethan in an arena where Ryn could not possibly hope to compete: her tight black leather top ended just below the curve of her deservedly famous breasts, and left most of their upper side exposed. If Ryn felt a little sick looking at that, she was reasonably sure that every humanoid male in the room was positively dizzy, Jedi Code or no. And Evinne had arm-rings, for stars' sake: in addition to at least one bicep-band like Ryn's (it flashed once in the light as she raised her hand in greeting), both forearms were spangled with the thinner, lighter bands of the bangle type, not as significant in weight or texture but damn impressive in their sheer number.

That's a lot of victories, Ryn thought, feeling her stomach unpleasantly hollow and her throat uncomfortably tight. If Evinne had painted a sign and hung it around her neck, the message could not have been any clearer: You and I are not rivals, because you will never be in my league.

Calm down, Ryn told herself, forcing a smile as Evinne advanced. You never had any personal dignity to start with, so you haven't really lost anything. Your job is to aim for fair play and try to keep this from turning into a major diplomatic incident. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Yoda casting her a much too worried frown, and she tightened her jaw until her teeth ached, as though that might somehow help to control her spiraling emotions. Look at it this way: Evinne wants to find the Chosen One. Yoda wants to learn more about Lorethan culture. And you want Anakin to have a good chance to make up his mind about her. Skywalker and Kenobi still hadn't landed their small ship when she'd gone in to dinner; but the latest message from Master Kenobi had indicated that they would probably attend this evening, if they were not too badly delayed by the incoming traffic.

Ryn took another miserable look at Evinne's dazzling approach and swallowed hard. Because that's just what I wanted. More women who aren't me for Anakin to be interested in.

The Jedi Council, all placed at the same table, were bowing and nodding politely; the rest of the Jedi were trying to continue their meals as though they weren't tingling with curiosity.

That's my cue.

"Masters Jedi," Ryn said, hoping she had gotten the Basic plural right, "I believe only Master Yoda has had the opportunity to meet my esteemed countrywoman, so that gives me the notable honor of making known to you the Lady Aesin'evinne Ardel, retired Adept in the Voluntary Civilian Defense Force, Hero of the Battle of Lekara, the Battle of Achmet, the Third Battle of the Blockade, and others, and currently an Adept and student of the Living Force in service to the Jade Temple, and First Daughter of the House of Arathmain, Clan Ardel."

Ryn took a deep breath; the recitation of Evinne's pile of honors had made quite a mouthful. "Lady Aesin'evinne Ardel, I bring to your recollection Jedi Grandmaster Yoda, and make known to you Jedi Masters Mace Windu, Kit Fisto, Ki-Adi-Mundi, and Adi Gallia." She bowed, her duty completed, and reset herself behind the high-backed chair to wait for the next round of proceedings.
She was not disappointed. Evinne bowed, correctly if not graciously, and made a short but minimally polite speech on the honor of being introduced to these esteemed Jedi, amidst this honored company. It didn’t help that Ryn knew it all to be complete Bantha poodoo; but at least Evinne was doing a reasonable job of keeping her rather strong opinions on the Jedi to herself. For a woman of Evinne’s rank and power, that was a significant concession; probably not to courtesy, but to her need for the Jedi’s cooperation.

Stop assuming the worst.

Somehow they all took their seats and the meal began. There was no Lorethan fare, but a good selection of spiced vegetables from the meadowlands of Naboo, much like the ones Anakin had brought to Ryn's quarters a few days before, together with some sort of crustaceous seafood from Mon Calamari. There were other things, too, but Ryn's stomach was so agitated that she never did more than pretend to eat any of them. Even from her water glass she tasted but sparingly.

Ryn was mildly surprised when Evinne brought up the topic of the Chosen One without disguise, somewhere near the midway-point of the meal.

"I hear, Masters, that some Jedi believe your prophecy of the Chosen One is on the cusp of being fulfilled. As a student of the Living Force, I should greatly desire to meet this exceptional being. Would it be possible at all?" So much for awaiting my introduction.

She glanced expectantly at Master Yoda, but it was Mace Windu who answered.

"The prophecy of the Chosen One is still unproven," he said, his tone repressive. "And even if it were to be true, we have no way of knowing for certain that this boy is the one mentioned in the Prophecy."

Yeah, I'll bet fatherless children with unheard-of midichlorian counts just wander into the Jedi Order all the time. But Ryn kept that thought to herself, because, bringing up Anakin's literally fatherless beginnings was about the farthest thing from a good idea she could think of right now. Instead she rearranged some of her vegetables into what she hoped looked like a smaller pile and listened intently.

"May I ask, Master Windu, if the … ah … candidate … is a humanoid?" queried Evinne, and Ryn felt anxiety squeeze her chest. Calm down. Anakin's safe in the Jedi Temple. He'll tell her he doesn't want anything to do with her and her pilgrimage and she'll have no choice but to leave. Even Evinne isn't crazy enough to hang around Coruscant over the objections of the Jedi Temple.

But what was she doing in Ziro's palace?

"The boy is human," Windu said, giving her a look of suspicion so deep it was almost a glare— not, unfortunately, altogether undeserved.

"I see," Evinne murmured, toying with her food and somehow managing to make it look graceful and alluring. "And does he study here at the Temple?"

Ryn bit the inside of her lip while the members of the Council glanced at each other. They hadn't discussed, at any point, what any of them would do or say if Evinne actually tried to interrogate them over dinner. Ryn herself wasn't even sure of the right course. She had no right -- as she kept reminding herself -- to interfere in a religious pilgrimage, and yet something felt wrong here, something she couldn't pick out or define, but something nonetheless real. It set her teeth on edge.
The brief (but telling) exchange of glances over, Adi Gallia spoke up. "I'm afraid he is on a mission right now."

Actually, Ryn was sure that Anakin had landed on Coruscant by now; somewhere not too far from the Jedi Temple, and moving closer. But she supposed that the mission was not technically over until Anakin and Obi-Wan had reported its conclusion to the Council, maybe not until they had been debriefed. She decided she was not morally obligated to correct Adi Gallia's statement, and rearranged a few more vegetables as a cover for her preoccupation.

Sitting at the table with half the Jedi Council and one of the most beautiful and powerful members of the Lorethan aristocracy reminded Ryn oddly, and not exactly pleasantly, of high dinners when she was a child: not just the youngest in the family, but a real runt, a scrawny little thing small for her age. She had the same sense now of being not quite big enough for the task in front of her: inadequate, a little awkward, completely useless.

It didn't help that Evinne, ever since her dazzling show-you-up entrance and proud glare, had been ignoring Ryn in a way that wasn't pointed at all, but rather seemed the natural result of Ryn's own inconsequence: she simply wasn't worth taking notice of. The people that mattered were the members of the Jedi Council, and Evinne, with her usual sharp instincts, had already sorted out Windu and Yoda as the hammer and anvil that beat the rest of the Council into shape. All she had to do now was cut them from the herd, so to speak.

Ryn hung grimly on, determined not to give an inch, even though she felt posed rather precariously on the fence between the two sides, Evinne and the Jedi. Of course, the Jedi didn't know exactly what Evinne wanted with their Chosen One—and neither do I—but they were reticent, on general principles, to give anything away.

And then the situation abruptly changed, because Obi-Wan Kenobi walked through the door, followed at a respectful distance by his Padawan, who looked so kriiff good that Ryn lost her breath and dropped her fork on the tablecloth and stared at him, eyes wide, for several frantically hastened heartbeats, until Yoda's gentle brush across the surface of her mind reminded her that it probably wasn't a good idea to draw attention to the new arrivals.

She drew her eyes forcibly to her plate, but Evinne, whether by notice of Ryn's behavior or through awareness of the two strong Force-presences that had just entered the room (not that the walls separating them from the hallway outside would have presented any barrier, but they were halfway up the room by now, and at that range they were as palpably present as the Council members, Obi-Wan's gentle sunlight and Anakin's flashing thunderstorm-charge), was already pricking her ears. She turned slightly to her left, using a pull from her water glass as an excuse, and cast her keen blue gaze down the length of the room until she spotted the newcomers, just taking their seats two tables down: close enough to get a sense of what was going on at the Council's table, far enough away to be unobtrusive.

"Extraordinary architecture," she murmured, turning back and setting her water glass on the table. "I adore the skylights."

The only thing Evinne had ever been suspected of adoring, besides power, was her worthless father, so Ryn found this statement an absurdity so huge that she struggled to keep a straight face. If she hadn't been so miserably worried about Evinne, and Anakin, and the two of them together, she didn't think she would have made it. But she was worried, desperately so, and painfully conscious that not all of her motives for concern could be considered unselfish … and suddenly she felt a wave of calm, sent a little clumsily, a little too strong, and she recognized Anakin's touch and found herself smiling at nothing at all.
Then Yoda made a wholly unexpected move, and Ryn, who had been taking a drink of water to hide her smile - shamelessly borrowing Evinne's tactic - nearly choked.

"Master Obi-Wan!" he exclaimed, more animated than usual. "Sit with us, you should, and meet our visitors from Loreth. Room, we will make for you, yes."

What?!

Ryn blinked worriedly. "M-master Yoda," she began, flustered; but Yoda was not to be deterred.

"Spending much time with Lady Orun"—Ryn jumped, startled at the sudden use of the honorific usually omitted in the Temple—"young Obi-Wan has been," he was saying to Evinne. "Interested in your culture, he is."

Obi-Wan drew closer, frowning, with Anakin trailing dutifully behind, head down in what he probably thought was a gesture of respect. Ryn stood with the others at the table, but her voice shook as she made the introductions. "I make known to you Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi and his Padawan, A-anakin Ssskywalkerr." She stumbled over Anakin's name, giving him an elongated vowel at the beginning and putting too much stress on some of the consonants in the surname. She steadied herself and went on. "Gentlemen, I am pleased to introduce to your acquaintance the Lady Aesin'Evinne Ardel, retired "—

Evinne cut her off with a raised hand. "There is no need to be so formal. 'Evinne' will do nicely."

"As you wish," Ryn acquiesced, her voice cracking with nervousness as she sank into her seat with everyone else.

She found that Anakin had maneuvered himself into the chair next to hers when he reached under the table and gripped her hand tightly for a second in comfort.

Ryn felt her heart lift instantly, and she squeezed his hand back, swiftly, before releasing, and shot him a quick look of gratitude from beneath her lashes. It was embarrassing, to be so easy … but for the moment, at least, she didn't care.

He gave her foot a gentle, look-lively nudge. "Pass me the … well, whatever that is," he murmured, and Ryn reached over and handed him a platter heaped full of something's legs.

Evinne was studying Obi-Wan with more than professional interest. "Master Yoda was telling me you have a … fascination … with the Lorethan heritage?"

"Ah … yes," Obi-Wan answered, looking several degrees of confused. "I … ah … ran into Ryn— that is, I mean, Lieutenant—or"—

"Just Ryn," Ryn said, just loudly enough to be heard.

"… yes, well. I ran into her one day entirely by accident, and couldn't resist the urge to strike up a conversation." He was omitting the evening encounter in the garden—or maybe that was the meeting he was referring to? Ryn's head was spinning.

"Actually," Anakin corrected, "I ran into her. Or rather, she ran into me."

Ryn blushed. "I have already extended my apologies for that incident."

Evinne ignored her. "That must have been uncomfortable," she was saying to Anakin. "I know she's
at that awkward, gangly stage, but I don't remember Ryn being so clumsy."

Ryn wondered what the odds were on a girl her age dying of a heart attack; hers was pounding painfully against her ribs.

Anakin was looking nonplussed, clearly sensing that his gentle teasing hadn't been taken quite as he'd intended. "Well … now," he stammered lamely.

*Smooth, Skywalker.* Ryn forced a smile onto her face for his sake. "Well, for once I was glad to be clumsy and inept," she said with she hoped was a cheerful tone. "Otherwise, I might never have met An—Padawan Skywalker and Master Kenobi."

Evinne's eyes flicked to Anakin at Ryn's slip of the tongue, but she had the good taste not to make an issue of it at the dinner table. Unfortunately, that seemed to be as far as her good taste went, because she leaned forward, cast her eyes once over Ryn, and said, "Well, there's a time and a place for everything, I suppose."

Anakin looked appalled.

*You're not scoring any points with the Chosen One,* Ryn thought, and stabbed a vegetable—something crisp and orange—with a lot more force than it deserved.

Evidently taunting her non-rival had grown boring, because Evinne turned her attention back to Obi-Wan. "Tell me, Master Kenobi, what features of Lorethan society do you find of particular interest? I would be happy to share with you."

Ryn held her breath.

"Your history holds a special interest for me," Kenobi said thoughtfully. "But I am also fascinated by your sociopolitical structure. From what Miss Orun has told me, it is unique among all the systems I have encountered."

"How delightful!" Evinne said; turning her brilliant smile on him. "We Lorethans, of course, are very proud of our history. But these days we must also be mindful of the future. A philosophy which I believe is also embraced by your noble order."

"But not to the exclusion of the present," Obi-Wan said quickly. "As my old master liked to remind me."

Evinne regarded him thoughtfully. "You were Qui-Gon Jinn's apprentice, weren't you?" she said. "I thought I recognized the name. He visited us once—close to ten years ago, it must have been." She paused. "He was well-respected by our leaders."

"Deservedly so," Ryn put in. "I have been studying some of his writings in the Archives here. He was a devoted student of the Living Force." She leaned forward in her earnestness. "There have always been too few like him, in the Order or out of it."

"Studying," Evinne said. "I would say that you have become completely indoctrinated, but as I remember, you always could read through anything."

Ryn tried not to shift in her seat, but she couldn't help tensing. Anakin's hand slipped over to squeeze her leg beneath the tablecloth.

"I like reading," she said to Evinne. "I like learning things. And I like fiction and poetry even better, for their own sakes."
"I'll bet Master Gallia would approve," Anakin said helpfully, with a smile at the dark-haired Master. *Turning on the charm, Anakin? I didn't know you had it in you.*

Apparently Adi Gallia did, because she smiled back warmly before addressing Ryn. "I confess, I have a weakness for poetry," she said. "As it happens, I was recently reading a poet I greatly enjoyed, a Lorethan named Aes'ral Tamor Ardel. Do you know him?"

"Her," Evinne corrected, recovering quickly from a stunned silence. "She was the sister of my fourth paternal grandfather. A remarkable woman, in many respects. I am glad that her poetry is enjoyed by others in the galaxy besides ourselves."

"I think I have read somewhere that much of her poetry was written in exile?" Adi Gallia said carefully. "Can you tell me anything about the political situation that led to her banishment?"

"She was not banished," said Evinne. "She was bartered. At one time, we had a … tense, but fairly stable, relationship with the Hutt clans who have holdings near Lorethan space. Part of that agreement was the supply of a Lorethan advisor to various Hutt lords. Aes'ral Tamor served Jabba of Tatooine's predecessor for some thirty years, during which time she wrote most of her poetry, occasionally performing it for the court. *A Day in the Sun,* for example, was written for and delivered at the execution of a moisture farmer who had somehow angered the Hutt lords. But her most famous poem, *Water in the Desert,* has never been performed publicly. It was written for a slave boy, nearly ten years her junior, whom she met during her first years there, and eventually fell in love with. When Clan Beow finally sent her replacement, she spent all her savings to buy his freedom, and they were married before they left the spaceport."

A hush fell over the table. Ryn could feel Anakin growing more and more impatient beside her. Finally he burst out, "What happened to them?"

Evinne shook her head. "No one knows. They visited Loreth only once, briefly, after they married. I suppose Aes'ral no longer felt that it was truly home. She had lived twice as long on Tatooine as she had on Loreth." She glanced at Ryn. "I'm sorry. That must be a painful story for you."

Ryn tried to smile. "That depends. Do I get a beautiful slave boy to love?" She hadn't been thinking of Anakin when she said it, but she felt him stiffen beside her now and realized her mistake. *Oops.* She sipped her water again and wished for something a little stronger.

"Fascinating," Obi-Wan said. "I shall have to read these poems. What can you tell us about Lorethan music?"

Evinne dabbed delicately at her mouth with her napkin, then set it aside. "Not nearly enough, Master Kenobi, but I have a suggestion for you. If you are truly interested in learning more about the Lorethan Way, you must experience at least a part of it for yourself. Some of us are gathering tomorrow, in a less … expensive … quarter of Coruscant. Join us. Bring a friend. Come see what we are like when we are not …" she flicked a hand at Ryn "… on our best behavior."

Ryn stiffened, but Evinne's aura offered nothing except the opportunism she'd always displayed toward attractive men.

"I look forward to it," Obi-Wan said.

***

"I don't like her," Anakin said, glaring darkly at the door through which Evinne had just exited.

Ryn tried to be fair, though it was putting a strain on her faculties at the moment. "You aren't seeing
the best of her," she said, with less conviction than she would have liked. "She is a very brave and resourceful young woman—a hero to her clan."

"I don't think heroes are supposed to be *catty*," Anakin retorted, clearly unimpressed.

"Everybody has faults," Ryn defended lamely, somewhat hampered by her own lack of enthusiasm. Anakin shot her an *are-you-kidding?* look, then quickly sobered when he realized that Master Yoda was speaking.

"Come with me, you must, young Obi-Wan, young Skywalker! Ryn Orun."

Ryn bowed respectfully; behind her shoulder she could sense Anakin and Obi-Wan doing the same. "Yes, Master Yoda," they chorused.
Roots Go Down

Chapter Summary

She chose the hard way. Anakin was worth it.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

"Revealed to me, Evinne Arde'i's reason for seeking the Chosen One still is not," Yoda informed them, when they were all settled in his quarters. "Not good this is. Not ready are you, young Skywalker, for this challenge."

"What challenge?" Anakin demanded. "Everyone keeps acting as though I'm at some sort of crossroads. I don't understand."

Yoda blinked his large eyes slowly and thoughtfully. "Powerful, Evinne's determination to find the Chosen One is. Seek to lead you away from the Jedi Order, she may. Tempting, the young woman could be."

"Well, not for me!" Anakin exclaimed, exasperated. "I keep telling you, I don't want anything to do with this woman! But I'm beginning to think the rest of you do!"

"Calm down, Anakin," said Obi-Wan gently. "We only want what is best for you. Master Yoda and I are here to help you stay on the right path. And Ryn is your friend."

"I don't understand," Anakin said again, toeing at a nub in Yoda's carpet. "Why can't we just tell her that I'm the Chosen One and I'm not interested in her pilgrimage?"

Yoda shook his head. "Not everything, do we know. The shadow of the Dark Side, I sense in this. More knowledge, we need."

"Besides," Obi-Wan said. "The Lorethan government would certainly object to such brusque treatment. We don't want to precipitate a diplomatic incident."

"Why?" Anakin cried. "We're stronger than they are. Loreth is no threat to the Republic. Why do we care if a few diplomats get their feathers ruffled?"

Ryn stiffened as though she had been slapped across the face. She froze where she had been sitting, her hand upraised for the point she was about to make, her face gone suddenly, bloodlessly white. She stared numbly into space while everyone else stared at Anakin.

Dimly, as if from an unfathomable distance, she heard Obi-Wan explaining to Anakin why they cared, and the difference between might and right … or something like that. It was fuzzy.

She started to rise, then remembered she still had a job to do.
"Master Yoda, I cannot instruct you as to the guidance of the Padawans in the care of the Jedi Order, but I will state again for the record: It is the position of the Lorethan Free State that the free exercise of religious devotion is a personal matter, and we would like to see it remain so. I must respectfully advise you against excessive meddling." She'd meant to go somewhere else with that sentence, to suggest a peaceable alternative or maybe to offer to mediate, but she couldn't remember any more, and she was afraid of saying the wrong thing. I have to get out of here. "In the meantime, please excuse me. I have had a very busy day."

She made it to the door without tripping over anything—like her wounded feelings, maybe—and hit the door release without really noticing that it was there.

She heard a voice calling her name as she stepped out into the hall. Some instinctive part of her being recognized it as Anakin's and wanted to respond; but there was nothing she could say, nothing she could stand to hear him say, right now, and she kept walking.

She knew, on some level, that she was overreacting: that the blinding enormity of her pain was out of all proportion to Anakin's offense. What he said was callous, certainly; but Anakin was a teenage boy. They said and did callous things all the time (or so she'd been told). Clearly Anakin's outlook on interplanetary relations needed some work; might did not make right, and Ryn hoped that Kenobi was up to the task of delineating this concept for him. But she knew that she shouldn't be taking this so personally.

It didn't matter. She couldn't help it. She'd deal with that later. For right now, she gave herself something she'd never had before, something that came as an odd sort of relief: permission not to even try.

She wandered down the hallways without conscious thought, letting her feet take her wherever her instincts wanted to go; it didn't matter, really. The only real trouble she could get into inside the walls of the Temple was by talking to someone (which she had no intention of doing), or by whipping out her secret lightsaber and trying to hack someone to pieces with it (also low on her list of priorities at the moment).

Eventually, the hallway opened out into an arboretum, twilit now with the never-quite-dark of Coruscant. Ryn couldn't even see any stars, because the glow from the city wouldn't let their little points of light penetrate.

It's never really night here. Exhausting. She remembered reading somewhere that almost all of Coruscant's daytime illumination was provided by reflective satellites, catching and focusing the lightwaves of the distant sun. So I suppose it's never really day here, either. How strange.

There were benches in the arboretum, in different sizes and shapes to accommodate the variety of races represented in the Jedi Order, but Ryn eschewed them to sit curled up in the roots of a broad old tree. There was something solid about it, a sense of life so strong and ancient that its sheer radiant energy eclipsed everything else in the room. Eclipsed, but did not diminish.

"That tree was planted when Master Yoda was a youngling," said a voice several feet away on her left.

Ryn turned to regard Obi-Wan, dully surprised. Normally it was hard to sneak up on her; but then, she hadn't exactly been paying attention.

She decided that, like so many other things, it didn't really matter.

"It's very strong," she responded, certain that neither of them wanted to be talking about the tree but
unwilling to address what she felt sure Obi-Wan wanted to discuss.

Kenobi came to tuck himself into another fold of the tree's roots, beside her. "I came to see whether you were all right."

She wasn't going to lie to him. "I will be." It was a little harder to add, "I'm sorry for running out on you."

"It's understandable," Kenobi said. "What Anakin said was … I'm sorry. He doesn't always think before he speaks."

"I know." She bit her lip. "I think that actually makes it worse."

There was a pause. "I suppose it does. I'm not sure he always means what he says, either."

Ryn laughed, without much humor. "You're not helping, Obi-Wan."

They were both quiet for a minute, drinking in the simple, thoughtless aliveness of the trees. Ryn watched a leaf come loose and fall in a breeze that she was pretty sure was artificial, like everything else on Coruscant. Like her friendship with Anakin. "You're not the one who should be here," she said abruptly.

Obi-Wan didn't mention how she had walked away from Anakin in the hallway. He said, "I think Anakin was afraid of making things worse."

Ryn didn't answer, and into the ensuing silence he added, "He doesn't quite know how to apologize. It means admitting he was wrong."

"Then it's a skill he needs to learn," Ryn said, and her voice didn't sound like the one she knew: it was harder, and rougher, and a little older than it had been that afternoon. "Everybody's wrong sometimes." She shifted, pulling her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. The next words were drawn out of her by that thing inside her—that thing that was really just her, cut away to the core—that refused to write Anakin off, even when, really, it would have been so much easier.

Deep down inside, she chose the hard way.

"Anakin has a lot to prove. He tries too hard."

"He has a lot to learn," Obi-Wan replied, his tone chilling a little in disapproval—of herself or Anakin, Ryn wasn't sure.

Ryn nodded minimally and tucked herself a little tighter to rest her chin on her knees. "Are you sure he's learning the right things?"
Weightless

Chapter Summary

It's like flying, when they touch hands and the music soars inside.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Anakin had his head buried under the belly of an airspeeder, oblivious to everything but the fused transmission, when a female voice just behind him said, "Anakin."

The voice was so detached, so toneless, it could have belonged to anyone—to a droid, even. But he knew that slightly husky timbre, and he swallowed hard and put his cutting torch down carefully before backing slowly out from under the airspeeder and lifting his safety mask.

Ryn didn't wait for him to speak. "Master Kenobi wants you to accompany him to the … event … tonight. He suggested that I teach you some Lorethan dances, just in case you need to … blend in, I guess."

That sounded to Anakin like a rather thin excuse for putting the two of them together and giving Anakin a chance to apologize for acting like a bantha's backside. Ryn, it seemed, was not going to make it easy for him.

Fine. I like a challenge.

"Listen, Ryn, what I said last night … I wasn't talking about you. I"—

"What, you forgot I was Lorethan?"

"No! It's just … well, I mean, I was thinking about politicians. You know."

"Not really," Ryn said. "But I do know a couple of dances. Is now a bad time?"

Anakin felt his temper stir at her dismissal. Stop that, he told himself. She has every right to be short with you. You insulted her and her entire planet. Last night. In front of other people, including Master Yoda.

Anakin stood up and gave her his best smile. "No. Now is a fine time. What do you want me to do?"

"Come with me, please," Ryn said, and turned on her heel and walked away.

* 

"Ryn, please, just listen to me," Anakin said, catching up to Ryn in two long strides. "I know I owe you an apology. I didn't mean what I said. Not the way it sounded."
Ryn didn't break stride. "Oh, so you didn't mean that the Republic need not concern itself with treating other peoples well, as long as they can't defend themselves?"

"No!" said Anakin. "I just meant that the Council shouldn't worry too much about what the Lorethan politicians think, because they don't pose a threat."

"Keep talking," Ryn said grimly. "This is getting better all the time."

"What? No, come on. You don't like politicians any more than I do. You know what I mean."

"Again: not really. There are only about … seven or eight career politicians on Loreth, and even they aren't like the ones you have here on Coruscant. But I'm not that concerned with politicians. I am … troubled to think that you believe people are unimportant merely because they are not powerful. With that kind of attitude, the Republic will become just a big bully. The biggest bully in the galaxy." Her voice sank to a whisper. "And you, of all people, should know better."

Anakin felt his face darkening. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you were born a slave. Unimportant. You ought to have more understanding for people who still are."

Anakin felt a wave of unreasoning fury rise in him, frightening in its potency. "I am not a slave!" he choked. "I am a Jedi. Maybe more than just a Jedi. The Chosen One!"

Ryn had to feel his storming wrath, but the look she gave him was unimpressed—neither intimidated nor appalled. "Are you?" she said drily, her tone making it not exactly a question … more like a challenge. "Do you really want to be? Not all prophecies are good, Anakin."

That answer dissipated his anger—or at least distracted him from it—and surprised him enough that he missed a step.

"What do you mean?" he asked, catching her stride again. "The Chosen One is supposed to destroy the Sith and bring balance to the Force."

"So I've heard." Anakin didn't bother wondering how Ryn had heard. He'd given up learning how she knew things. Ryn just knew. "But I don't believe it's what the Jedi really want."

"What are you talking about?" Anakin demanded. "Of course it's what the Jedi want."

Ryn looked skeptical. "Really. So the Jedi Order is longing for the day when the Force is divided equally into Dark and Light and their numbers are equaled by the Sith?"

Anakin tried to speak, to tell her that that wasn't what the prophecy was about, but how did he know, really? Even Master Yoda said that interpreting the future was risky and difficult.

Ry sensed his sudden confusion and broke stride to stop and face him. "Sometimes a prophecy is as much a warning as it is a promise," she told him gravely. "Even the wisest may not know which it is until it's all over. All I'm saying is … be careful what you wish for, Anakin." She sighed and started walking again. Anakin wasn't sure whether he was meant to hear when she muttered quietly. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Ryn's anger at his thoughtless comment the night before seemed to have faded, but Anakin thought he could detect an underlying sense of hurt in her aura, even as she stalked down the corridor, all business. He couldn't think of anything else he could say to make it better—so far he'd just managed to make things worse—so he kept his mouth shut and followed her into one of the smaller training
rooms.

Ryn waved him to one side and walked over to the control console in the corner that controlled the room's lighting, temperature, and sound. The light she left alone, and if she changed the climate settings Anakin couldn't feel it; but instead of a calm, mechanized voice giving a lesson, instructions, or the quiet meditation music some Jedi preferred, the room's speakers began to play a stately tune, supported by a lot of percussion.

"There are three basic types of Lorethan dance," Ryn almost shouted; then she winced and lowered the volume on the speakers. "That's better. Anyway, the three types are: formal and ritual dances, traditional dances performed without a specific ritual intent, and the sort of ... hmm ... freestyle dancing employed by most humanoid species to gain the attention of the opposite sex. I'm not bad at the first two, but of course I've had little opportunity to practice the third. I was too young when I left Loreth, and children, for obvious reasons, do not participate."

She took a deep breath and went on. "I'm not sure exactly what Evinne has in mind for this evening. It seems to me unlikely that the entertainment will include organized dancing, because Lorethans tend to prefer dancing outdoors, and there is nowhere on Coruscant that fits the bill. I suppose it is possible that Evinne will take you 'clubbing', in which case the third style of dance is most likely. However, Master Kenobi has asked me to give you an overview of all three types, and so we will begin with the formal dances; they are not the most difficult to master, but they tend to be the most embarrassing if you foul up. Are you ready?" She waited for Anakin's nod before saying, briefly, "Here we go."

The main difference between the various formal dances seemed to be the poses in which one began, and the placement of hands against your partner's body: shoulder, waist, or hips. "Shoulder" position, with each partner setting both hands lightly on the other's shoulders, felt a bit awkward to Anakin, but Ryn assured him that it was the most common. "Hands-only," a position used for the more lively dances because of the greater freedom of movement it afforded, was the most comfortable, and the dances that required it were also the most fun: there was a lot to be said for flying around the room with Ryn, dipping and swooping and twirling. Dancing, she displayed a grace of movement Anakin had never really noticed before; and sometimes, despite her clear determination to keep things between them businesslike, he could catch a flash of pleasure and excitement in her green eyes.

*She really does like dancing.*

"I haven't done it much," Ryn said, and Anakin blinked, trying to remember if he had voiced his thought aloud. "But yes, I like it." She sat down and took off her boots, probing the left ankle carefully; evidently she'd hurt it during their last flight around the room. "I used to be very small for my age. Meant I could do tricks the heavier kids couldn't. Dancing was like ... like flying, I guess. Weightless and rhythmic."

There wasn't much he could say to her characterization of dancing, so Anakin said, "You don't look that small now." Actually, she was sort of slender: wiry might be a better word; but small made Anakin think *short*, and Ryn looked pretty normal to him.

"I've grown a lot this past year," Ryn answered. "I'll probably grow a couple more inches, if I'm lucky. Still pretty short for a Lorethan. We tend to be tall—well, for humans, anyway."

She stood up and tested her ankle, stepping on it lightly at first and then bouncing experimentally. Her face brightened. "Not actually twisted. I think it's just a little sore. I've been holding too stiff on some of these turns."
"Are you sure?" Anakin said. "We can quit and go to the infirmary if you'd like."

"No, it's fine," she answered. "I think I can work the soreness out."

Anakin grinned. "Can you show me some of those tricks you were talking about, while you're at it?"

Ryn returned his grin with a little smirk of her own. "Maybe later. Right now we still have to learn the traditional dances." Then she frowned. "No. Nevermind that. Some of them are pretty complicated. You couldn't very likely learn them in a day, and no one will expect you to, anyway. If someone asks you dance one of those, you can just say, I'm sorry, I haven't learned that dance yet, but I would be delighted to watch you perform.' It lets the woman know you find her an attractive partner without actually committing you to dance."

"Sneaky," said Anakin, frowning.

"Smart," Ryn corrected. "Even Evinne won't take offense at that excuse—because it will be true."

Anakin looked at her uncertainly. "Are you sure?"

Ryn considered. "No," she replied finally. "But I am sure it's the best we can do."
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After Ryn had finished teaching Anakin to dance—or after she'd given up trying, anyway—she headed down a whole series of corridors to find Obi-Wan, who also wanted to learn some of the more basic Lorethan dances.

And why couldn't he have just learned with Anakin? Because he wanted me to be alone with him, that's why. Manipulative Jedi. She wondered whether he had actually told Anakin to apologize, or just know instinctively that the younger man wanted a chance. Anakin had certainly seemed sincere in his apology … but then, he had seemed pretty sincere last night, too.

That was the thing that Ryn wasn't sure she could understand—he had said he was sorry, and Ryn could believe he regretted saying what he had, but that wouldn't change the fact that his first instinct had been to dismiss the feelings and concerns of the weak. Even when one of them was a friend. Ryn wasn't sure how she felt about that, or what it meant, yet; but she knew that the revelation had changed things between them irrevocably. She could move on, but she couldn't go back; and whatever happened between them after this, things would never be quite what they had been Before.

She didn't have Anakin's quicksilver temperament, flashing from one extreme to another in the blink of an eye. So far as she knew, she only really had two moods: thoughtful and determined.

Right now she was mostly the latter: determined not to give Obi-Wan Kenobi a piece of her mind, no matter how badly the meeting with Anakin had gone. It was not, she reasoned, Kenobi's fault. Certainly, he could have planned it better—or, say, minded his own business—but he had meant well, and he was hardly to blame for what happened after he had maneuvered them into spending most of the morning together.

The real disaster, in Ryn's mind, had come when she had tried to demonstrate the basics of the third type of dancing, the kind that Ryn thought was most likely to become part of the evening's entertainment, not least because it provided Evinne with a ready-made opportunity to show off her appeal.

Ryn had seldom done it herself—she'd been too young when she left Loreth—but she'd had seen it done often enough, and she soon discovered that she understood the principle almost too well, clenching her teeth to hold back a low whimper of pleasure as she pressed against Anakin and writhed.

It felt easy; it felt good, natural … which was the whole point, as she'd explained to Anakin. The idea was not the follow any prescribed set of dance moves, but to allow the beat of the music to set a rhythm that pulled you into a nonthinking state where every movement was instinctual, and the only goal was to enjoy your partner's body … and your own.

She and Anakin hadn't reached that state.

Well, she'd come stanging close.
There had been a moment, halfway through the one song they'd actually tried, when the insistent
drumbeat had urged her hips into a twisting rhythm that made contact everywhere possible, and for a
few impossible seconds Ryn had closed her eyes and finally allowed herself to really feel what had
been pulling at her, these last few weeks, and she had been repressing this so hard because she'd
been afraid of it, of what it would mean, but now she knew, she felt all of it, and it was good …

And then Anakin's hands gave up their tentative rhythm on her hips and he asked, worried, "Ryn? Is
everything … all right?"

Ryn had forced her breathing to be quiet, even if she couldn't completely mask the shaking in her
voice as she said, "I'm fine. And … if you're called on to perform this kind of dancing tonight"—run
like hell—"you will be fabulous, no doubt about it. Just remember not to think too hard, and follow
your instincts. Your body knows what to do, even if your conscious mind doesn't."

Standing outside Kenobi's door now, Ryn wondered whether she could give him the same
demonstration as convincingly. Probably not. There was an air of refinement about Obi-Wan that
forbade one to encourage the satisfaction of animal instincts, however well in tune with the Force
they might be.

Of course, Evinne might disagree.

But Obi-Wan took to the study of the more formal patterns with the ease and grace of a man who has
mastered Ataro and Soresu, and who is rarely ever embarrassed by anything, having surrendered
such feelings to the Force long ago.

He did not even attempt to pry into her morning with Anakin until he had mastered the Flying
Maiden and they were taking a short break.

"How did Anakin take to his new course of study in dancing?" he asked casually, taking a long pull
from his water bottle.

"Well enough," Ryn said. "He's a natural athlete, so I don't think he found any of the moves difficult
in themselves, although I sensed that he did not like the constraints of some of the patterns. It's lucky,
for both of you, that if there is dancing at all, it's likely to be the freer sort. All you have to do there
is follow your instincts; there is no pattern at all."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "And how did this form of dancing arise?"

Ryn shrugged. "I really don't know, but it isn't unique to Loreth, though the music is culture-specific.
Perhaps it is merely a natural part of humanoid mating behavior." She racked her brain for more
information and found it. "I have read that it is very popular on Corellia. Did you not see any while
you were there?"

Kenobi frowned. "If I understand correctly what you are saying, then on Corellia … and in most of
the Republic … this type of dancing takes place mostly in … nightclubs. When Jedi enter such
establishments, they rarely come to enjoy the entertainments."

Ryn decided it was better to warn him than not. "You may have the opportunity tonight, Master
Kenobi," she said carefully. "I have spent … a little time … among Evinne's set, and I understand that
she is very fond of the clubbing experience, or used to be. In the absence of a more traditional
Lorethan presence on Coruscant, she will very likely gravitate to such environments while here."

"You don't sound as though you approve," the Jedi noted, his voice offering no judgment.

"I don't care about the clubs," Ryn said. "If Evinne's choice of amusement is to drink and flirt, that is
harmless enough. It's that … well, Evinne never went through an isolation period. She discovered this affinity for nightclubs during the time when our women are traditionally cloistered. I suppose her clan couldn't really spare her for so long; she's one of their best fighters. But that sort of thing is becoming more and more common. I'm not sure what it means for our society."

"You fear that girls like yourself and Evinne, who were never cloistered, will become a bad element?" Kenobi said, his face wearing that look of detached interest that Ryn had come to associate with a Jedi Wanting to Know More. But in this case, at least, she had nothing to hide.

"It's not that,' she said. "Well, not exactly. It's … the reason so many of us are needed, right now, is for the militia. We've always been fierce fighters, but now, for the first time in our history, almost the entire noble population under fifty is a member of some fighting corp. A pretty fair minority among the Agrarians, too. We are changing as a people, and I … worry about what that means."

Obi-Wan laid his hand on her shoulder, much as he might have done with his Padawan.

"Don't," he advised her. "Anticipation is distraction, and worry is just a particularly unhelpful form of anticipation."

Ryn tried to smile and almost made it. "Planning to take me as your next Padawan, Master Kenobi?"

"Not at all," he said cheerfully. "Anakin will be the death of me."

*He loves you,* Ryn thought; but aloud she said, "Come one. We'd better try the Flying Maiden one more time, just in case."
Chapter Summary

Shady politics in a mediocre nightclub ...
Anakin could sense Obi-Wan's quiet eagerness in the seat in front of him, and Ryn's nervous excitement within arm's reach on his right; but personally he had his doubts about the evening's choice of activities. Their destination, for starters—Ryn had sounded sure that it was going to be in a bad, or at least *not good*, part of Coruscant, and it seemed like she would know, if anyone did—which was a big *if*.

Normally Anakin would be glad for the chance to get out of the Temple and engage in some mildly risky fun—but now Obi-Wan and Ryn were involved, and a political plot revolving around the Chosen One, and a gorgeous but distressingly predatory female who might or might not be waiting for a good opportunity to do some undefined witchery to him. And there was Yoda's bad feeling.

All in all, a quiet night in the Archives would have suited him just fine.

He glanced over at Ryn, who gave him a nervous smile that said: *everything will be fine … I hope*, before dropping her eyes.

*Very reassuring.*

Some distance from the Jedi Temple—not very far, horizontally speaking, but in a very different neighborhood, vertically—the airspeeder drew up outside a decent-enough looking club with a flashing neon holosign that was pretty much like all the flashing neon holosigns of all the mediocre nightclubs on Coruscant, and not too far removed from the rest of the galaxy.

Anakin kept a wary eye open as he followed Obi-Wan through the door: at his right shoulder, Ryn was looking scared but determined, and he wasn't sure how he was supposed to interpret that. He reached back and gave her hand a squeeze for comfort, which was really the only thing he knew to do, and had the satisfaction of feeling her slender fingers—cold right now, but steady—squeeze back before he dropped them, quickly, one step ahead of Obi-Wan's notice. The older man, he knew instinctively, would not understand; and he might even feel that now was a good time to lecture him on the evils of attachment. That would be embarrassing, and also probably futile—because no matter how many times Obi-Wan and Yoda and everybody else tried to teach him to let go, Anakin could never quite make it to the place where he cared about his mother, and Padmé, and even Obi-Wan, as much and as little as any stranger passing in the street, could never even *imagine* a world in which he felt that way. He could never make himself care about his friends less, so the best he could hope to do was to care about other people *more*.

He tried.

He did his best.

For Obi-Wan, at least, it was never quite good enough.

His master glanced curiously over his shoulder, and Anakin realized that he must have picked up his Padawan's inattention. *Focus.*

He tried.

***

Ryn had a bad feeling before she ever walked into the bar: as soon as the airspeeder dropped them off at a middling-nice establishment in midlevel Coruscant. Something about the place where they'd stopped seemed somehow *wrong*: more suited to the pedestrian fantasies of an upper middleclass clientele who wanted the illusion of an exciting night life without ever leaving their comfort zone.
than to the adventurous urges of an energetic young woman with a somewhat wild reputation.

*This place has put-up job written all over it,* Ryn thought now, surveying an interior filled with a lot of people who appeared to be aimlessly milling, holding half-full drinks like stage props. In fact, the whole thing looked like a set from a holonovel.

No, Ryn amended, her eyes narrowing as they swept the area, *not the* whole thing.

There were a few people—maybe just under half of the patrons numerically, but hanging around the tables as though hoping to avoid notice—who actually looked as though they might belong here, relatively speaking: humanoids just entering their middle years, trying to alleviate their stultifying boredom. Probably. But they were only a thin camouflage for the twenty or more sharp-eyed Lorethans, spaced judiciously around the room—some dancing, some talking, but all looking much too alert to be out for an evening’s revel. They were the players, and everything else was just a set … whether the other patrons knew it or not.

Ryn caught Anakin by the arm and leaned into his shoulder to whisper into his ear. "Something's wrong."

"I see it," Anakin muttered. But he didn't offer any clue how he planned to proceed; maybe he didn't know. Ryn set her teeth and wondered what the Jedi weren't teaching him about the Unifying Force.

There was no more time to discuss it, in any case. A small knot of leather-clad Lorethans near the back of the bar disentangled itself, revealing Evinne at the center.

She stepped forward with a welcoming smile. "Master Kenobi!" she exclaimed. "I am so glad that you could join us! Come, let me buy you a drink."

Ryn frowned warily at this, stretching out with her feelings for any hint of Evinne's intentions, but all she could read was what she had sensed last night: a surprisingly strong interest in Obi-Wan. Ryn didn't think it had anything to do with her mission or the Chosen One. *Sometimes,* she reminded herself, *it all comes down to good old-fashioned lust.* It was a feeling that had been foreign to her until recently; but she comprehended that it was a driving force in the lives of many beings.

To Anakin, at least, Evinne was merely friendly; but Ryn soon saw that Evinne had provided for his entertainment as well. She caught Evinne's slight gesture that brought a slender, red-haired woman about Anakin's age, clad mostly in her own friendly and engaging manner, to her side.

"Padawan Skywalker," Evinne said. "Allow me to introduce to your acquaintance a particular friend of mine: Banora Ardel, a member of my clan and noted warrior."

Banor grinned at Anakin in frank appreciation, utterly guileless, and Ryn fought down a wave of jealousy so strong it nearly made her sick.

It was ridiculous, she knew: Anakin wasn't offering the redhead anything in return but a handshake (her idea, as a response to his carefully correct bow) and a wary smile. And even if he were, it wasn't like Ryn had a right to feel so possessive; Anakin was a free agent, as far as she was concerned. It wasn't like their meeting had changed *his* life.

And he'll want me when mynocks learn how to podrace.

Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be much that Ryn could do to quell her rambunctious feelings, but at least she didn't have to act on them. She self-consciously took a step back, giving Anakin his space and focusing her gaze in a determined sweep of the room, trying not to give away the jealousy that was choking her like a fist around her throat.
Out of the corner of her eye she saw Obi-Wan cast her a worried look. She gave him a rather sickly smile in return.

Anakin remained mercifully oblivious.

A man of about Obi-Wan's age approached from her right, saluting her with his drink. "You're no Jedi."

That was true enough. "No."

"Lorethan?"

"Yes."

"Good lass. What brings you to Coruscant?"

"I am an envoy to the Jedi Temple."

The man's deep brown eyes narrowed fractionally, then flew wide as the realization hit him. "You're the Orun girl."


He waved a drink toward the two Jedi. "Friends of yours?"

"I think so."

That response appeared to briefly nonplus her fellow Lorethan, but he quickly recovered, bowing at the waist. "Forgive my manners, my Lady; I have forgotten to introduce myself. I am called Terch Ardel. I am a … trader, in the service of Aesin'Evinne."

*Smuggler, you mean,* Ryn thought; but it wasn't such an unusual occupation, unfortunately, for spacefaring Lorethans. There were only so many ways to earn a living, after all. She let her eyes drift over the crowd as she observed, as casually as she could, "Clan Ardel seems to have quite the presence on Coruscant these days."

Terch shrugged. "It is the future. We go where the winds of change take us."

To Ryn, that sounded like a poetic way of saying, *we're shiftless opportunists,* but there was nothing inherently wrong with being flagrantly opportunistic, and the Force knew Loreth couldn't afford to pass up any opportunities since the War, so she bit down on the desire to express her vague feeling of contempt. It was probably all linked to her irrational—she knew it was irrational, but she just couldn't make it go away—jealousy of the manifestly innocent Banora. She wouldn't be surprised if the whole thing was orchestrated by Evinne, not for Anakin's benefit, but just to see what Ryn would do, how she would react …

*Come on. That's beyond paranoid. Get a grip.*

She glanced toward Anakin, her gaze drawn irresistibly despite all her efforts …

And the room erupted into fire and pandemonium.
Fear and Loathing on Coruscant

Chapter Summary

The last one to let go wins.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Anakin didn't take the time to think. He hooked an arm around the red-haired girl named Banora and dove for the floor, already reaching for his lightsaber.

Ryn.

He risked a quick glance over his shoulder as he rolled to his feet, lightsaber igniting with a quick snap-hiss, and found that Ryn had hit the deck under the first barrage and now was inching forward on her belly, fingers outstretched toward a shard of glass that she apparently thought could pass for a weapon. She was pale and her eyes were wide with shock and fear, but Anakin didn't see any sign of injury.

Blaster bolts streaked once more through the shattered windows as dark figures appeared behind them, but Anakin was almost too shocked to deflect them, because suddenly the place was blazing with lightsabers.

Something whizzed past his left ear and a large Rodian fell into his field of vision with Ryn's shard of glass in his ruined throat. Anakin's eyes backtracked automatically along its trajectory in time to see Ryn diving for cover behind an overturned table. The vibroblade that should have severed Anakin's spinal cord tumbled out of the Rodian's weakening grasp and hit the floor with a buzz and clatter. Anakin stooped for it quickly and tossed it to Ryn, or at least to the far side of the table she was using as a shield; he couldn't see her any more.

Banora was apparently one of the few Lorethans not carrying a lightsaber; Anakin shot her a quick look and found her rising to a crouch on the floor by his knees: "Stay down," Anakin told her, and spun his lightsaber to deflect another smattering of bolts even as he strained to hear Obi-Wan's voice over all the commotion, shouting instructions.

Yep, Anakin thought. Should have stayed home tonight.

*

This was a disaster.

Ryn kept her head low and her profile snug against the battered piece of furniture she was using for cover while she scrambled with one hand for any other projectiles within reach; the broken glass had served its purpose, and she had the vibroblade Anakin had flipped her tight in her left hand, but it wasn't weighted right for throwing, and she had a feeling she was going to need it later, anyway.
Like now, she thought, as a Gamorrean who'd apparently shared her flash of insight about seeking cover hit the deck beside her. Ryn didn't have to do anything; she held the blade point-up as he rolled in, his blaster tracking for her face, and let his own considerable weight and momentum drive the blade home. She snatched the blaster rifle quickly from his loosening fingers and shoved him out of the way (as much as she could) with a foot before reaching over the edge of her makeshift foxhole to fire off a few rounds over Obi-Wan's shoulder. She saw one man in Mandalorian armor fall before the spread of return fire forced her to drop back behind her cover.

She came up to fire again, but this time someone was ready for her and a flash of silver metal missed her head by less than three centimeters as she ducked hard to the right, her shot going wide.

Thinking it was a grenade, Ryn reached for it to hurl it out the window—if it didn't blow her up first—and almost dropped it in surprise when she realized it was the hilt of a lightsaber.

It had the mark of Clan Ardel stamped on its hilt and the grip was longer than she was used to, but Ryn didn't care. Her thumb found the activation switch and she was on her feet before the snap-hiss had died away.

She deflected bolt after bolt, a combat technique she still found a little difficult. Evinne probably mastered this before she could walk.

Her limited experience told her that she ought to reach out and sense the auras around her, to discover what was really going on here. But Anakin's presence was so blinding that it was like looking for a candle in a star's corona.

Calm down. All those other auras are still here. Just ignore Anakin for a minute.

She deflected another blizzard of blaster fire, squinting through the mess to see Evinne cutting down a pair of Gamorreans with her flashing blue blade. "What is this?" she demanded of the older girl; but she didn't get a response. She couldn't even sense whether Evinne had heard her, with the flurry of emotions Anakin was throwing into the atmosphere, thick as the haze of smoke released by deflected blaster fire.

She tried a new tactic, deflecting a shot and letting her elbow drive into a Twi-lek's ribcage on the backswing.

Anakin, you're broadcasting.

Ryn's heel caught the Twi'lek's knee and she heard the sharp crack of bone giving way as the screaming tornado that was Anakin in her mind downshifted to a surprisingly musical muted roar.

She twirled her borrowed blade again, slicing a Rodian's blaster in half and walking on through the sweep so that she could bring the hilt down sharply, just behind his ear, as he turned to follow her move. He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

The storm of blaster fire was beginning to die down. Whoever these attackers were, they clearly had not been prepared for two Jedi and a crowd of Lorethan ex-military.

Ryn snorted. That was almost funny. She was a veteran at twelve, for kriff's sake. They were all veterans, and only three or four were actually old enough to legally enter this club.

The bones in her left hand ached with memory.

Ryn raised her lightsaber to a forward guard again, ready to send any searing red bolts back to their source, but there was nothing, only the groans of the injured and the muffled panting of those still
standing. Slowly Ryn eased out of her defensive posture, but she didn't deactivate her lightsaber.

Instead she advanced cautiously on Evinne, blade at the ready.

"What was that?" she asked, her voice hoarse from the smoke, but steady.

"An attack," Evinne said, as though that actually constituted an explanation. "But we fought it off."

_Tell that to the men on the floor._

"Let me rephrase," Ryn said, holding on to her temper with both hands because a catfight was not going to improve the evening. Probably. _"Why were we attacked?"

Evinne shrugged.

That was a mistake. Ryn used that microsecond of inattention to bring her sword up to bear, a couple of centimeters from Evinne's unprotected throat …

And Evinne _blocked_ it, sweeping Ryn's blade out and back and down in a swift semi-circle.

Ryn knew an instant of despair. She couldn't possibly defeat Evinne in a straight sword-match; going head-to-head she'd lose every time. Evinne was bigger, stronger, and more experienced. Ryn couldn't beat her.

She didn't even try.

She hooked her right foot behind Evinne's left knee and gave a sharp tug that landed them both sprawling in a heap of tangled limbs and lightsabers. Ryn's chin cracked the floor hard enough to make her see stars, but she hung on, because this was the only advantage she was going to get.

Both lightsabers had deactivated under their slackening grips, and Ryn blew them to the opposite wall with a fierce Force-push that made no concessions to her own manifest incapability in the Force while she brought her right forearm down across Evinne's throat with all the desperation of one who knows that taking a beating is the best chance they'll get: in hand-to-hand combat, the last one to let go wins.

This was a fundamental truth, a truth that Ryn embraced with every fiber of her being, and she hung on to it as hard as she hung on to her seat atop Evinne, putting all of the power of her conviction into that grip.

Much to her surprise, she didn't need it.

Evinne did not immediately fight back; apparently, she had cracked her head even harder than Ryn. And when she did start to struggle against the younger girl's grip—just an eighth of a second late—Obi-Wan's lightsaber swung down, hovering between their tense, sweating faces.

But then Ryn saw something that made her blood run cold: a small disk, hanging by a thin chain from Evinne's neck, divided into white and black halves along a curving line.

She didn't stop to think.

She said, "Obi-Wan. We've got trouble."
Chapter Summary

"I know who is important to me," she said.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:

Obi-Wan said, "What?" and Anakin's eyes flicked back to Ryn in time to see her fingers twist in a delicate chain around Evinne's neck and give a sharp, wrenching tug.

There was a faint snapping sound, and Ryn held up her prize, looking as bleak as Anakin had ever seen her.

Which was pretty bleak. Ryn was not an up kind of person.

The object, at first glance, looked pretty innocuous: a small disk, made out of some kind of metal, enameled half white and half black. But Ryn was looking at it as thought it might bite her, so Anakin assumed there had to be more to it than that.

"This is the symbol of the Yinang," she whispered, and when Obi-Wan looked at her with a bemused expression that mirrored his own reaction, Anakin didn't feel quite so ignorant.

"Perhaps you'd better explain," Obi-Wan said.

But the startled Lorethans had regained their initiative and were moving in slowly, lightsabers at the ready.

"The explanation may have to wait, Master," Anakin said, risking a quick glance around the room. "I'd say we're no longer welcome."

Obi-Wan followed his eyes. "Good point, my young Padawan." He jerked his head at Ryn, who nodded and got up slowly and backed away from Evinne's prone form.

Somewhere in the back of the room, a man with more liquor than sense moaned about being denied a girl-on-girl fight.

Evinne shot him a glare that made Anakin wonder whether looks really could kill.

Ryn took no notice: she was busy spitting out a mouthful of blood.

They backed out the door, and on the platform outside Obi-Wan commandeered a speeder while
Anakin kept a wary guard up for angry Lorethans. Ryn spat up some more blood and reeled, looking sick.

Inside the speeder, Anakin took the controls while Obi-Wan slid into the backseat with Ryn, who still seemed a little shaky. Anakin didn't think it was all from the injury that had her spitting blood. Whatever that little pendant she was clutching meant, it had her plenty worried.

"Now will you tell us what's going on?" Obi-Wan asked, as Anakin pulled into traffic and began to pass … well, pretty much everything in sight.

Ryn made a gulping noise that Anakin wasn't sure how to interpret. It didn't sound happy. But all she said, in a choked little voice that worried Anakin a lot more than flying blaster bolts, was: "I think we ought to wait and discuss this matter at the Temple. With Master Yoda."

_That's not good_, Anakin thought, and pushed the engine for a little more speed.

*

Back at the Temple, Anakin was having trouble keeping his worry under control while they waited for Yoda to meet them—in the Archives, at Ryn's suggestion.

Speaking of his best (currently only) non-Jedi friend: every time he glanced at Ryn's white, frozen face, Anakin felt the knot of worry in his stomach twist a little tighter. She claimed that her only injury was biting the kriff out of the inside of her mouth when she fell on top of Evinne, but Anakin didn't think that was what had her wide-eyed with fear, or her fingers clenched around the pendant in a white-knuckled grip. Ryn was hard to phase. If she was this upset, there had to be a reason, and Anakin was sure he wasn't going to like it.

Things didn't improve when Yoda showed up.

He hobbled into the Archives, waved the duty Padawan aside -- Jocasta Nu had already retired for the evening -- and regarded Ryn with grave concern. "Great fear, I sense in you," he began, and then cut off, because Ryn had leapt to her feet and now thrust Evinne's pendant at him, holding it out in a shaking hand.

"Master Yoda, I am so sorry," she said, and her voice was wound so tight it was nearly breaking. "Please. You have to believe me. I would never knowingly put Anakin in this kind of danger. If I had thought for a second, if I had even suspected, the matter was this serious, I would have told you at once, I swear."

Anakin was dubious about the level of danger he was actually in; he was a survivor, after all. But there was no question that Ryn thought the danger was real, and he cast her a concerned look. _Stay calm_, he thought at her. _Everything is going to be fine._

Ryn shot him a quick, unreadable glance, and turned back to Master Yoda in time to hear him say:

"Indeed, young one. But tell me, you should, what you feel the danger to be."

Ryn nodded, her face tightening as though he had asked her to throw herself on a lightsaber. "Of course, Master Yoda. I ... this pendant is the symbol of a group called Yinang. Their philosophy values balance above all else, to the extent that the more radical members believe that both the Jedi and the Sith must be eradicated before true balance can be restored to the Force. It is impossible to know how deeply Evinne is enmeshed in their teachings, of course, but the fact that she was wearing their pendant cannot be a good sign. And since she was looking for the Chosen One, I fear that her purpose must be to somehow manipulate him, in the hopes of more quickly bringing balance to the
Force. In which case she must either seduce him away from the Jedi, or kidnap him, in order to remove him from the contamination of Jedi teachings." She swallowed hard. "And some of our teachings ... I have heard it said that only the Chosen One's death will ensure true balance."

"Hmmm," Master Yoda said, while Anakin reeled inside and Obi-Wan looked appalled. "Sure of this, are you?"

"I'm not sure of much," Ryn said hesitantly. "But I took this pendant from around her neck, and we have both had a bad feeling about her presence here. I fear that all is not well."

"Dangerous, this is," Yoda agreed. He stood quietly for a moment, eyes closed in thought. "Sense the will of the Force in this matter, I do not. Act hastily, we should not. Meditate, we all must, in hopes of learning more."

"But --" Ryn bit her lip, looking even more troubled. "Shouldn't we search the Archives first, to glean more information on the Yinang? I wasn't even aware they had a presence on Coruscant."

"Hmm," Yoda said again. "Clear, our minds must be, if this mystery we are to solve. Not clouded by preconceptions. Do research later, we can, after meditation."

The three of them bowed in unison. "Yes, Master Yoda."

***

Ryn thought privately that the Jedi as a whole were in grave danger of meditating themselves right into a comatose state. There seemed no point in arguing, however, so she bowed politely to Master Kenobi, offered a subdued goodnight to Anakin, and headed off down the hallway in the direction of her quarters.

She doubled back at the first crossway and re-entered the Archives to begin her search.

***

That was where Anakin found her, a little less than an hour later. He hadn't snuck up on her, of course; his aura was so blinding that Ryn doubted he'd ever sneak up on anything with more Force-sensitivity than a droid. But she made him speak before she looked up, anyway, just to be contrary.

"I knew I'd find you here," Anakin said, satisfaction lacing through his tone as he sat down.

Ryn wanted to say something snappish in return, but that was crazy. He hadn't done anything wrong; it wasn't reasonable to be irritated with him for guessing her actions accurately. And it wasn't his fault that Evinne was coming unhinged.

She looked up from the flimsi in her hands and forced what she hoped might pass for a smile. "So I'm predictable."

Anakin's smile deflected the sting. "Reliable," he countered cheerfully.

Ryn's answering smile was faint but real this time, a silent thank you.

But Anakin's eyes on her face were concerned. "You're worried," he noted quietly. "You really think it's that bad?"

"I really think you could get hurt," Ryn answered. "If I'm wrong ... well, chalk it up to the paranoia induced by a very unstable childhood. If I'm right ... then we need to get our bearings here, and fast."
Anakin studied her for a minute in silence, then abruptly nodded. "All right. What have we got so far?"

Ryn sifted through the mass of flimsis she'd been collecting, found the beginning of her notes. "Here," she said, handing them over. "This is really disorganized, I'm afraid; I've just been writing everything down as I come to it. But you can--" Their fingers touched as Anakin took the flimsi and she froze, abruptly losing her place in the conversation.

She sat back and looked at him, really looked at him, for the first time in weeks. Anakin frowned back and forth between her and the flimsi, clearly puzzled by the scrutiny.

"You're not worried at all, are you?" she asked finally, not quite able to trust her impressions.

"Not really," Anakin said, scanning the sheet.

"Then why are you here?"

Anakin looked faintly surprised. "Because you are."

Ryn blinked. "What?"

"You are," he repeated. "You're worried."

Ryn wasn't sure how to take that. "You came all the way down to the Archives in the middle of the night because you're not worried, but I am?"

"Two heads are better than one." A shadow of uncertainty crossed Anakin's face, a trace of the haunting insecurities that bore unerasable testimony to some hidden pain. "If you don't want me, I can--"

Ryn stopped him with a quick hand on his arm.

"I want you," she said firmly. "I definitely want you. I'm glad you came. I just ... I'm a little surprised, is all." Pleasantly startled to find that he cared enough to give up--to give her--a little of his jealously guarded free time, the few precious unsupervised hours that Ryn knew--she knew, whether she wanted to or not--he usually spent daydreaming about future glory and his mother's freedom and winning a glance from a small, delicate-looking young woman with soft brown hair and warm brown eyes. Not because he expected to get anything out of it, but because he knew it mattered to her.

"Surprised," he repeated flatly, his eyes wary.

Ryn forgot to be serious, just for a second, and let the smile spread across her face. "You're a pretty good surprise," she told him. "Are you sure this is how you want to spend your night?"

Anakin sighed. "No," he said. "But I'm sure we'll both feel better once the mystery is solved."

***

"Let's face it," Anakin said later--it felt much later--putting down a stack of flimsis and running a hand over his face. "We just don't have all the pieces. We know all there is to know--or at least, all the Archives can tell us--about the Yinang. What we don't know is Evinne's game. She is the key here."

Ryn didn't disagree with him in principle, but she was reluctant to give up. "But if we keep looking,
maybe we'll find a clue to what she wants," she suggested, half-heartedly.

Anakin shot her a look of well-deserved scorn. "Not if we're looking in the wrong place," he pointed out. "Look, we know what Evinne, as a member of the Yinang group, wants: to bring balance to the Force by any means necessary, even if that means destroying the Sith and the Jedi. We don't know how she plans to achieve this. Only she can tell us that."

Ryn opened her mouth to counter, realized that he was right, and shut it again without speaking. She shuffled some flimsis around, more for something to do than from a hope of accomplishing anything useful.

"There's something I don't understand," Anakin said, over the soft sound of her sigh. "If the prophecy says I am to destroy the Sith and bring balance to the Force, why is Evinne acting at all? Why not just let the prophecy run its course?"

Ryn speared him with a stare. "Are you sure it's you? Sure you're the Chosen One?"

Anakin met her gaze steadily. "Master Qui-Gon was sure."

"Anybody can be wrong," Ryn muttered with more hope than conviction. Please, let Qui-Gon be wrong. Don't let it be Anakin. Not Anakin. He's so ... don't let it be Anakin.

The person in question was still watching her, vaguely confused, and so Ryn took a deep breath and cleared her throat, pushing the fear and worry away. Focus.

"Maybe Evinne wants to make sure you destroy the Jedi as well as the Sith," she suggested, returning to Anakin's question. "Maybe she feels she has a better chance of securing the prophecy if she converts you to her cause. As a Yinang, you would--wait." She struck the desktop with her open palm for emphasis. "That's it. It all makes sense now."

Anakin regarded her doubtfully. "It does?"

"Yes," Ryn said, leaning forward in her intensity. "Look, it's the way we do things back home. Loyalty is the central value of our society, the bedrock on which everything else rests. Evinne hopes to tie the Chosen One to her, to the Yinang, by establishing an intimate relationship, possibly backed by the promise of a marriage contract. It's brilliant. Twisted, but brilliant."

Anakin didn't look convinced. "I don't think I understand," he said slowly. "Being ... intimate with Evinne means you're a part of the Yinang? I don't get it."

"No ... oh, dear. Let's see." Ryn rubbed her aching head, trying to think of a way to explain the tangle of Lorethan internal relationships so that it made sense to a Jedi Padawan from Tatooine.

"All right," she said finally. "You know that I was sent here because a Jedi died in the defense of Loreth." Anakin nodded. "We had to pay the debt. And it had to be House Orun, because we were in charge of the defensive action in which the Jedi was killed. So here I am. But because of that, the family structure is endangered. I now have an outside loyalty: to the Jedi Order, of course, as part of my assignment, but also, now, I have personal obligations to you and Obi-Wan, as friends. This means, for example, that if you were hurt or in danger, my brother Kit might come to your aid. He has loyalty to me, and I have loyalty to you. So if, let's say, you were to form an intimate relationship with Evinne, either through sex or some other means, you would be expected to support her goals and make her loyalties your own--to some extent, anyway."

Anakin stared at her for a long minute, then shook his head vigorously. "You give me a headache."
Something caught in Ryn's chest, a sharp little pain. The lights in the room seemed to dim a little. "I do?"

"Well, yeah," Anakin said, oblivious. "All these complicated interrelationships. How do you keep them all sorted out?"

"I--uh--" Ryn looked down at the tabletop, at Anakin's fingers worrying the frayed edge of a piece of flimsiplast. Restless. Impatient. But strong and sure, too: on the hilt of his lightsaber, working on a piece of broken machinery. Spreading bacta on her blasterburns. Not perfect hands, that never made a mistake; but dear to her, because they were his.

She looked back up and met his questioning eyes. "I guess I just know who's important to me, and then I care about what matters to them."

Anakin stared at her a little longer, making her acutely uncomfortable, and she was sure he could see through her shields to her carefully guarded feelings. But whatever he saw, he kept to himself.

"All right," he said finally. "So here's where we are: Evinne will try to seduce me, I will say no, and everything will be fine. There is no problem." He pointed a finger at her. "We can all sleep soundly."

"Maybe," Ryn said dubiously, worrying at her lower lip, and Anakin sat back, his blue eyes shading darker with exasperation.

"Well?" he said, when she didn't elaborate. "Spit it out."

Ryn shot him a guilty look. "Evinne doesn't know who the Chosen One is," she reminded him. "And if she's running around Coruscant, trying to seduce Jedi ... that could be pretty disruptive."

Anakin looked abruptly exhausted. "Ah, stang it," he fumed, running his fingers through his short, bristly hair. "All right. I'll go talk to Evinne, tell her--"

"What?" Ryn exclaimed, ignoring the protests of aching muscles as she snapped to attention. "No. This is a matter of Temple security. We have to tell Obi-Wan, and Master Yoda." Her jaw firmed. "And then I will see to it that Evinne is removed from Coruscant."

Anakin tilted his head. "Are you sure?" he asked her.

"Absolutely," Ryn answered with great conviction. "This has gone on long enough. She is jeopardizing diplomatic relations. As the ranking Lorethan present, it is my responsibility to get her the hell out of this system, before she makes a worse nuisance of herself." A thought struck her and she stopped short. "Unless ... I mean ... if you want her to stay, so you can ... uh ..." She trailed off, gesturing helplessly, floundering.

"No," said Anakin. "I thought we had covered this already. I'm not interested. Stop asking."

"Right," Ryn said, pushing herself slowly to her feet. She was discovering new aches at about the rate of one every five minutes. "Do you think--will Obi-Wan be up?"

Anakin glanced at his chrono and shook his head. "Not unless he's still meditating. But I think he'd want to be interrupted, under the circumstances. Let's go."

***
Chapter Summary

"What are you asking me to do, Master?"

Chapter Eighteen:

After they had explained the new theory to Obi-Wan, he agreed with Ryn (but not with Anakin) that Master Yoda should be briefed, and declined to wait until morning. So the three of them trekked across the Temple, where Ryn made her report to Yoda, who closed his eyes, presumably searching his feelings (it looked deceptively like a nap), for several minutes before saying that he concurred with Ryn's assessment as a native Lorethan.

Which meant that in the very early hours of the morning, she found herself in a booth in the Temple's comm center, sending a priority hyperwave message home to Kit, who took it almost at once.

"... so a diplomatic suggestion, in the right ear, that she be reassigned, seems in order," Ryn concluded briefly. "She has talents that could be useful on other Core worlds, if that's what she likes. But this Chosen One business has got to stop. It's risky, and disruptive. And a little insane, if you ask me."

"I did not," Kit said. "But I agree." He smiled, but his voice was tired, even through the comm channels. "I'll see what I can do, let you know in a few days. Was there anything else?"

"Yes," Ryn said, unable to hide a grin. "I want you to meet someone." She backed to the edge of the transmission grid and motioned to Anakin to squeeze onto it with her. "Kit, this is my friend Jedi Padawan Anakin Skywalker. I ... um ... mentioned him in my last report. Anakin, this is my brother, Kitraal Orun."

Anakin bowed a little awkwardly, trying not to send himself out of the transmission field any more than necessary. "I am honored to make your acquaintance, sir," he said politely.

"Padawan Skywalker," Kit acknowledged. "The pleasure is all mine. Ryn has spoken very highly of you." He hesitated. "Please convey my respects to your master, and assure him that you are both very welcome to visit our home on Loreth at your convenience."

"I ... that is very kind of you, sir," Anakin managed, plainly surprised. "I will certainly tell Master Kenobi."

"Good," Kit said. He sounded vaguely smug. "With a little luck--or, as you might say, the will of the Force--I may have the chance to make your acquaintance in person soon. I have been promising Ryn a visit ever since she was first assigned, and it is time I made good. Until then, Jedi?"

"Yes, sir."
"I'll comm you, Ryn."

And he was gone.

Ryn grinned cheerfully at Anakin as they stepped away from each other, off the transmission grid. "I'm glad you decided to come down here with me," she told him, almost bubbly for once. "I've been wishing you could meet Kit."

"He seemed nice," Anakin replied cautiously. But Ryn picked up on his reticence and frowned at him, suddenly uncertain.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," Anakin said; but Ryn knew better, so she folded her arms and waited.

He looked at her posture and sighed. "I don't know, all right? He was so ... formal and gracious. I felt like I should be calling him Your Excellency or something."

"Your Grace," Ryn corrected him. "In Basic, anyway. But if that's all that's bothering you, you can relax. That was positively warm for Kit. And he was only trying to be nice. Make a good impression."

"I thought you said he didn't care that I was a Jedi."

"He doesn't," Ryn said. "He cares that you're my friend."

Anakin had been right behind her as they headed toward the stairs, but now she sensed him stopping and turned around, one hand on the banister for support.

Anakin was staring up at her, through her, the expression on his face as unreadable as his sense in the Force.

Some days I just don't understand you, Anakin.

"Look," Ryn said, on an exhalation that was almost a sigh. "This is that thing we were talking about earlier. Remember? I know who is important to me." Anakin nodded, so she went on. "Well, you're important to me. And I am important to Kit, so you matter to him."

"I am?" Anakin said, sounding a little dazed, and Ryn sighed for real this time.

"Sleep on it," she said gruffly, reaching out and grabbing a fistful of tunic to haul him after her up the stairs. "It's not that complicated, I promise."

And Anakin, his Force-presence bemused, followed her all the way to the top before he recovered enough to brush her grip away.

***

It was closing in on oh-five-hundred hours, Coruscant standard time, by the time Ryn finally reached the relative peace and quiet of her own quarters.

She stripped to her underwear and dove under the blanket, not bothering to mute her sense of Anakin, retreating down the hall after insisting he see her to her door. It was anybody's guess why he'd decided to play the gentleman; with Anakin, sometimes the explanation was more confusing than the question. Right now she didn't even feel like asking.
But I love you, you damn mysterious Jedi, she thought with sleepy affection.

She was still smiling when dreams took her.

**

Anakin woke a little after thirteen hundred hours with his head pounding and a nasty taste in his mouth.

"Unngghh..." he rolled reluctantly to his feet and slouched into the 'resher.

When he staggered out into the living area, he found Obi-Wan, reading a book of some kind. But he must have heard Anakin get up, because he wordlessly handed his Padawan a cup of hot caf, nodding his acceptance of Anakin's mumbled thanks.

Obi-Wan waited until Anakin had drained about half the cup before speaking.

"I take it everything went well last night--this morning, I should say?"

Anakin nodded, very carefully. His head felt dangerously heavy. "Ryn contacted her brother, who promised to make the necessary arrangements." He hesitated. "I spoke with him, briefly. He asked me to convey his respects to you, and to extend his invitation for the two of us to visit him on his home planet."

"Really?" Obi-Wan's tone was colored with surprise. "That's unusual. In fact, I think it's a first. Only a handful of Jedi have been allowed to set foot on Loreth in the last several centuries. I don't think any of them have actually been invited."

"I think it's mostly because of Ryn," Anakin replied. He still wasn't sure how he felt about that. "Sort of a friends-by-extension thing."

"I suppose I should feel honored that Miss Orun considers us her friends," Obi-Wan mused. "She is an interesting young woman. So reserved, and yet charismatic, in her own way. But I must say, Anakin, that if she feels any affection, I think it must be for you."

Yeah, I know. What am I supposed to do about it? But that wasn't entirely true, so Anakin said, "She respects you deeply, Master."

Obi-Wan looked amused. "Search your feelings, Padawan. Or better yet, search hers." His eyes focused on Anakin's face, disconcertingly perceptive. "But I see you already have. You know she has strong feelings for you, don't you?"

No. I'm blind, deaf, and stupid. "Yes, Master."

"Have you spoken to her about it? You know that for a Jedi--"

"I know," Anakin said quickly. "And no, we haven't talked about it." He surveyed the dregs in his cup. "Ryn is ... a friend. I don't want to embarrass both of us by making an issue of her private feelings. She knows what the Code says about attachment. What else is there to say?"

Obi-Wan looked at him sharply. "But does she understand what that means--for both of you? No attachments doesn't just mean avoiding a romantic liaison, Anakin. It is a way of life. It means not even having to let go ... because you were never holding on." His expression softened, and he sighed. "I know it isn't easy, but it is the Jedi way. And, Anakin, you have to make that clear, from the very beginning. I'm not saying you shouldn't be friendly. But to let Ryn expect anything else ..."
that would be cruel. If you let things go on, you'll only end up hurting her more, later."

*You are important to me.* So matter-of-fact, as though to deny the weight of the admission. As though any protest he made couldn't hurt her. But he had seen the tiny, telltale shake in the hand that trailed along the banister, felt a shiver of pain, almost hidden, in the Force around her.

"What are you asking me to do, Master?" Anakin asked quietly, looking into his cup but seeing Ryn's pale face, tense with worry. *I really think you could be hurt.* "Ryn already knows the Code. She knows how committed I am to becoming a Jedi. She has never said or done anything to make me think she expects--I don't know--for me to reciprocate her feelings."

"But you need to make it clear to her that you don't," Obi-Wan said. "That you never can. Don't let her grow attached to you."

*You are important to me.*

"Yes, Master."
CHAPTER NINETEEN

He waited until the next morning to confront Ryn, both because he dreaded the interview--what was he supposed to say, really?--and because he figured they could both use a reprieve.

He found her in the Room of a Thousand Fountains, quietly reading a datapad that turned out to be a transcription of a late Jedi Master's journals.

"Anakin." She smiled as he joined her, uncurling slightly and stretching her bare toes in the grass. Her boots lay beside her on a tree root.

"Hi," Anakin said awkwardly. "Master Obi-Wan--" No. It wasn't fair to put this off on Obi-Wan. "I mean, we--uh--need to talk."

Ryn's smile faded, her eyes dimming to wariness as she took in the seriousness of his expression--or, more likely, the anxiety in his aura. "Sure." She indicated a spot on the grass beside her, caught Anakin's hesitation, and rocked easily to her feet. "Or we could take a walk."

Ryn pulled on her boots and started them off down a wandering little path that trailed between water features, and Anakin fell into step beside her, trying to work out the best way to begin.

Finally Ryn prompted him, her tone too carefully neutral. "So? What's on your mind?"


When nothing more was immediately forthcoming, Ryn shot him a puzzled look. "That's a pretty broad topic," she hinted, and Anakin had to agree.

"Do you remember what the Code says about attachment?" he asked her desperately.

"Of course. Jedi are not to have them." She hesitated, then added, "I believe many Jedi consider attachments to be a manifestation of greed, while others fear they may prove detrimental to a Jedi's focus, distracting him from a life of contemplation and clouding his mind in a crisis."

Her carefully blank delivery could have rivaled that of a Jedi Master.

Anakin took a deep breath. "So you know how important it is for a Padawan, especially, to deny all attachments and strive to follow the Jedi way."

Ryn gave him an unreadable look. "I can see that you think it is."

Stang it. You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?

But that wasn't fair. This wasn't Ryn's fault.

"Ryn, I--to be a Jedi, I can't--I mean, we ... I can't let myself have any kind of feelings ... for you. For anybody." Padme. My mom. "I'm sorry."
Ryn turned away and walked to the nearest railing, looking down on the lower level. Her fingers were tight as she gripped the decorative metal, the small muscles in the backs of her hands, her forearms, standing out with tension. So intense, and yet so restrained. Like a lightsaber, really: the tightly controlled potential of energy always just this side of disaster. She said nothing.

Finally he approached her, carefully, not wanting to intrude on whatever private struggle she was waging.

She turned to face him as he stepped up beside her, her green eyes bleak in the sunlight. "Are you telling me this because you think I don't know?"

The pain in her voice was in the Force, too: a dark stain spreading outward like blood from an open wound.

"I just wanted to keep you from getting hurt," Anakin said, as lost as he had ever felt, painfully inadequate.

Ryn gave him a brief, bitter smile: you're too late. The breeze--probably artificial, since everything was, here--blew strands of dark hair across her face, and she brushed them impatiently aside.

"Anakin." He nodded to show she had his attention. "Have I ever, by word or deed, led you to believe that I expected you to ignore the Jedi Code in order to form an attachment with me? Have I ever asked for more than you could--should--give?"

Anakin swallowed hard. "No."

She gave him a smile with enough determination behind it to power an entire wing of starfighters. "So here's the deal: you do what you think is right, and I'll feel what I feel." Anakin started to protest, but Ryn laid her fingertips against his mouth, silencing him. "You warned me off," she told him, still smiling bravely, as though that would blind him to the tears standing in her eyes. "I am responsible for my own pain," she said quietly but firmly, and her voice was almost steady. "If I decide to throw myself off a cliff tomorrow--if I fall hopelessly in love with you--that is not your fault."

"In love?" Anakin repeated, feeling the panic rising under his ribcage.

"Stranger things have happened," Ryn said wryly, dropping her fingers from his mouth and turning back to lean on the railing again instead. "My point is: you are not responsible for anyone's choices but your own. So here is a choice that's all mine: I'm yours for life, and I'm not asking anything in return. You can ignore me, or avoid me, if that's what you feel you need to do. But I'll still be your friend, forever. And there is nothing you can do about it."

"That's--uh--that's really ..."

"Irrational?" Ryn supplied. "I know. It's really the only irrational thing I've ever done, so maybe I'm due." She seemed to be feeling pretty cheerful about it, in contrast to her earlier mood; but Anakin wasn't so sanguine.

He studied her for a moment, watching her face intently while he combed the Force for clues. But the expression on her face was all reckless determination and her aura radiated certainty, tinged by a certain giddy abandon, although there were still layers of pain that he hesitated to probe. The only conscious thought he could pick up was a repetition of what she had already said: You've got me for life, whether you like it or not.

Finally exasperated, Anakin pulled himself back from the Force to pin her with a glare. "Have you
lost your mind?"

Ryn smiled back, defiant. "If I have, I'm not missing it."

Anakin spluttered. "You're insane! Completely kripping insane!"

The smile widened into an unapologetic grin that took over her face like the burst of a supernova. "And there is nothing you can do to get rid of me."

_I could probably think of some things_, Anakin thought darkly; but he let it go and said instead, "How am I supposed to explain this to Obi-Wan?"

Ryn cocked her head at him. "You think Obi-Wan will have trouble grasping the concept of free will?"

Anakin bit his lip. "I think he's heard of it."

Ryn sighed. "Well, I'm not taking it back just because Master Kenobi may disapprove. He can lecture me about it, if he feels he must. But while he's grousing, you might remind him that I've decided to care about him, too--and he can't stop me any more than you can, although it might be fun to watch him try."

"Such defiance, I sense in you," Anakin said to lighten the mood, his Yoda imitation making her laugh.

But then she lowered her voice to a husky facsimile of his own: "I try, Master." She couldn't hold the sullen expression she had adopted, and burst out laughing, for which failure she was punished by a tickle-fest that ended with Anakin dangling her upside down over the railing, while Ryn shrieked like a particularly euphoric krayt dragon.

Which was how Master Windu found them.

***

"Padawan Skywalker!" he thundered, in tones that, in any Jedi less renowned for his implacable calm, Anakin would have interpreted as wrathful. "What is the meaning of this?"

Anakin hastily yanked Ryn up; she pulled an easy somersault over his head and landed facing Master Windu.

"Well?" Windu demanded, hands on hips.

"I--" Anakin began, but Ryn silenced him with a quick tap on the shoulder: _let me handle this._

"Master Windu, if I may."

Master Windu's look was inscrutable as ever, but he said, "Speak."

"In the wake of the stressful events of last night, of which Master Yoda has been apprised, we were practicing the Laughing Cure." Ryn did a passable job of looking puzzled, curious, and innocently surprised, all at once. "Do you have nothing like it here?"

Windxu's stare would have quelled a hardened criminal, but Ryn held her ground. "We strive to maintain a proper Jedi reserve," he said repressively.

"Ah." Ryn's tone was a critical note shy of pity. "In the Jade Temple and in our hospitals, there are
whole rooms devoted to laughter. I am sorry to have caused trouble; I did not realize that mirth was forbidden to Jedi."

Windu's gaze sharpened. "I did not realize that hanging upside-down in a public place was a necessary ingredient for laughter," he declaimed; and suddenly he was in motion again, sweeping by them with a billow of his cloak.

Anakin let out the breath he'd been holding and grinned, clapping Ryn on the shoulder. "That was ... inspired," he informed her cheerfully. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone face off with Master Windu before."

Ryn pulled a face. "He got the last word," she pointed out.

"Only because he left," Anakin assured her. "But was all that about Laughing Cures real?"

"About the Temple and all that" Ryn asked, surprised. "Yes. I'd have to be an idiot to lie about something so easily checked out. I spent some time in one of those hospital wards while I was convalescent."

"Convalescent?" Anakin repeated. "From what?"

Ryn looked momentarily discomfitted. "Oh, I ... I was injured during the war. A while ago, now."

"What happened?"

"Well, the Hutts--"

"No, I mean: what happened to you?"

"Oh." Ryn seemed to shrink in on herself somehow, becoming less the forthright young aristocrat who had been so unintimidated by Mace Windu and more a frightened young girl Anakin didn't think he'd seen before. "I was ... beaten pretty badly."

Anakin glanced down at her left hand, fisted quietly at her side now, but tense, and wondered how many times he had seen her rub it, absently, when she was worried or distracted.

"Your left hand?" he guessed quietly, and watched a spasm of pained amusement flit across her face.

"My everything," she said softly, with a touch of bitter humor. "Seven broken ribs, a punctured lung, bruised kidneys, fractured skull, two cracked vertebrae, a dislocated jaw. Other ... things. But my left hand, they didn't just ..." She stopped and swallowed hard. "They broke the fingers, one at a time, and then started on the bones in the back of my hand." She looked away, lost in a memory of pain that Anakin couldn't reach, and he wondered what sort of insanity had made him ask her to remember all this horror.

When Ryn spoke again, her voice was thick. "They kept torturing me long after I couldn't have told them anything, even if I'd wanted to." She drew a deep shuddering breath. "And they laughed."

Anakin didn't know what to say. "Ryn, I'm sorry. That's horrible: I wish I hadn't made you remember that."

Then she looked up at him, blinking away tears, and behind the pain her eyes were clear.

She smiled faintly. "But I need to remember, Anakin. Because, with all of that, I still won."

Anakin regarded her curiously. "Now I'm confused."
Ryn's smile widened, touched with triumph. "I was a scout during the war. A lot of kids were. That night ... four of us young ones went out to gather information for an attack on the enemy's base camp.

"We were headed back when they started firing. I've never known how they got wind of us, but they had a pretty good fix on our position.

"We lost Achmée when the first rounds fell between us. I was the leader, so I stayed behind to play decoy while the other two got clear.

"The problem with that, of course, was that I got caught, and the mercenaries, were ... resentful. But somewhere between blows, when I knew I couldn't last must longer--I remember thinking, This is how I die--I realized that was all right. I didn't have to last another hour, another minute. I just had to say no one more time than they could say, tell us." She held up her left hand, wriggling the fingers. "They were working on my third finger when the ordnance started falling." The fingers clenched into a fist. "My friends had got through. The attack turned the tide of the war. But what I will always remember is that an entire command of hardened mercenaries was defeated by one eleven-year-old girl with no weapons at all."

"That's quite a story," Anakin told her, impressed.

"Everybody has one," Ryn said. "Maybe someday you'll feel like telling me yours."

"I don't know," Anakin said. "You're a tough act to follow."

His friend's smile lit the balcony like floodlights, like the glow from a lightsaber, like a star gone nova in the dead of space. "You'll manage."

***

Anakin had no idea, despite Ryn's bold assurance, how to even begin to explain the conversation he had had with her to his master; and Obi-Wan, for reasons best known to himself, for a few days said nothing, either. What he guessed was always hard to tell.

Then one afternoon, maybe a standard week later, Ryn and Anakin were strolling down one of the Temple corridors after a hotly-contested sparring session--Anakin rarely lost, but Ryn had pushed him hard that day--when they rounded a corner, laughing, and nearly ran into Obi-Wan.

He sized them up: their laughter and their closeness, the easy way they moved together, even as they apologized; and he frowned.

"Anakin. Ryn. Are you headed down to the mess?"

They shook heads in unison, though the motions were tellingly different: Anakin's a loose side-to-side swing and Ryn's a single tightly controlled swivel.

"It felt like rain this morning," Ryn said. "So I checked the weather. And the forecast calls for showers, starting at seventeen-hundred hours. We're going to the garden to see if it's true."

Obi-Wan's frown deepened into something more like a scowl. "You can't predict weather that accurately, even on a planet with a relatively controlled climate, like Coruscant. Weather-prediction is not an exact science."

Ryn tipped her head to the side in an expression of puzzlement. "There are inexact sciences? And meteorology is one of them? How?"
Anakin suppressed a chuckle he was sure Obi-Wan wouldn't appreciate as his master attempted to find a suitable response.

"Well ... perhaps you'd enjoy studying the history of the field a bit," he suggested. "In the Archives."

"I'm sure I would," Ryn said, and her sense in the Force was commendably honest. "But not as much as I'm likely to enjoy the rain."

Anakin didn't bother to suppress his laughter this time.

Ryn stepped lightly on his instep as a reminder to behave himself. "And it does feel like rain," she reiterated to Obi-Wan, turning big baby bantha eyes on him. Stars. "If it doesn't start raining within the half-hour, I'll start studying the history of meteorology tonight, how's that?"

Obi-Wan was still frowning, still clearly nonplussed -- Ryn's tactics were nothing like Anakin's -- but Ryn shifted her stance into parade rest and looked up at him pleadingly (no mean trick, since Ryn wasn't that much shorter than Obi-Wan). Hands behind her back, she infused her voice with longing and said, "I miss the rain so much, Master Kenobi. It rains so seldom here ... I'd like to see it in the garden, hear it hitting the leaves." Her face brightened, glowing in anticipation. "Dance in the rain again."

For a moment, Anakin thought she'd oversold it, but he had underestimated his friend's talents. Obi-Wan sighed briefly, sized her up again, witnessed the sincerity she radiated, and said, "I suppose it can't hurt. We'll all go."

So the three of them wandered out into the garden at five minutes to five in the evening, Coruscant standard time, and Anakin and Obi-Wan watched silently as Ryn focused all the considerable intensity of her concentration on the deep gray clouds that overshadowed the garden.

At three minutes after five, the first drops began to fall.

At five minutes after five, Ryn tilted her head back to let the rain wash over her face and opened her mouth to catch the glistening drops as they fell.

Anakin shivered as the cold water began to seep through the layers of his Jedi clothes -- coming from Tatooine, everywhere seemed a little cold by comparison, even when it was dry, and he had never really lost his awe of an atmosphere that held so much water it fell from the sky -- and Ryn was instantly at his side, blinking away drops of water that clung to her extravagant lashes.

"I forgot, you're always cold," she said, her solicitous frown somewhat incongruous with her soggy appearance. "Do you want to go inside?"

Anakin wasn't about to admit he was freezing. "I'm fine."

Ryn looked doubtful. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." She still looked uncertain, so he added, "I'm still waiting for this famous rain-dancing."

Obi-Wan said, "Does it rain a great deal on Loreth?"

Ryn took a step back from Anakin and executed a lazy pirouette before answering, evidently considering what to say.

"Not really," she said thoughtfully. "We have several climatic zones. Mine is fairly damp, but I wouldn't characterize the planet overall as rainy." She held her arms out and twirled in a slow circle,
then another, and another, until Anakin realized that the circles traced by her feet formed a concentric pattern along the paved stones of the garden path, the traces of her footsteps showing slightly drier than the stone around them. "We do have a good bit of ocean, though. Three-quarters of the planet's surface."

"All salt-water?" Obi-Wan asked, and Anakin wondered if Ryn was annoyed by his distracting questions.

If she was, she didn't show it. "Yes," she said. "But there are a number of fresh-water rivers and lakes."

She began to twirl back the other way, still forming interlocking rings beneath her feet.

"Is this dance traditional?" Obi-Wan asked, and Anakin thought he saw Ryn's jaw tighten briefly as she spun again, but he couldn't quite be sure.

"No," she said. "Just easy. And I like the rain."

She came to a standstill and swept the damp hair back from her face in a smooth motion. "It would be autumn back home, my favorite season for wild weather. The storms would be moving in off the sea, and we'd have some wild winds ... but also a lot of days when it was just like this, all day long, and you could sit and listen to the rain drumming on the roof. I love the sound of rain on a roof. You never hear that on Coruscant; too many floors between."

"You could hear it from the Council chambers," Anakin said without thinking. He caught Obi-Wan's mildly reproving look and thought, Well, it's true.

Ryn shrugged. "I've never been up there when it was raining. But I have no doubt it's nice."

"Well, in the Council chambers we'd miss the full effect of your dancing," Anakin pointed out.

Ryn twisted her hair in her hands and wrung little streams of water from it. "True enough. But I'd rather see you dancing in the rain, myself."

*I can't even dance on dry ground,* Anakin thought. There was no way he was saying that out loud, but the amused grimace Ryn sent him seemed to suggest that she might have picked up his thoughts; sometimes his shields weren't quite strong enough to fend off her casual awareness.

"It's easy," she said, and reached for his hands.

She pulled him out into the garden path and extended their arms to her full reach, fingers interlocked, and then began to twist, bowing as she turned so that their linked arms spun like the blades of a windmill as they spun. Anakin followed her footsteps, making a second, larger ring of interlocking circles that overlapped and encircled hers.

They danced until they were soaked and dizzy, and Ryn brought them to a stop under the dripping leaves of an ancient tree, turning her rain-washed, laughing face up to him.

"Well, Padawan Skywalker?" she asked, breathless with laughter. "What do you think of dancing in the rain?"

"It's fun. But you do it better than I do." The rain-soaked breeze carried the scent of Ryn's skin to him, soft and fresh and clean.

Ryn's lips parted, droplets clinging to their peaks. "You just need practice."
"I'm going to get you for that."

Ryn arched clean dark brows. "How?"

Anakin shrugged, and then, as she opened her mouth to tease him further, caught her wrists in a tight grip and spun, hard, lifting her feet off the ground as he twirled back from the tree, onto the path they had left, Ryn's laughter falling on his ears with the rain as she flew.

He slowed and set her on her feet next to Obi-Wan, who was watching the two of them with a look of total incomprehension.

"What is it, Master Kenobi?" Ryn asked, blinking away raindrops. "Are you awaiting your turn?"

"I don't dance, thank you."

"Don't be absurd. I know you know at least one good dance; I taught it to you. Come here."

There was something about Ryn's innocent delight in the rainy day that softened even Obi-Wan's sternly appropriate demeanor. He relented and put a hand on Ryn's waist, reaching for her hand with his free one as her fingers came up to rest on his shoulder.

They found a rhythm together and danced away, lightfooted in the dampening garden.

The rain only lasted an hour or so, but it was a memorable experience. Years later, when Anakin thought of what he'd lost, he'd see Ryn's face, young and bright and unscarred, streaked with rain, smiling up at him, and the bittersweetness of the memory would threaten to undo him.
CHAPTER TWENTY

Ryn hugged herself a little as she looked up into Coruscant's nighttime sky, searching with her eyes for the star system that currently held Anakin and Obi-Wan.

She didn't actually know their itinerary, of course; Obi-Wan hadn't even briefed Anakin on that, either out of fear that the knowledge would somehow prove too much for his headstrong Padawan's fragile control or because he didn't know himself. (Ryn suspected the latter, while Anakin claimed to believe it was a test of some kind.) But she felt a gentle but undeniable tug in Anakin's general direction, despite the fact that he was undoubtedly several lightyears away by now, hours' travel, even in hyperspace. The stars in his vicinity could all go nova and it would be years -- lifetimes, maybe -- before Ryn could see it from Coruscant. Whatever she could see from here was already done long before Anakin ever left the Temple.

It didn't matter. She could feel him, out there, and her eyes inevitably wanted to follow her heart.

Ryn wasn't kidding herself. She knew she was in way over her head -- had known, really, from the beginning. She'd taken one look at Anakin Skywalker and thrown herself off the proverbial cliff.

She didn't even bother looking down anymore.

Maybe that was why being near him felt like being in free fall.

Master Kenobi sensed her feelings -- to be fair, there were probably a fair number of rocks that could sense her feelings -- and he was, apparently, trying to protect his Padawan from the supposedly destructive influence of Ryn's illicit passions. Or possibly he was trying to protect Anakin from the force of his own attachment to her -- an item she wasn't exactly sure how to define. Ryn wasn't certain which was worse, but she supposed (trying desperately to be fair) that Obi-Wan had that right. He was Anakin's master, after all; if he thought his Padawan was in physical or, more likely, emotional danger, then he had the right, even the responsibility, to take steps to pull him out of harm's way.

Ryn was working hard on not being angry with Obi-Wan for that, and some days she was almost making it.

She figured that meant she was growing as a person.
A little slowly.

Standing in the Temple garden, staring into the night sky, Ryn took a deep breath, acknowledged her pent-up frustrations and the slow-simmering fury building in her chest, and tried to release that negative energy into the Force.

She was only partially successful, so she pulled a scowl -- at herself, this time -- and sprang up to the top of the wall -- no mean leap, and a narrow target -- and began a circuit of the garden, with the intention of clearing her mind.

The wall around the Temple garden was about as wide as Ryn's hand: narrow enough to make her pay attention, especially with a drop of several hundred meters to her right; but not so much that she felt herself in any immediate danger.

*Right. No more obsessing over Skywalker. Think about something else.*

It would be winter back home. If Ryn closed her eyes, she could almost see the black branches stark against the snow, hear the winter silence in which every sound was distinct. A sharp pang went through her at the thought, and Ryn compressed her lips.

*No. No homesickness, either. You knew what you were signing up for.*

She did a quick walkover, from upright to heandstand to feet again, and paused, relishing the simple thrill of acrobatics, well-executed. She'd always loved the sort of physically challenging pastimes common on Loreth, and there was no one to appreciate her skill here.

Ryn scowled at herself again for that, not only because it was blatant self-pity, but because it wasn't altogether true. Jedi in general would not be impressed -- Lorethan dance was, after all, hardly more difficult than their own katas, though it certainly required a different kind of focus -- but Master Kenobi would appreciate the aesthetics, in a detached sort of way (that was how he did almost anything, so Ryn couldn't really hold it against him), and Anakin ... well, if Anakin thought she needed him to suddenly become an aficionado of an obscure form of dance from a distant barbarian world, then he would do it or die trying.

Ryn grinned at the thought of Anakin, frowning in fierce concentration as he struggled to develop a taste for Lorethan native dance, and executed a couple of quick steps before rolling into a cartwheel.

"... Skywalker."

Ryn froze, legs in the air. *What?* She swung her legs over and dropped silently to a crouch, just inside the wall.

*It's none of your business,* she told herself.

But her instincts for danger were shooting sparks. And that voice hadn't sounded exactly friendly.

She stretched out with her feelings -- *I hate this part, I feel like such a sneak* --

"... you. My friends will find this information very helpful. And I assure you, the Chosen One will no longer be a threat to the Jedi way."

"What?" said a second voice, shocked, and Ryn braced herself against a sudden echo of fear, quickly released. *Jedi,* she thought.

The other presence was ... colder. And vastly more determined.
Ryn crept forward toward the voices, staying low and squirming around the flora so as not to make a noise.

Under a low-hanging branch, she saw them: a tall young man in Jedi robes who brought new life to the phrase *devastatingly handsome*, and a shorter man, wrapped in a dark cloak, who practically glowed with conviction.

"I sense your thoughts, young Jedi," the first voice murmured. "You fear that Skywalker is unfit to balance the Force. Unworthy. Dangerous. He is dangerous. I see in your eyes that you have thought it before. And you were right, young Jedi, but not for long. Skywalker will not live--"

Ryn decided she had heard enough. She launched herself out of the undergrowth, lightsaber humming to life, just as the Jedi activated his.

The cloaked man shot Ryn a quick glance and took off at a run. Ryn darted after him, half-expecting the Jedi to attack her from behind; but as she leaped over a twisted root she glanced to her right and caught a glimpse of his face, backlight by the glow of his lightsaber.

"Friend of yours?" she queried, stretching for a little more speed.

"Guess not," the Jedi answered, and Ryn thought she heard a note of chagrin. "I'm Ferus Olin."


The Jedi -- Olin -- didn't alter course. "You need back-up."

Yeah, you're the man I want to trust. "From Yoda," she said. "There's more here than meets the eye." They were nearing the opposite wall. "Get Yoda."

"I--"

"I'll catch this guy. Just go!"

The cloaked man leapt straight over the wall, and Ryn threw herself after him, ignoring Olin's protests.

She landed with a thud on the back of what had to be her quarry's getaway speeder and was thrown flat as they lurched into motion. She scrambled and found a join wide enough to hold her fingertips and clung tightly as she hastily deactivated her lightsaber and shoved it into her belt.

She caught hold with both hands just in time, as the driver whipped the speeder into a tight turn that nearly sent her flying.

Skywalker will not live ... Master Yoda, please hurry. Ryn swung her legs up to brace her feet against the speeder's bumper and hauled herself up to peer over the edge of the open cockpit.

Blasterfire made her duck and flatten herself along the aft, and Ryn kept her head low as she inched her way forward against all the fancy jinks the pilot was throwing her way.

A last roll actually turned the speeder upside-down, but Ryn launched herself at a low headrest and hauled her body into the backseat, where she braced her feet to hold her place and whipped out her lightsaber to deflect incoming shots.

She deflected one of them right into the repulsorlift control, and the speeder began to drop, falling
like a stone through the skies of Coruscant.

The pilot dropped his blaster to deal with the situation. Ryn held her lightsaber blade an inch or two from his throat and waited.

The speeder was less cooperative. It bucked alarmingly, refusing to respond to any efforts to steer.

The pilot suddenly gave up and ducked. Ryn sensed his intent and jumped a split second behind him.

A blue lightsaber slashed at her face as they fell through the air, leaving the speeder to its own plummeting devices. Ryn fought back, whipping her lightsaber in tight green arcs that flashed white where they met her opponent's slashes.

"Who do you work for?" Ryn yelled over the hum of lightsabers and the rush of wind in her ears. How far had they fallen? She couldn't tell; gravity and distance had become abstract, even as it threatened.

The cloaked man didn't answer, so Ryn made her first offensive move, a quick thrust that burned a hole through his robes before he batted it away with a counterstroke. Not very well-trained, if this is the best he can manage. Ryn ducked under another slashing blow -- it seemed to be her opponent's preferred style -- that was rather better. Or he could be faking. She remembered something her brother used to say, during training: There is no such thing as an easy fight. Every opponent is dangerous, every time. Any one can kill you.

Real ray of light, my brother.

But when the cloaked man swept his blade low, at her knees, Ryn was ready for him. She did the splits in midair, met his blade with hers on the way back down, and held. In free fall, with nothing to push against, the differences in size and strength were evened out. What mattered was speed and agility, and Ryn had a clear advantage in both.

She resisted the urge to kick him away when the opportunity presented itself -- it would have won the fight, but if they survived the fall, then it would also give him a better chance to escape with whatever he knew. Skywalker will not live ... No. He will. I'll make sure of that.

"Who do you work for?" she yelled again.

Predictably, the man didn't answer.

Ryn tried a new tack. "What do you want with Skywalker?"

The man's eyes flashed with something Ryn couldn't identify. "A friend of yours?"

Ryn narrowed her eyes and deflected another thrust. "Maybe."

"He's too dangerous to be allowed to live."

The arrogance of the man was appalling. What gives you the right to decide that?

Ryn met his next swing with a quick right-to-left sweep that locked their blades and said, grimly: "So am I."

The open spaces to either side were closing in rapidly now, the buildings built even closer together here than they were in the upper levels. Ryn caught a glancing blow on her shoulder from a nearby awning, unable to summon the momentum she needed to change her trajectory. Her companion in
this plummet grazed the side of an airspeeder and kept falling.

Then they both hit the top of a speeder bus, hard enough to knock Ryn flat on her back and jar her teeth. She rolled to one side and let the lightsaber strike meant for her neck scorch the top of the bus, and somersaulted over her opponent's head, a neat Form I move that was one of Anakin's favorites, probably because it was insane difficult and visually impressive. Ryn sometimes had to wonder whether it was Anakin's secret plan to just impress all his enemies into surrendering.

The man slashed at her throat as she passed over his head, but Ryn had been expecting that. She swatted his blade away like an offending insect and landed, sure-footed, to deliver a vicious kick to his knees.

That should have ended the fight, but the man's joints must have been sturdier -- a lot sturdier -- than she'd expected, because instead of collapsing over a shattered patella, he flung away the tattered remains of his cloak and came after her with renewed energy.

*I've got a bad feeling about this.*

Ryn gritted her teeth and met his attack, and when he vaulted over her head onto a passing closed-cockpit airspeeder, she turned and followed him without hesitation, because there was no time to stop and think about what was going to happen to her.

Or to Anakin.

"I'll ask again," she said, parrying through a series of blows that brought their disparity in size and strength into painful focus. "What do you want with Skywalker?"

"You're a Jedi," the man yelled. No, I'm not, Ryn thought, but she let it slide. "Why should you want balance restored to the Force? Do you want to see the Jedi and the Sith matched on even terms? Is that what you want?"

Now that you mention it, Ryn thought, no.

Keep him talking.

"What has that got to do with Skywalker?" she demanded. "He's just a kid." A little older than me, actually ...

"Don't you listen to your own prophecies?"

Oh, you'd be surprised.

Ryn launched a couple of blows for form. "Enlighten me."

The speeder dipped suddenly, probably in response to its very nervous passengers, and Ryn followed the fanatic in a leap to a passing taxi.

"He will destroy everything!"

That sounded like apocalyptic religious hyperbole to Ryn, but she filed it away anyhow. Aloud she said, "So you're going to kill him for something he hasn't done yet?" Slash-parry-thrust. "That seems a little ... precipitate ... don't you think?"

He spun his blade dizzyingly fast, so that even to Ryn's trained eyes it made a solid wall of blue light.

Ryn jabbed her own blade into the middle and hoped for the best.
It caught, and the fanatic's arm muscles bulged as he tried to break her grip.

"I will do what I must," he snarled, and leapt back.

*Don't we all,* Ryn thought, and followed again.

She caught his first blow easily and landed a kick in the center of his chest that knocked him off-balance. Ryn waded in, lightsaber flashing. "Tell me who you're working for."

The rogue suddenly developed a swagger -- realizing, Ryn guessed, what she'd concluded several minutes before: out of free fall, bound again by the laws of mass and gravity, she didn't have a snowball's chance on Mustafar of beating him. All she could really do was to buy Yoda time for a decent start ... assuming Olin had gone after him at all.

She'd had time to recognize this, to know in her soul that the price for Anakin's life would be her own, and accept it as a fair trade, no regrets.

There were worse ways to die.

So when the impact of something heavy behind her rocked the airspeeder again and she ducked instinctively under the sweep of another blue lightsaber, Ryn whipped her blade back and up to intercept, kicked the first guy in the ribs again, and thought, *Same story, different chapter.*

There was no way she could keep both of them fighting for long with one lightsaber. But Fanatic Number One apparently had some information about Anakin -- thanks to the young, must-too-trusting Jedi in the garden -- that his buddy might not be privy to yet, so Ryn figured he had to be her top priority.

So she gave up sword-fighting altogether, kicked off with both feet, and launched herself with all her strength at Fanatic Number One in a tackle that tore them both off the speeder and into free fall again.

She felt the bar of light that stabbed her through the abdomen and thought, *That's it. That was my life.* Her jaw firmed and she tightened her grip on the heretic's collar. *Time to make it count.*

She brought her lightsaber up, and he had just time to look startled at being killed by a dead woman before he came apart in her hands.

It was hard to hold on, and it didn't matter any more, so Ryn let go and deactivated her lightsaber, clutching it tightly for the long journey, and waited to die.

Lights in windows flicked past. She hit something, but she couldn't see what, because her life was flashing past her eyes.

Her parents, so long ago she thought she'd forgotten what they'd looked like ...

Her sisters and brothers, gone so many years ...

The orbital bombardment that had left her home in ruins ...

That last awful mission, when she'd been taken captive.

Her assignment to the Jedi Temple, and the misery of her first months there.

Opening her eyes to see Anakin leaning over her ...
Are you all right?

... like waking into a new life.

Falling in love for the first time, now that she thought about it, had felt strangely like freefall ...

Consciousness faded away.

Chapter End Notes

It's the end of Freefall, but it's the beginning of the story! Read Gravity to learn more ...

Works inspired by this one.  

Free Fall - Special Edition by WynCatastrophe

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