

Chapter 11 - New Beginnings

Traya had been trekking through the forest for a number of days now. She had killed a vine snake that had tried to kill her on the first day, but staring at the boney, Vongspawn afflicted carcass she had decided against eating it. Now she was second guessing that decision. In her rush to leave the town, she hadn't thought to bring any of the ration packs that the Myneyrshi exploration parties normally packed preparing to head into the Vongspawn-ridden forest.

It was the afternoon of the second day when she had begun to sense creatures following her in the shadows. They were always too far away to be seen or heard, but once she became aware of their presence, she couldn't help but sense them just out of sight everywhere she went.

It was late afternoon on the third day when real hunger began to set in. On her voyages with Cade, she had often childishly lamented on being "hungry," but this was something entirely different. At first she felt it as a mild headache, and excessive exhaustion. By the fourth day, she had begun to stumble while walking.

She knew there were Force techniques for conserving energy, but Cade had never really reviewed these with her. She noted to herself that she would have to review them when she saw him again-

No, she was done with Cade, and the Jedi. Her whole life had been a constant fight with them. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction. Everything from here on out she would do on her own!

Her anger strengthened her steely resolve. She used the hatred she felt to fuel her as she continued marching along.

By the fifth day, her headache was immense. On a number of occasions her vision had gone blurry and she had had to sit down for rest.

On the sixth day, she finally sat upon a log. As she settled in, she prepared to close her eyes just for a few seconds. She could tell that there were only a few creatures near her,

not enough to really need to worry about. *Just a quick nap*, she thought. She was awoken when, out of instinct, her body launched to its feet. Her lightsaber was drawn.

She heard a THWUMP, and her vision became finely attuned to an arrow deeply embedded in the wooden log directly beneath where she had been sitting.

The nap had felt like a couple of seconds, but must have been longer as the shadows on the floor had grown immensely with the change in the sun's position overhead. She now realized how oblivious she must have been. The arrow was only a warning shot. As she reached out in the Force, she realized that she was now completely surrounded by creatures in the forest.

Her vision was blurred. She could only see twenty Psadan in front of her, but, as she reached out in the Force, she could sense at least another fifty bodies waiting, hidden amongst the forest. Most were on the ground, but a fair amount of what she assumed were sharpshooters, were perched upon branches in the canopy.

She knew she could make quick work of a hundred Psadan with ease if she wanted, but, in her current state of exhaustion, she was bound to make a mistake. It would be an error that would not be forgiven by this many enemies. These enemies were lucky she was so worn down. It would be a smart strategy, if it had been intentional.

Traya lifted her blade above her head in a high guard position with the blade pointed horizontally across her. She placed her free hand out in front. She didn't have much energy left, but she would kill as many Psadan as she could before this battle was over.

Her leg was tightened like a coiled spring, ready to launch. She was almost ready when suddenly the Psadan began shouting to each other. The language wasn't quite Myneyrshi, but Traya could make out certain words and phrases here and there.

"K'ad Rathu?" One of the Psadan shouted.

Traya faltered. That name, she knew. That was who Leesh had mentioned in the hospital. She lowered her front arm and let her lightsaber dip.

"Where is Rathu?!" She shouted.

Suddenly the tension that had been building amongst the Psadan in the forest faltered. It was broken by a wave of curiosity.

There was some rustling in a bush as a muscular middle aged Psadan, with a scar under his left eye, wearing a helmet fitting neatly upon the three horns on his head, emerged from the undergrowth.

"I am Rathu." the Psadan declared in perfect Basic. He had a heavy blaster in his right hand, yet, unlike all the other Psadan who had their weapons perfectly locked on Traya, this creature allowed his weapon to swing casually at his side, leaving it confidently pointed at the ground. This creature made no indication that he had any fear of Traya. This struck a chord in her. She was beginning to regret singling out this Psadan.

"From whom have you learned my name?" Rathu asked, his deep voice exuding a calm tone that stood in sharp contrast to the anxiety Traya could feel emanating from the rest of the Psadan fighters.

Traya paused. She never considered much of the Psadan, viewing them mostly like simple minded stooges or henchmen to a more powerful and intelligent leader, a leader she assumed to not be Psadan. Rathu shattered this stereotype. He spoke perfect Basic. In fact, he spoke it better than most Myneyrshi Traya knew.

"I have a message from Leesh," Traya announced.

Murmurs resonated through the Psadan, as they all recognized the name.

Rathu hid it well, but Traya could sense a surge of emotions, relief, pride, hope, emanating off of Rathu in the Force at the mere mention of the name. He then asked, "Leesh? How is he? Is he... alive?"

Traya paused. She hadn't really expected this question.

"Ummm..., no. No, he isn't. He- Leesh is dead."

The previous surprise and hope at Leesh's name, morphed into a deep sadness. Traya felt it from all the Psadan in the forest, but particularly from Rathu.

It led to a hushed silence in the forest. A quiet that was soon broken by a shout from the canopy, "how dare the witch speak his name! Rathu, I told you. She's probably the one who killed-"

Rathu, cut off the voice. "Do you wish to speak for us, Dah'ndi'?"

A Psadan with a magnificently decorated curved bow dropped down from the tree tops. Although the Psadan were a stocky species, many of them moved with shocking agility. Dah'ndi' landed on the ground and hopped over to Rathu. His eyes darted between the ground and continuously checking on Traya. "Rathu I meant no disrespect. I simply wished to say what is obvious to us all."

It seemed like a small detail, but Traya couldn't help but stare, mesmerized at the brilliant decorations on the handle of Dah'ndi's bow. The dark mahogany color of the bow contrasted beautifully with a golden handle that seemed to gently grasp the middle of the bow. And, even more striking, were the red and black jewels intricately woven into the golden handle.

Rathu raised hands gesturing to all the Psadan in the trees and on the ground. "Well, what is it that is obvious to everyone here?" He was not just challenging Dah'ndi' here, but the rest of his fighters as well.

"It is obvious that she was the one who killed him."

Rathu sneered, "obvious, you say? You lob accusations at this child. You know the punishment for such accusations, don't you?"

"Of course I do. Besides, whether she is innocent or not, what is wrong with one more dead Ja'dee?" Dah'ndi' spat at the ground. "That seems like a victory to me!"

A roar of agreement passed through the forest of Psadan. Dah'ndi' had a smug look on his face as he watched the other Psadan cheering his words. Traya readied her stance again. She imagined how many Psadan she could kill.

She imagined lighting her blade and stabbing it through Dah'ndi's back. The fool had left his back wide open to her. She would undoubtedly go for him first. Once he was dead, she could easily use his body as a shield.

She sighed. She would probably have to kill Rathu next. She didn't want to, but with his cunning, she knew she couldn't escape the Psadan foot soldiers as long as he was alive directing them.

Rathu's voice broke her inner dialogue. "You would all sentence this child to death? With no knowledge of the true facts of the situation? You would give her no chance to defend herself?"

The smug look that had been on Dah'ndi's face disappeared. "But sir. She is Ja'dee."

"Ja'dee or not, she is a creature of the living. She must be allowed to give her side of things. Besides, I would like to know what were my son's last moments."

Dah'ndi' knew he could not object to this request. "Very well..."

Rathu now turned and took two steps closer to Traya. "You, child. What say you to these accusations?"

Traya surprised herself as she took two steps back and lifted her blade into a guard stance at Rathu's advances.

Rathu chuckled at her reaction, which further irritated Traya. This creature showed no fear of her at all. "Whether you are a Ja'dee or not, you are still a mere child, young one."

Traya bristled at the statement. "This mere child could kill you with a flick of her wrist."

Rathu stared Traya down. He held her gaze for a few long seconds, and then let out a raucous laugh.

"You're probably right, young one. Even a child Ja'dee is a death machine. Ja'dee, what is your name?"

Traya lowered her weapon and stepped forward, "I am Traya."

"Ah Traya, that is quite a pleasant name." Rathu said with a hearty laugh. Then he grew serious. "Traya, you will tell us all how Leesh died."

"He..." Traya was unsure how to say it, "he killed himself."

At this, the mood of the entire forest soured. The Psadan in the forest and the trees let out a hissing bellow that caused the hair on Traya's neck to stand up.

All humor had left Rathu's face. He then lifted his left hand and Traya felt a pit in her stomach as she heard fifty blasters raised towards her and every bow in the forest clicked as arrows were knocked into place.

"You better have substantial proof before leveling such an accusation at my son. Psadan do not take Naha-Anine lightly. It is the ultimate form of shame. No true warrior would ever commit such an act of cowardice."

Traya began to realize just how much she misunderstood Psadan culture. She struggled to regain control of the situation. "Please, be assured, Leesh's death. It was honorable. I swear."

Rathu's hand lowered slightly, but the arrows still remained knocked. Traya could hear the hum of all the blasters. "Then how did he die?"

"He- he died in battle."

The hand lowered further. "If he died in battle, then who was he fighting?"

"I- I-"

"Traya, this is my son's death. I do not take it lightly. Now tell me the truth of his final moments."

"He- he was trying to kill my friend. He wouldn't stop."

"Traya, I want to know how my son died. Who was he fighting?"

"I didn't mean to-"

"With who!"

"I tried to not kill-"

"With who!"

"Battle with me..."

Dah'ndi' blurted out, "She admits it!"

"SILENCE." Dah'ndi' almost fell backwards at the bellowing command from Rathu. "I will not have any more interruptions."

Then he turned back to Traya, "And I will not have any more deception from you. I want to know the full truth of my son's death. Finish your story, Traya. And spare me no details."

Traya then told Rathu and Dah'ndi' about the events at the hospital; how she found Leesh in Ts'int'a's room, and how they fought.

"He was trying to kill Ts'int'a again. I flung Leesh off of T'sint'a with the Force to save T'sint'a," Traya now flashed back to the moment of Leesh hitting the wall, that cracking sound. "But I used too much power. I- I didn't mean to kill him."

Even though the hand holding her blade was steady, Traya could feel her free hand trembling.

She was staring at the floor now, she couldn't see Rathu's face. She felt shame, for she knew that, as a warrior, letting her guard down like this was unacceptable. If Rathu wished to kill her now, he could. She wouldn't fight it.

She felt the Psadan take a step towards her, and then another. She didn't want it to end like this, but she knew it should. She prepared herself as a hand reached out, and then landed on her shoulder. Perhaps a blade to her stomach? It wouldn't be painless, but she should bleed out fast. She waited, eyes closed, and then she felt something strange in the Force.

Suddenly there was a sense of soothing, of comfort. "Finish your story, child."

She looked up now, in complete disbelief.

"I- I- I mean after he hit the wall-" Traya thought about what she had seen a few days back. Her mind had been overwhelmed with emotions and so empty of sustenance that she hadn't had time to review what had happened. "I remember him hitting the wall. He went limp. I thought he was dead. When I went over to check, just before he died, he gave me a message."

"A message? What kind of message?"

"Oh right. It was a message for you."

Rathu's eyes lit up. "For me?"

"Yes, that's how I knew your name. He told me to tell you," she thought for a moment to make sure she got the message right, "he said you should be proud of him. He said that he had completed his mission."

Relief flooded Rathu's face.

"Thank you Traya. You don't know how happy you have made me."

"I have?" Traya asked.

"Yes. At least now, I have some peace as a father."

Traya smiled. "I even tried to save him when he came back."

Suddenly all comfort was gone. Rathu launched forward and grabbed Traya by the shoulders. He had a crazed look in his eyes, "What do you mean came back?"

Traya was disturbed by the sudden change in Rathu. "I don't know. I don't know. He just came back."

Rathu took a deep breath and regained his composure. "I need you to listen to me, Traya. The same way you told me of his death, I need you to tell me what you mean when you say 'came back.' Don't spare any details."

Traya likewise took a deep breath and tried her best to get the details correct. "After he hit the wall, his body was limp on the floor. At this point I still felt his life force. When I went over to him, I tried to make sure he was okay. I was hoping he would stay alive until-"

"Until what?"

"No, nothing." She paused trying to get Cade out of her thoughts. "But then he briefly lifted his head to give me the message for you. And then it fell back down again. Yet this time, I thought he died- no, no, I know he died. I felt his life Force leave his body."

"I've sensed death before. Normally it's permanent, but, this time, something came back. It wasn't Leesh though. It was something else. This time his head arose, but his eyes were strange. They were red and his pupils- they were a strange yellow color. Then he said-" She stopped talking here. She didn't want to make the words real...

"What did he say?" Rathu asked pressingly. For some reason now he was whispering. It was as though he didn't want the other Psadan to hear this part of the story.

Suddenly Traya realized what a mistake Rathu was making, the opening she was being provided. The advantage Rathu's troops had had before was a 360 degree line of sight on Traya. Previously they could fire on Traya before she reached Rathu. Rathu had been so

lured in by her story that he had let down his guard. If she wanted, she could kill him right here.

As a matter of fact, Traya could easily grab Rathu now and use his body as a shield. She visualized the ensuing battle as Rathu's body fell limp from her lightsaber through his chest. She imagined the way his large body shook from the onslaught of blaster fire and arrows behind it.

On the other side, that was not blocked by Rathu's large body, Traya could easily deflect the blaster bolts and arrows that came at her with her lightsaber. The arrows would be more difficult to deflect. If they bore metal heads, the arrowheads might splinter into shards and the hot projectiles would certainly hit her as they flew through her lightsaber. They would hurt, but couldn't stop her.

She would drag his body behind her for about thirty feet until she got to the area where the forest grew thick. She smiled as she imagined running through the woods, free. The Deadlands could be her home. She could- she could- suddenly her stomach grumbled once again.

"Traya. What did he say?"

Traya looked down at her feet and realized how tattered her clothes had grown, how weak she felt. She couldn't keep going on like this. She looked up at Rathu and now spoke loud enough so that all the Psadan near them could hear her. "First Leesh shouted for me to get away from him, like he was scared of me. Then he said-"

She took a deep breath before delivering this line, "one more gift from Krayt," and then he drove his knife into his own neck."

The woods broke out again in hissing bellows. Traya took a few steps back at the haunting sounds.

Rathu, however, seemed unperturbed and deep in thought. After a few moments, Rathu raised his hand. The woods fell silent. "Young Traya. I believe you."

There was a strange energy in the air. Rathu turned to face the rest of the Psadan in the forest. "Ak'is!"

Rathu beat his chest twice with his fist, and as he spoke pointed at Traya. "Ajika'akae Oh'Dacha'."

Traya felt the tension that had been building break like a wave hitting the shore. Suddenly joyous cries came from many of the Psadan soldiers. Traya could hear bows being undrawn and sense blasters lowered. The Psadan on the ground began to come out of their hiding places and a few of the archers in the trees dropped to the ground with raucous shouts of joy.

"No!" The shout came from Dah'ndi'. The celebratory cries came to an abrupt stop. He then pointed at Traya and said. "I will not protect her. The Ja'dee have and always will be enemies to the Oh'Dacha."

The air grew thick again. "I have followed you through many moons, Rathu. But this is a step too far. I will not welcome this, this- witch, into our clan.

"Don't you see, Rathu? Don't you all see?" Dah'ndi' was now yelling to all the Psadan that surrounded them. "The Ja'dee is trying to manipulate us! She is selling us lies!"

Rathu stepped forward. Like Dah'ndi', he was also raising his voice so that all the Psadan could hear him as well, "and what lies are these?"

"Lies where she heroically saves your son. Lies where she is at no fault for her actions, and our true enemy is just some sort of spirit. We all know what really happened. She murdered your son. She probably used her Ja'dee mind tricks to cause him to commit-"

Before Dah'ndi' could finish his sentence, Rathu had pulled a wooden scimitar from his belt and had it at Dah'ndi's neck. The point was sharp enough to draw blood where it pressed against the Psadan's thick neck. "I would choose your next few words very carefully, my Brother."

Dahndi began to speak again, but slower now. "Her story is too clean, Rathu. We know the Ja'dee. We know their powers of bending the mind."

Rathu lowered his weapon slightly. And then he lowered his voice so that only Traya, Dah'ndi', and the closest of the Psadan troops could hear him. "Dah'ndi', I need you to trust me here."

Dah'ndi' glowered at his brother. "I want to Rathu, but I need proof. I will not let you bring this Ja'dee into our homes on a whim."

Traya watched as Rathu's face grew saddened. "That I do not have."

"Then you do not have my support in Ajika'akae."

"Very well, my Brother."

"Very well."

The two walked towards each other, hugged, released from the embrace, and turned away from each other. Now back to back, facing opposite sides of the group of Psadan that surrounded them, they each raised one fist in the air and, in unison, shouted, "Anga Da'a Hee!"

The forest erupted in sounds that felt to Traya like cheers, but instead of shouting, the Psadan emitted a series of loud humming bellows. There was something oddly comforting as Traya felt the calls resonate in her chest.

The remaining Psadan archers in the canopy dropped to the forest floor. The soldiers then gathered around Rathu and Dah'ndi'. The Psadan troops seemed to move as a unit. They stood side to side to form a loose circle around the brothers.

Rathu and Dah'ndi' walked away from each other until they were on opposite sides of the circle. As each reached the edge of the circle, a Psadan from each side broke formation, coming forward with a large pouch and a spear.

Traya found herself awkwardly left in the middle of the circle ritual. She quickly ran beside Rathu.

"What is happening?" Traya asked Rathu, who had begun removing his helmet.

"I declared Ajika'akae under clan Oh'Dacha and my brother has rejected the proposal. To resolve the issue we have both agreed to Anga Da'a Hee."

Rathu handed the Psadan next to him his helmet, and the Psadan, carefully, placed the helm into the pouch he carried.

"Anga what?"

Rathu began to remove the armored plates he wore as leg-guards. "Ah, Anga Da'a Hee? It is a battle to the death." Rathu then gave his leggings to the Psadan next to him, who, again with care, folded them and put them into the pouch he carried.

Traya stood dumb-founded, unsure that what she had just heard was correct. "Fight to the death?"

"That's correct." Rathu was now removing his belt, which held a number of interesting weapons and tools. The Psadan next to him received the belt and, again, placed it onto the pouch.

"Wait, wait." Traya was still processing it all. "Why are you fighting at all?"

Rathu continued removing his armor and weapons, now taking the knives out of his boots. "I have declared Ajika'akae, putting you under the direct protection of clan Oh'Dacha'. However, this agreement can only be invoked when agreed to by all clan members present. My brother is a member of Oh'Dacha' and he refuses Ajika'akae."

Rathu put both his hands on Traya's cheeks. It was a gesture that made Traya feel quite silly and childish. "This disagreement can only be solved one way, Anga Da'a Hee."

Rathu returned to his position next to the pouch and began stretching. Traya was stunned. "Wait, so this is all for me?"

Rathu chuckled, "don't be silly, child. This is about much more than just you."

This answer only left Traya even more confused.

Rathu nodded to the Psadan next to him. The companion closed up the pouch which now contained all of Rathu's armor and tossed Rathu a large wooden spear. The Psadan then grabbed Traya by the arm and led her through the wall of Psadan that now made a tight circle around the two brothers. As Traya turned around she realized she was too short to see over the wall of Psadan and couldn't get a good view of what was happening inside the circle of bodies.

To get a better view she quickly scaled a nearby tree, climbing onto one of its lower limbs. She was now beginning to realize how important this event was. The Psadan that had previously not been able to take their blasters off her, now didn't give her the slightest notice. They were completely enthralled in the event unfurling before them.

The Psadan on the outside now began a low growling chant. *Hum, hum, hum*. There was an energy growing in the air. It was almost festive, celebratory in a way. As they hummed they all began to brandish various weaponry; spears, short swords, and a number of scimitars. Then, they all pointed their weapons into the circle. Traya began to realize the seriousness of this fight. It truly was life or death. Each brother only had two options, fight the other or be impaled on the spear wall.

Traya would certainly be sad if Rathu died. She would be disappointed if she lost this new friend.

Yet then something else dawned on her. Rathu was offering her his protection, but what would happen if Rathu lost? Not only would he be dead, but Traya would have a whole platoon of armed Psadan coming for her.

Oh well, without Rathu organizing them, Traya was certain she could kill them all.

"You got this, Rathu!" Traya shouted, her legs playfully dangling from the tree branch she was sitting on.

Inside the ring of spears and swords formed by the Psadan, the brothers, spears in hand, circled each other like drops of water heading down a drain.