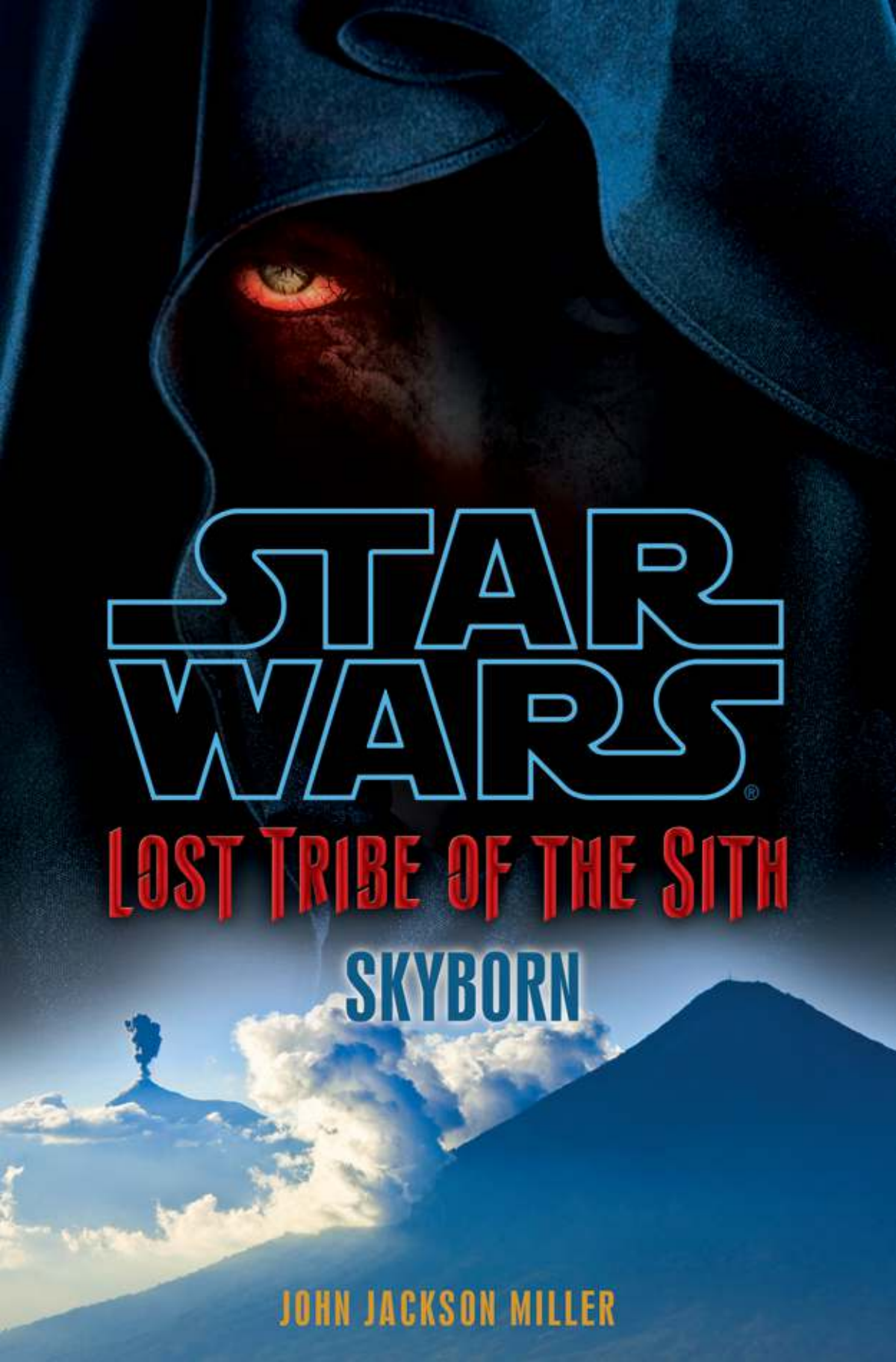




STAR WARS®

LOST TRIBE OF THE SITH

SKYBORN

JOHN JACKSON MILLER



Lost Tribe of the Sith #2

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2009 Del Rey eBook edition

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Published in the United States by Del Rey, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Star Wars®: Fate of the Jedi: Abyss* by Troy Denning. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

ISBN 978-0-345-51939-9

Printed in the United States of America

www.starwars.com

www.delreybooks.com

Chapter One

5,000 years BBY

“Heretic!”

“Good to see you too, Mother,” Adari said. “Did the children behave?”

The door hadn’t fully closed when the smaller child was in Adari’s arms, shoved there by Eulyn. Adari’s older boy bounded into the room, hobbling her. Under attack from four purple arms, Adari staggered toward the wall, looking for a spot to drop her nonliving cargo. The canvas bag thudded against the wooden floor.

“Heretic! That’s what your uncle says they’re calling you,” Eulyn said. “He was here—and neighbor Wertram, the tailor. And his wife, too—she never leaves the hut for anything! *Eight people* have been by today!”

“Well, don’t look outside,” Adari said. “More followed me home.” She shooed the gangly older child away and tried to rescue her silvery hair from her toddler’s mouth. Short hair wasn’t the fashion for Keshiri women, but for Adari, it was self-defense. Where her youngest was concerned, it’d never be short enough. “Is the stew on?”

“Stew?” Eulyn yanked her little grandson back, only to see Adari dart into the kitchen. Flushed with aggravation, Eulyn’s skin took on a violet hue that almost matched her daughter’s. “You’re worried about dinner! You don’t have any idea what’s been going on around here, do you?”

“It’s a dinner break. I was working.”

“Working, nothing. I know where you were!”

Adari stared into the clay crock full of boiling meat and vegetables and sighed. Of course her mother knew where she’d been. *Everyone* did. Adari Vaal, collector of rocks and stones; young widow of the valiant uvak-rider on whom so many hopes had rested. Adari Vaal, enemy of right and order; absent mother and misleader of other people’s children. Today had been her third day of testimony before the Neshtovar. It had gone as well as the other two.

“What is that *sound*?”

“They’re hitting the house with rocks,” Adari said, returning with a steaming bowl that she set on the table. Standing back, she swung the front door wide and watched as several gifts from the community bounced over the threshold. She slammed the door quickly. A peppery stone under the empty crèche drew her eye. She reached for it with a sinewy, scratched arm. “That’s a nice one,” she said. “Not from around here.” She was apparently drawing people from all over. She’d have to look around, later. Who needed expeditions when you had an angry mob to collect samples?

Adari knelt and put the discovery in her pouch, already overflowing with stones of every shape and color. Above, the clatter grew louder. The younger child wailed. Eulyn’s huge dark eyes widened further with horror. “Adari, listen!” she said. “They’re hitting the roof now!”

“That’s actually thunder.”

“It’s proof, that’s what it is! The Skyborn have forsaken you.”

“No, Mother, it’s proof that they’re *protecting* me,” Adari said, eating standing up. “If it rains, the mob can’t set our house on fire.”

That wasn’t likely to happen—the widow of a Neshtovari was a protected person, unlikely to be killed in a riot. However, there was nothing wrong with making her life miserable, and since her sin was against the Neshtovar themselves, no authority would stop them. In fact, little displays like this were good for public order.

Adari poked her head into the backyard. No rocks there. Just the uvak, doing what he had done all year: taking up most of the place and being unfragrant. Emerald reptilian eyes opened long enough to shoot her a bad look. His leathery wings shifted, raking against the sides of the pen. The beast didn’t mind the cooling rain, but the noise from the street had disturbed his royal slumber.

Riderless uvak were all sloth and bad attitude, but Nink hadn’t liked his rider when he had one. He was Adari’s least favorite thing, but he came with the house. In a sense, the house was his.

In olden times, when a Neshtovari—an uvak-rider—died, the community had slain the deceased’s family, as well. That practice had ended, perhaps the only time the Neshtovar had allowed practicality to overrule tradition. Uvak were precious, temperamental, and attached to their riders; stabling them with the dead rider’s survivors often kept the beasts sane enough to be useful for the breeding market. Not to mention, Adari mused, what it must have done for *Neshtovar* breeding. The riders hadn’t had great social lives when death was in the picture. But since the change, uvak-riders had become highly sought after as mates in Keshiri society.

Adari hadn't sought Zhari Vaal at all. She was interested in rocks; Zhari was their equal for conversational ability. In nine years he had given her two dim-witted children, a description that seemed less harsh to her than maternally charitable. She loved them well enough, but they were showing no signs of being any kinder or brighter than their father had been. Foolishness bred true. She, the fool for not running away; he, well, he was Zhari Vaal. The "valiant young rider of the Neshtovar on whom so many hopes rested"—that was the line from the wake—had mistreated Nink one too many times. One beautiful morning, the beast had flown Zhari far out over the sea and unceremoniously dropped him. Adari was sure she had seen a hint of satisfaction in the creature's bright green eyes when he returned home. She'd never gotten along with Nink before, but at least now she paid him some respect. When it came to Zhari, the uvak had had more sense than she did.

It wasn't all her fault, she knew. The match had resulted from years of lobbying by Eulyn, seeking to lock in her family's future position. Only males became riders, but Keshiri property descended matrilineally; now Adari and her mother had the uvak and the wooden house, while their neighbors still lived in huts of lashed-together hejarbo shoots. Eulyn was thrilled—and Adari was content to let the children be Eulyn's domain, too. Adari had done her duty; the Keshiri had been advanced by another generation. Now she could concentrate on something important.

If they'd let her.

"I have to go back," she said, lifting her younger son from his work destroying the dinner table. The afternoon hearing had gone long, and an unprecedented evening session loomed.

"I knew you'd do something like this," Eulyn said, her gaze piercing her daughter's back. "I've always said

all that digging around in the filth would do you no good. And arguing with the Neshtovar! Why do you always have to be *right*?”

“I don’t know, Mother. But it’s something I’m going to have to live with,” Adari said, handing off the dripping toddler. A smeary imprint remained on her tunic—no time for a change. “Try to get Tona and Finn to actually sleep tonight. I’ll be back.”

She opened the door carefully to find that the rain had driven off the crowd. Comfort trumped belief on Kesh. But the rocks remained, dozens of ironic little statements scattered all across the stoop. If the hearings lasted any longer, she wouldn’t have to do any more field research for the season—everything she needed would be on her doorstep.

Perhaps she should offend the Skyborn every year.

“We were talking about the flamestones,” Adari reminded the chief of the Neshtovar.

“*You* were talking,” Izri Dazh said. “I accept no such term.” The aged rider and high councilor hobbled around the edge of the Circle Eternal, a plaza where a tall column served as a massive sundial. Adari looked around. Another gorgeous evening, for a place that had no other kind. It was the same every day, inland: a brief, determined afternoon rain followed by a cool breeze that blew straight through the night. But now half the village had forgone real entertainments to watch a bald, bloodless man harangue a young woman. “There *are* no flamestones,” he said, gesturing to a pair of crimson rocks on a pedestal beside the central column. “I see here only normal stones of Kesh, as you might find on any hillside.”

Adari coughed.

“You have something to say?”

“I’d better not.” Adari looked up from her seat in the

sandy clearing—and then around at the glaring listeners. What was the point? No one would listen. Why keep making it worse . . .

She took another look at Izri. This lavender wraith was the man who had eulogized Zhari. What did he know about anything? What business did the Neshtovar have telling *anyone* what to think, just for convincing a few lazy animals to take them for rides now and again?

Fine, she thought, rising. *These'll be two fewer rocks they can throw*. She took a stone from the pedestal. "I have—the scholars of Kesh have collected stones from every part of this continent. We record what we find. We compare. This rock came from the foot of the Sessal Spire, on the southern coast."

The crowd murmured. Everyone knew the smoking Spire, rumbling and bubbling at the edge of civilization. Someone *must* have been crazy to go out there collecting rocks!

"The Spire created this stone, from the flames it holds inside. And this," Adari said, picking up the other rock, "was found right here outside the village, buried in the riverbed." The stones were identical. "Now, the mountains ringing our plateau aren't smokers—what we call volcanoes—at least, not now. But this rock being here suggests they might once have been. This whole continent, in fact, might have been created by them."

"Heretic!"

"Is my mother here?" Adari craned her neck, scanning the crowd. Someone tittered.

Izri took the stones from her and rustled along the perimeter of the audience. "You say these stones came . . . from *below*," he said, the horrible word dripping from his tongue. "And created all that is Kesh."

"Then, and now. The smokers are building more land all the time."

“But you know that all that is Kesh came from the *Skyborn*,” Izri said, jabbing his cane in her direction. “Nothing can be born of Kesh anew!”

She knew; every child knew. The Skyborn were the great beings above, the closest thing the Kesh had to deities. Well, there was something closer: The Neshtovar, as the self-proclaimed Sons of the Skyborn, might as well have *been* the Skyborn as far as life on Kesh was concerned. Keshiri faith was vertical; high was mighty. The elevated were venerated. It was Izri’s uvak-riding group that, ages before, had brought down from the lofty oceanside peaks the wisdom of the great battle of creation. Riding colossal uvak of crystal, the Skyborn had fought the Otherside in the stars. The battle raged for eons, with the Otherside injuring the Skyborn before being defeated. Drops of Skyborn blood fell upon the roiling black seas, forming the land that birthed the Keshiri people.

Adari wondered about the biology of a gigantic, sandy-blooded race—but the Neshtovar notion had something going for it: The Keshiri’s few maps of the land looked as if one of her kids had spilled something on them. Long ridged peninsulas spattered in all directions from a cluster of plateaus, forming enormous, often unwalkable coastlines and fjords enough for the Keshiri to harvest marine life forever. Farther up the many rivers to the plateaus, farmers drew even more from the rich soil. The Keshiri numbers were both vast and well fed.

About the Otherside, Adari found the Neshtovar were incurious to a fault. “That which opposed the Skyborn” meant death, sickness, fire, rebellion—in no particular order—when it wasn’t taking mortal form in accordance with the storyteller’s needs. The Otherside came “from below,” another element in the message of vertical faith. And that was all there was to say. Given the elders’ devotion to the Skyborn, Adari was sur-

prised they hadn't hammered down who or what the Otherside was. But then, if they had, they'd have come up with a better name.

Which wasn't stopping Izri from invoking it repeatedly as he railed at her. "Your words glorify the Otherside, Adari Vaal. It's why you are here. You are here for preaching—"

"Teaching!"

"—telling these *lies* about the Great Battle to your acolytes!"

"Acolytes? They're *students*!" She searched the crowd for familiar faces. Her students had ducked out the day before when things had gotten rough, but some of their parents were here. "You, Ori Garran! You sent your son to the scholars because he wasn't any good at the mill. And Wertram, your daughter. Everyone here in Tahv—do you think the village is going to *fall into a hole* because I talked to your children about some *rocks*?"

"*It very well could!*" Izri grabbed his cane from its spot by the pedestal and shook it. "This land was a part of the living Skyborn. Do you think they do not hear you? When the ground quakes, when the smokers burn—it's their remnant acting in sympathy with their wishes. Their wishes that we honor them, and hate the Otherside!"

This again. "I know that's what you think," Adari said, searching for slow, even tones. "I don't pretend to know what forces work the world—"

"That's clear!"

"—but if disagreeable words caused the world to shake, Kesh would rock every time husbands and wives quarreled!" She inhaled deeply. "Surely, the Skyborn have more important affairs than to police our own little disagreements. I know they do."

Silence. Adari looked around. Dark Keshiri eyes,

once aimed at her, pointed down and away. She'd won a few, that time. Maybe not enough to let her keep her job, but enough that she could keep collecting—

Krakka-boooooom!

Purple faces turned west, toward the Cetajan Mountains. Jutting out into the ocean beyond, the range provided the village of Tahv some of its finest sunsets—but now the flames were coming from the mountain peak itself. A pillar of fiery ash billowed from the summit.

It made no sense. Adari helped Izri to his feet. “That—that’s a granite peak,” she said over the subsid-ing echo. “It’s not volcanic!”

“It is now!”

Chapter Two

A rock was a simple thing, but as her grandfather had told her, “By simple things, we know the world.” Adari had never felt shame for all those hours she’d spent searching the creek beds, or for finding more of interest in the shards of a shattered stone than in her children’s first words. She was teaching them—but the rock was teaching *her*.

Now, thanks to a simple rock, she was seeing more of the world than ever before—from high above, clinging to the broad back of Nink. It was an unlikely position for either of them, but she’d been in it for most of the night and part of a day. Her first uvak-flight. It wasn’t by choice.

The hours after the explosion on the mountain hadn’t gone that badly, she thought. Audience members at the hearing had fled to their homes. She’d done the same after Dazh and his cohorts left together, quibbling over signs and portents.

By the next morning, however, the mood of the town had changed. The faraway Cetajan peak was still smoking, but it had become clear that it posed no danger to Tahv or the villages farther down the watershed. It was safe for everyone to go outside—out to Adari’s front yard, to express their feelings about her faithless

words and the smoldering addition to the skyline they had caused. The Skyborn *did* listen. What other proof was needed? If the Keshiri couldn't silence Adari Vaal, they'd at least make sure their voices were louder than hers.

They'd been doing a good job of it when Adari sent Eulyn and the kids out to take refuge at her uncle's place. The growing crowd, still pelting the house with rocks, had parted to let the innocents leave. But the mob had stayed straight through the afternoon rain—and by sunset, the Neshtovar themselves were outside, their uvak tethered safely away from the throng. By the time Izri Dazh had hobbled up the steps to pound on her door, Adari had seen the first torches lit outside.

That had been enough for her. The torches could've been for light—but they might have been for something worse. She'd clearly exceeded whatever protection a widow of an uvak-rider was afforded. The Keshiri weren't big on violence, but they didn't have a lot of variety in their social sanctions, either. Judging that it didn't look like a banishing kind of crowd, Adari had turned in desperation to her own backyard, and that least liked portion of her legacy: Nink.

Her departure over the rooftop had surprised the people out front almost as much as the maneuver's success had surprised her. The uvak was most surprised of all. With his rider gone, Nink could have expected never to be ridden again. Uvak took to new riders so seldom that they were promptly put out to stud. Awakening to Adari trying to clamber aboard his fleshy back, Nink could have done anything, gone anywhere.

He went up.

She had spent the rest of that night alternately screaming and dodging pursuit by Neshtovar fliers. The latter feat was made easier by Nink's insistence on soaring far out over the ocean. Those had been the worst

moments for Adari, who knew the animal's past. But something on the uvak's part, perhaps curiosity, kept him from sending her to Zhari's grave. Just before dawn, Nink had finally found a seaside mountain roost, where Adari immediately collapsed with exhaustion. Amazingly, when she awoke, the uvak was still there, stuffing his beak with what little foliage there was. Home clearly wasn't looking that attractive to Nink anymore, either.

Now, on the second morning since the explosion, Adari saw that her directionless night flight had taken her near the source of anxiety. The Cetajan Range was a chain of craggy goliaths slivered from the mainland—a prominent part of the horizon when seen from the interior, but as inaccessible as places on the western shoreline got. An expedition of rock hunters had brought back what little Adari knew of the place—and that had required a sympathetic volunteer Neshtovari willing to fly a sample return mission. Seeing the mountain ahead of her, Adari was overtaken by the urge to see the truth up close. If the explosion wasn't volcanic, it could set things right with her and the community. And if the mountain was suddenly volcanic, she was curious about that, too. What was the process involved?

Or were the scholars wrong about the makeup of the range? Had the uvak-rider flubbed the sample?

That was probably it. Adari's anger rose as Nink did, the uvak comfortably clearing the chain in preparation for an oceanside approach. It would be poetic, Adari thought, if the one project the scholars had entrusted to a Neshtovar had resulted in wrong information. *Cetajan Range samples, nothing*, she thought. *The idiot probably brought us rocks from his front path!* She shuddered, and not just from the chilly air. Why should she be made to suffer for their colossal—

Suddenly the source of the smoke column came into view. Adari nearly fell off Nink right then. She'd half expected to see an open caldera, steaming like the smokers—*smoke* really was a misnomer—she'd seen in the south. Instead, a massive shining *shell* sat in an indentation on the seaward side of the mountain. That was the word that entered her mind, even if the scale was completely wrong: its sharp, corrugated ridges resembled the ancient conchs she'd seen returned from the seabed. But this shell was the size of the Circle Eternal!

And this shell had smoke—not steam—billowing from several ruptures. Tremendous grooves gouged behind the body showed it had struck downward at an angle. The fires inside were now nearly spent, but she could tell from the melted mangle that they must have been far larger once. The explosion producing the plume visible from the inland side must have happened right when it landed, she thought.

Landed?

Before Adari could contemplate this, movement caught her eye. One of the apertures in the shell disgorged something, something that struck the gravel below and disappeared in a slide of dust. She nudged the uvak nearer. A flash of crimson light appeared in the small cloud—and at its end . . .

. . . a man.

The man looked up at her. He was pale of face, lighter than the sickest Keshiri she had ever seen. And in his left hand was a shaft of brilliant red light the size of Izri's cane.

Was it in his hand—or was it part of his hand? Adari panicked, and Nink agreed, swooping out of the way. A violent but welcome updraft yanked them both back out over the sea.

Adari shook her head violently and closed her eyes as

Nink found smoother air. What had she seen? It had the shape of a man, yes. Hair, darker than any Keshiri—but then that red light. *What was that light?* And there was something else moving on the mountain, too, something she'd seen out of the corner of her eye. Was the shell a nest of some kind?

She swallowed hard, her throat raw from the wind and elevation. It was all too macabre. Sample return missions, Neshtovar inquests—none of her past concerns stood for anything against what she'd seen. Opening her eyes, she brought Nink around on a looping approach parallel to the jagged beach. The giant shell perched near the end of a sheer drop-off, far above. She'd approach from below, this time, rising carefully until she could get a closer look.

Adari soon realized that her plan, while reasonable, was wholly unsuited for a novice rider. Nink strained against her, taking her on a spiraling route to the top that wrenched her stomach. Dizzy, she fought to keep her eye on the cliff top. The figure from before was there, without the bright red light. But holding something else—

Something whizzed past, hurtling downward at such speed that Nink withdrew his wings in fear. Adari slipped for real this time, tumbling backward. Flailing, she caught the uvak's clawed foot with one arm on the way down—and desperately wrapped her other arm around it. "*Nink!*"

She strained to look up, but Nink was on the move, sailing away from the crest and its strange goings-on as fast as his reptile wings could carry them. Dangling, she saw that Nink was making for the safety of their earlier roost, farther up the chain. He'd obviously had enough surprises for one day.

So had she. But at least she was getting used to them. Or so she thought.

* * *

Shortly before the sun slipped behind the western ocean, she watched the last wisps of smoke disappear from the mountaintop. Adari didn't think Nink could be coaxed up there again before her water-pouch ran out. The dried brekka beets were already gone. She'd left so quickly she hadn't restocked her expedition pack.

Now, sitting on a ledge and watching the sunset, she drew an invisible continent on her knee, wondering how far she would have to fly to reach any settlement that had not heard of her plight. There probably wasn't such a place. The Neshtovar weren't just the peace-keepers and lawgivers, they were the communications system that made far-flung Kesh one world. Circuit riders would have already spread the word from Tahv to the elder riders in each village. She had escaped, but freedom was no deliverance for her.

Deliverance.

The word reached her on the wind. It wasn't even a word, really—not one she had heard before. A strange, melodic combination of syllables that meant nothing to her ear. Yet her mind recognized it as a familiar concept: *deliverance*.

Instinctively, she looked back toward the mysterious peak, drowning in shadow. Lights winked in the darkness near its massive base. Fires—but not the uncontrolled fires that must have been present at the mountaintop. These fires had been set.

Adari sprang to her feet, losing her water-pouch over the edge. The Neshtovar! They'd hunted her here, and they'd camped, and in the morning, they'd find her! They wouldn't wait to find out what she'd seen atop the mountain, not when she'd compounded her crime by daring to fly Nink.

A breeze was blowing to the sea from the direction of

the mountain. Cool, calming. *Deliverance*, came the word again. Another feeling followed, complex and emphatic: *We are yours—and you are ours.*

Adari blinked back bewildered tears and stepped toward the sleeping uvak. The wind rose again.

Come to us.

She'd been wrong to come here. The sky had told her to, but it didn't seem like any kind of deliverance Adari knew.

Her nose crinkled at the stench. The gully was dark, but it was clear something awful had been burned there. Even the sulfurous pits of the south weren't this bad. She looked back at Nink, yawning in the woods and unwilling to follow her farther. *Wise animal.*

The active fires were ahead, through trees over the hill. Air caressed her as she crept up. Whatever they were burning, it wasn't what was in the gully.

In the clearing below, Adari saw them: people. As many people as had been at her final hearing, only gathered around multiple campfires. She again thought of the Neshtovar lying in wait for her. If so, then her arriving on foot was probably for the best. She strained to make out their voices as she approached. She recognized one, but not his words. She crept closer—

—and left her feet entirely, hurtling toward a tree. Flailing, Adari slammed hard against it, collapsing breathlessly at its base. Figures rushed at her from the shadows. Scrambling, she saw them—their bodies illuminated not by the fires, but from stalks of magenta energy emanating from their hands, just like she had seen before. She tripped over a root. “No!”

She never hit the ground. An unseen force yanked her through the maze of figures, depositing her abruptly before the largest bonfire. Rising, her back to the flames, she looked at the advancing wraiths. They were

people, but not like her. Not purple, but beige, brown, red, and more—every color but what they were supposed to be. And some faces weren't like hers at all. Tiny tentacles wiggled on red jowls. A fat, leprous figure, twice as bulky as the rest and with a hide like Nink's, stood behind them all, grunting gutturally.

Adari screamed—but they weren't listening. They were all around her now, man, woman, and monster, shouting gibberish. She mashed her hands to her ears. It did no good. The words were digging past her ears. Digging at her mind.

Mental pinpricks became knives. Adari reeled. The strangers surged forward physically and ethereally—pushing, scraping, searching. Waves of images flashed before her, of her sons, her house, her people—everything that was Adari, everything that was Kesh. She still saw mouths moving, but the cacophony now boomed inside her head. Words, meaningless words . . .

. . . that somehow began connecting with familiar impressions. As with the breeze before, the voices were alien, but she could feel the sounds coalescing around rational thoughts.

"You are here."

"There are others. There are others."

"Bring them here."

"Take us there!"

"Bring them here!"

Adari spun, or all of Kesh did. Above her, the group parted for a new arrival. It was a woman. Darker-skinned than the others, she held a baby tightly swaddled in a red cloth. *Mother*, Adari thought against the clamorous assault. A sign of hope. Mercy.

"BRING THEM HERE BRING THEM HERE BRING THEM HERE!"

Adari screamed, writhing against the unseen claws raking at her. The others were holding back. The

woman above was not. Adari reeled. She thought she saw the veined wings of Nink, flying overhead and away.

A hand appeared on the mother's shoulder from behind, drawing her back. The din faded from Adari's mind. She looked up to see—*Zhari Vaal*?

No, she realized, as her teary eyes focused. Another of the strangely clad figures, but short and stocky like her husband. She had once imagined Zhari at the bottom of the sea, his rich mauve color drained. This man was paler still, but his dark shock of hair and reddish brown eyes gave him a confident, compelling look. She had seen him before, on the mountain. She had heard him before, on the wind.

"*Korsin*," he said, simultaneously in her mind and with a voice as soothing as her grandfather's. He gestured to himself. "I am called Korsin."

Blackness closed around her.

Chapter Three

On her third day among the newcomers, Adari learned to talk.

She'd spent the first full day after the terrifying encounter asleep, if that was the right term for a feverish, nightmare slumber interrupted by brief patches of delirium. Several times, she'd opened her eyes only to shut them quickly on seeing the strangers hovering around her.

But they were tending to her, not harassing her—as she'd found the second morning, awakening between an impossibly soft blanket and the rough ground. The newcomers had found a secluded dry spot for her, with several figures sitting vigil. Adari had drunk the water they offered, but it didn't restore her voice. Her head still rang, her mind bruised by the earlier assault. None of her vocabulary came when called. She had forgotten how to speak.

Korsin was sitting with her when she finally remembered. He'd called over Hestus, a rust-colored figure with a shining mask covering part of his acid-scarred face. It almost looked like it was part *of* his face—various bits hiding under his skin. Adari had flinched in fear, but Hestus had simply sat calmly, listening as Korsin tried to talk with her.

And they talked. Awkwardly, at first, with Hestus piping in occasionally to repeat a new Keshiri word she had said, followed by his own language's equivalent. Adari had marveled. The Keshiri words Hestus spoke sounded exactly like what she'd said—in her own voice, even. Korsin had explained that Hestus's "special ear" gave him that talent, helping to speed along the exchange of information.

Adari was interested in that exchange, but most of the information had gone the other way. She gathered that the people Korsin led had indeed come from the silver shell, and that it had somehow fallen from the sky. It was also clear that, powerful as they were, they had no means of leaving the mountain now, isolated as it was by water and forbidding terrain. Korsin had listened with interest as she spoke about Kesh and the Keshiri, of uvak and villages on the mainland. She'd mentioned the Skyborn only once, before stopping in near embarrassment. She didn't know who the newcomers were, but she felt abashed bringing it up.

Now, on the third afternoon since her arrival, Adari was speaking comfortably with the newcomers—and had even picked up some words in their language herself. They were something called "Sith," and Korsin was "human." She repeated the words. "You're a good listener," Korsin said, encouraged. He said others had worked with her as she slept—he did not say how—to try to improve communications. Now they were progressing quickly, and it was not all their doing. Even overwrought, Adari remained sharp.

"Our immediate concern, Adari Vaal," Korsin said, emptying a glistening pouch of powder into a cup for her, "must be to reach the mainland." There wasn't food or shelter enough for his people here, and the mountain had sheer drop-offs to the sea below. Her uvak might have provided an exit for someone, but

Nink, as fearful of the newcomers as he was of the mountain's native wildlife, had spent the last few days far out of reach, above.

Drinking the broth—it was filling, not unlike her mother's stew, she thought—Adari wrestled with the problem. Nink *might* come when she called, but only if she was standing in the open, alone. She could fly to land and return with help. “I couldn't take any riders, though.” Nink might not appear if she was accompanied, and a novice rider could never carry a passenger in any event. “I'd have to go alone. But I'd return as soon as I could.”

“She will not!”

Adari knew the voice before she even looked up. *The screamer.* The mother of the small child charged toward the smoldering campfire. “She will abandon us!”

Korsin rose and took the woman aside. Adari heard heated words exchanged, unfamiliar ones. But in bidding the woman away, he spoke words Adari did recognize: “We are her deliverance, and she is ours.”

Adari watched the woman, still glaring at her from afar. “She doesn't like me.”

“Seelah?” Korsin shrugged. “She's concerned over her mate—lost from the crash site. And with a child, she's anxious to leave this mountain.” He smiled, offering to help Adari stand. “As a mother, I'm sure you understand.”

Adari gulped. She hadn't mentioned her children. She'd barely even thought about them since she arrived among the newcomers, she realized. Shaking her head in guilt, she revealed something else: that the Keshiri might not listen to her.

Korsin seemed unsurprised—and unruffled. “You're smart, Adari. You'll make them listen.” He gently wrapped her shoulders with the azure blanket she'd slept beneath. “Keep this,” he said. “The sun's setting soon. It could be a cold ride.”

Adari looked around. Seelah stood in silent fury, unmoved from before. The others Korsin had introduced eyed their leader nervously; red tentacle-jowled Ravilan exchanged a worried look with Hestus. Even the hulking Gloyd, who, despite his brutish appearance, was clearly Korsin's greatest ally here, shifted uncomfortably. But no one barred her from leaving their campsite.

When a strong hand did stop her at the edge of the clearing, she was surprised to see whose it was: Korsin's. "About the Keshiri," Korsin said. "You told us about Tahv, your town—it sounds a good size. But how many are the Keshiri? How many Keshiri are there in all, I mean?"

Adari answered immediately. "We're numberless."

"Ah," Korsin said, his posture softening. "You mean they have never been counted."

"No," Adari said. "I mean, *we don't have a number that large.*"

Korsin froze, his grip on her arm tightening. His dark eyes, slightly smaller than a Keshiri's, focused on the wilderness beyond. She'd never seen him unnerved. If this was it, it lasted less than a second before he stepped back.

"Before you leave," he said, finding a tree to lean against, "tell me what you know about the Skyborn."

Korsin had called the vessel he arrived in *Omen*. The word not only existed in the Keshiri tongue, but was a long-held favorite of the Neshtovar. Watching what was happening now on the plaza known as the Circle Eternal, Adari guessed even the uvak-riding chiefs were realizing the irony.

She had returned to Korsin after a single day, one full week after *Omen* had collided with the mountain—and with her life. It had been a simple matter for her to

attract the uvak-riders there; as soon as the patrols spotted her and Nink, they followed the whole way to the Cetajan Range. The place had been the scene for several surprises in recent times, but none trumped the moment when the Neshtovar came upon Adari standing defiantly amid 240 supportive visitors from above, almost every one signaling his or her presence with a glowing ruby lightsaber. She didn't have one of the strange devices, but she glowed just the same from within. Adari Vaal, collector of rocks and enemy of order was now Adari Vaal, discoverer and rescuer; answerer of the mountain's call.

Add "prophet" to that, she thought as she watched the dozen score visitors—some hobbling from their ordeal—enter the Circle Eternal. They passed between gawking, silent crowds of Keshiri, many of the same people from her door the week before. Ahead in the Circle, all the Neshtovar in the region were present, more than she'd ever seen. Three days of aerial rescue operations had brought the newcomers off the mountain, days in which the word had gone out far into the hinterlands.

The Skyborn had arrived on Kesh.

No lesser reason could explain why the riders compliantly took their positions not in the Circle Eternal itself, but along the raised perimeter. The villagers had watched Adari's hearing from here; now the Neshtovar were watching her in the Circle, marching along behind Korsin. Behind them, the visitors filed in, forming their own inner perimeter over which the Neshtovar strained to see.

Izri Dazh looked small, standing beneath the column three times his height that served as the sundial's gnomon. Normally, it made him seem larger. Not today. He limped forward and greeted Korsin and company with mawkish words of praise before turn-

ing to the audience. Straining to see over the line of visitors, Izri made the declaration official. These *were* the Skyborn, he said, come down from the very mountain from which their servants had brought back the law centuries earlier. It wasn't the same mountain, Adari knew; perhaps the texts would be changed later. But Izri ignored that detail for now. The visitors had established their identities to the satisfaction of all of the Neshtovar, he said.

"You didn't believe them when they levitated your cane," Adari whispered, unable to resist.

"That ended when they levitated *me*," Izri rasped, under his breath. He turned back to see the villagers cheering—not for his proclamation, but for Yaru Korsin, Grand Lord of the Skyborn, who had just physically leapt the distance to the top of the column.

When the cheering finally died down, Korsin spoke in the Keshiri words that his interlocutor, the honored Adari Vaal, Daughter of the Skyborn, had taught him that morning. "We *have* come from above, as you say," he said, deep voice carrying to all. "We have come to visit the land that was a piece of us, and the people of that land. And Kesh has welcomed us."

More cheering. "We will found . . . a *temple* atop the mountain of discovery," he continued. "We will be many months in labors there, tending to the vessel that brought us and communing with the heavens. And in that time, we will make our home here in Tahv, with our children—aided by the Neshtovar, who were such good stewards here in our absence. They will leave here today, taking wing to all corners of Kesh, to spread the word of our arrival, and find the artisans we require." He spoke over the applause. "We are the Skyborn—and we *will* return to the stars!"

Happy chaos. Adari's younger son, Tona, squirmed

against her. She spied her mother and Finn at an honored place just outside the Circle, beaming happily. Adari looked up at Korsin—and swallowed hard.

It was all so perfect.

And all so wrong.

Chapter Four

The rapturous mood of the Kesh lasted straight through Moving Day. The Skyborn had been quartered in the fine homes of the Neshtovar while the riders spread the word. As the Neshtovar returned one by one, their guests uniformly declared their preference to remain in the relatively sumptuous accommodations. After the sixth rider appealed to Izri, the elder declared that *all* riders should move their families to humbler homes, that the Skyborn might know their devotion. Korsin and Seelah had been living in Izri's own house since the first day.

Everyone moved but Adari. For her service to the Skyborn, she'd been allowed to remain in Zhari's house. It also kept her near Korsin, whom she saw daily in her informal role as ambassador and aide. She saw all the prominent Skyborn daily: gruff but amiable Gloyd, who was something called a Houk; Hestus, busily indexing the Keshiri vocabulary; and rust-colored Ravilan, who often seemed lost, a minority within a minority. She also saw Seelah, who had installed herself in Korsin's lavish lodgings. Seelah's child was Korsin's nephew, Adari learned.

Seelah always glowered at Adari when she was around Korsin. Including today, as Adari stood with

him at a dig on the edge of the Cetajan Range, in sight of the ocean she fled to a month before. The Skyborn needed structures to stabilize and protect *Omen*, but first they needed a clear land passage onto the peninsula. A route was taking shape with the Skyborn, whose number included many miners, hewing huge chunks of strata with their lightsabers.

"Sabers'll do better when we recover some of the Lignan crystals to power them," Gloyd said. Korsin presented a rock sample to Adari. Granite. The efforts were not for her, of course, but she'd always wondered what was below. Now she knew.

"You were right after all," Korsin said, watching her study the stone. She hadn't mentioned her conflict with the Neshtovar, but she'd been anxious to confirm her theories with someone who knew. Volcanos *did* form new land. And the mountains of the Cetajan Range weren't volcanoes—while granite did come from magma, they told her, it was formed far underground over the course of eons. That was why its rocks looked different from the flamestones. "I don't understand half what my miners tell me," Korsin said, "but they say you could easily help them—if you weren't helping me."

Korsin began speaking with Gloyd about their next project, a dig to find metals necessary to repair *Omen*. Adari started to interject when she saw Seelah orbiting. Adari shuddered as the woman passed from sight. What had Adari done to earn such hatred?

She's not staring at me, Adari realized. *She's staring at Korsin*.

"I saw you," Adari blurted to Korsin.

"What?"

"I saw you a second time on the mountain, that day. You threw something over the side."

Korsin turned from his work. He gestured—and Gloyd stepped away.

"I saw you throw something," Adari said, swallowing. She looked down at the ocean, crashing against the cliffs. "I didn't know what—until you sent me to return to the village." Korsin stepped warily toward her. Adari couldn't stop talking. "I flew down there, Korsin. I saw him below, on the rocks. He was a man," she said, "like you."

"Like me?" Korsin snorted. "Is . . . he still there?"

She shook her head. "I turned him over to look at him," she said. "The tide swept him away."

Korsin was her height, but as she shrank, he loomed. "You saw this—and yet you still brought the Neshtovar to find us."

Adari froze, unable to answer. She looked at the rocks, far below, so like the ones farther up the range. Korsin reached for her as he had before . . .

. . . and drew back. His voice softened. "Your people turned on you to protect their society. You were a danger?"

How did he know? Adari looked up at Korsin. He looked less like Zhari all the time. "I believed something they didn't."

Korsin smiled and took her hand gently. "That's a fight my people are familiar with. That man you saw—he was a danger to *our* society."

"But he was your *brother*."

Korsin's grip tightened for a moment before he let go altogether. "You *are* a good listener," he said, straightening. The fact wouldn't have been hard to learn. "Yes, he was my brother. But he was a danger—and we had dangers enough when you found us," he said. He looked deeply into her eyes. "And I think this is something you know something about, Adari. That same sea took someone from you, too. Didn't it?"

Adari's mouth opened. *How?* Zhari had died there, but the Neshtovar would never have told Korsin.

Speaking of a rider's fall broke their greatest taboo: falling was being claimed by the Otherside. No one had seen it happen, save for Nink—and *the all-seeing Skyborn*.

Korsin was either a mind reader, or he was who he said he was. Her words barely came out. "It—it's not the same. *You* pushed that man. I didn't have anything to do with what happened to my—"

"Of course you didn't. Accidents happen. But you didn't mind that he died," he said. "I can see it in you, Adari. He was a danger to you—to the person you're becoming." Korsin's bushy eyebrows turned up. "You're glad he's gone."

Adari closed her eyes. Putting his arm around her shoulder, Korsin turned her toward the sun. "It's all right, Adari. Among the Sith, there is no shame in it. You would never be what you are today with him keeping you down. Just as you'd never be what you're going to become with *Izri Dazh* keeping you down."

At the name, Adari's eyes opened. The sunlight dazzled her, but Korsin wouldn't let her turn away. "You were afraid of us," he said, "and afraid when you saw the body. You knew we'd die on the mountain if you didn't bring help. Yet you brought the Neshtovar anyway—because you thought we could help you against them."

He released her. Adari looked blankly at the sun for another moment before looking away. Behind her, Korsin spoke in the soothing tones he'd used when his voice had first reached her on the wind.

"Helping us interact with the Keshiri is not just about helping *us*, Adari. You will learn things about your world that you never imagined." He turned over the rock in her hand. "I don't know how long we're going to be here, but I promise you will learn more in the next few months than you have in your entire lifetime. Than *any* Keshiri has."

Adari shook. “What—what do you—”

“A simple thing. Forget what you saw that day.”

Korsin made good on his word. In her first months with the Skyborn, Adari had learned much about her home. But she had also learned some things about where *they* had come from, and who they were. She was a good listener. *By simple things, we know the world.*

Korsin’s Sith were the beings from above that she denied—but they weren’t the gods of Keshiri legend. Not exactly. They had amazing powers, and perhaps they lived in the stars. But they didn’t bleed sand, and they weren’t perfect. They argued. They envied. They killed.

The Sith did read minds, to a degree. Korsin had used that to call out to her for help after seeing her in the air. But they weren’t omniscient. She’d found that out with a simple, surreptitious experiment involving Ravilan. She’d suggested he visit a restaurant deep in Tahv’s busiest quarter. Off he went, getting lost in the same neighborhood she always got lost in. The Sith’s perceptive powers were amazing, but they still required accurate knowledge from others.

She sought to provide that, accompanying Korsin to many work sites, mostly employing jovial Keshiri laborers. The Skyborn were perfect enough for the Keshiri—and perfect enough for her. Yaru Korsin was as far beyond Zhari Vaal in intellect as she was above the rocks, and as long as she learned to avoid the eye of Seelah, another widow of a fallen man, she could expect to learn a great deal more.

At the same time her knowledge advanced, Izri’s faith was further glorified. She took little joy in that, apart from the occasional chuckle she got from having a more storied role in it than he had. She was the

Discoverer, always to be remembered by Keshiri society. No one would remember Izri.

Watching another quarry being constructed, she wondered what that society would look like. She knew something the Sith didn't: They'd be here for a long time. She'd mentioned it once to a miner, who promptly discounted it as advice from the local know-nothings.

But she knew. The metals the Sith sought weren't in the soil of Kesh. Scholars had scoured every part of the continent. They had recorded what they'd found. If the substances Korsin's people required hid farther beneath the surface, it would take time to find them—a *lot* more time.

Time, the Sith had.

What, she wondered, would the Keshiri have?

Read on for an excerpt from
Star Wars: **Fate of the Jedi: Abyss**

by Troy Denning

Published by Del Rey Books

In the *Jade Shadow*'s forward canopy hung twin black holes, their perfect darkness surrounded by fiery whorls of accretion gas. Because the *Shadow* was approaching at an angle, the two holes had the oblong appearance of a pair of fire-rimmed eyes—and Ben Skywalker was half tempted to believe that's what they were. He had begun to feel like he was being watched the instant he and his father had entered the Maw cluster, and the deeper they advanced, the stronger the sensation grew. Now, at the very heart of the concentration of black holes, the feeling was a constant chill at the base of his skull.

"I sense it, too," his father said. He was sitting behind Ben in the copilot's seat, up on the primary flight deck. "We're not alone in here."

No longer surprised that the Grand Master of the Jedi Order always seemed to know his thoughts, Ben glanced at an activation reticle in the front of the cockpit. A small section of canopy opaqued into a mirror, and he saw his father's reflection staring out the side of the canopy. Luke Skywalker looked more alone and pensive than Ben ever remembered seeing him—thoughtful, but not sad or frightened, as though he were merely trying to understand what had brought

him to such a dark and isolated place, banished from an Order he had founded, and exiled from a society he had spent his life fighting to defend.

Trying not to dwell on the injustice of the situation, Ben said, “So maybe we’re closing in. Not that I’m all that eager to meet a bunch of beings called the Mind Drinkers.”

His father thought for a moment, then said, “Well, I am.”

He didn’t elaborate, and he didn’t need to. Ben and his father were on a mission to retrace Jacen Solo’s five-year odyssey of Force exploration. At their last stop, they had learned from an Aing-Tii monk that Jacen had been bound for the Maw when he departed the Kathol Rift. Since one purpose of their journey was to determine whether Jacen had been nudged toward the dark side by something on his voyage, it only made sense that Luke would want to investigate a mysterious Maw-dwelling group known as the Mind Drinkers.

What impressed Ben, however, was how calm his father seemed about it all. Ben was privately terrified of falling victim to the same darkness that had claimed his cousin. Yet his father seemed eager to step into its depth and strike a flame. And why shouldn’t he be? After everything that Luke Skywalker had suffered and achieved in his lifetime, there was no power in the galaxy that could draw him into darkness. It was a strength that both awed Ben and inspired him, one that he wondered if he would ever find himself.

Luke’s eyes shifted toward the mirrored canopy section, and he caught Ben’s gaze. “Is this what bothered you when you were at Shelter?” He was referring to a time that was ancient history to Ben—the last part of the war with the Yuuzhan Vong, when the Jedi had been forced to hide their young at a secret base deep inside the Maw. “Did you feel like someone was watching you?”

"How should I know?" Ben asked, suddenly uneasy—and unsure why. By all accounts, he had been an unruly, withdrawn toddler while he was at Shelter, and he recalled being afraid of the Force for years afterward. But he had no clear memories of Shelter itself, or what it had felt like to be there. "I was *two*."

"You *did* have feelings when you were two," his father said mildly. "You *did* have a mind."

Ben sighed, knowing what his father wanted, then said, "You'd better take the ship."

"I have the ship," Luke confirmed, reaching for the copilot's yoke. "Just close your eyes. Let the Force carry your thoughts back to Shelter."

"I know how to meditate." Almost instantly, Ben felt bad for grumbling and added, "But thanks for the advice."

"Don't mention it," Luke said in a good-natured way. "That's what fathers *do*—offer unwanted advice."

Ben closed his eyes and began to breathe slowly and deliberately. Each time he inhaled, he drew the Force into himself, and each time he exhaled, he sent it flowing throughout his body. He had no conscious memories of Shelter that were his own, so he envisioned a holograph of the facility that he had seen in the Jedi Archives. The image showed a handful of habitation modules clinging to the surface of an asteroid fragment, their domes clustered around the looming cylinder of a power core. In his mind's eye, Ben descended into the gaudy yellow docking bay at the edge of the facility . . . and then he was two years old again, a frightened little boy holding a stranger's hand as his parents departed in the *Jade Shadow*.

An unwarranted sense of relief welled up inside Ben as he grew lost in a time when life had seemed so much easier. The last fourteen years began to feel like a long, terrible nightmare. Jacen's fall to the dark side had

never happened, Ben had not been molded into an adolescent assassin, and his mother had not died fighting Jacen. All those sad memories were still just bad dreams, the unhappy imaginings of a frightened young mind.

Then the *Shadow* slipped through the containment field and ignited her engines. In the blink of an eye she dwindled from a trio of blue ion circles into a pinpoint of light to nothing at all, and suddenly Ben was alone in the darkest place in the galaxy, one child among dozens entrusted to a small group of worried adults who—despite their cheerful voices and reassuring presences—had very clammy palms and scary, anxious eyes.

Two-year-old Ben reached toward the *Shadow* with his free hand and his heart, and he sensed his mother and father reaching back. Though he was too young to know he was being touched through the Force, he stopped being afraid . . . until a dark tentacle of need began to slither up into the aching tear of his abandonment. He thought for an instant that he was just sad about being left behind, but the tentacle grew as real as his breath, and he began to sense in it an alien loneliness as desperate and profound as his own. It wanted to draw him close and keep him safe, to take the place of his parents and never let him be alone again.

Terrified and confused, young Ben pulled away, simultaneously drawing in on himself and yanking his hand from the grasp of the silver-haired lady who was holding it.

Then suddenly he was back in the cockpit of the *Jade Shadow*, staring into the fire-rimmed voids ahead. Scattered around their perimeter were the smaller whorls of half a dozen more distant rings, their fiery light burning bright and steady against the starless murk of the deep Maw.

“Well?” his father asked. “Anything feel familiar?”

Ben swallowed. He wasn't sure why, but he found himself wanting to withdraw from the Force all over again. "Are we sure we need to find these guys?"

Luke raised a brow. "So it *is* familiar."

"Maybe." Ben couldn't say whether the two feelings were related, and at the moment he didn't care. There was something hungry in the Maw, something that would still be there waiting for him. "I mean, the Aing-Tii call them Mind Drinkers. That can't be good."

"Ben, you're changing the subject." Luke's tone was more interested than disapproving, as though Ben's behavior were only one part of a much larger puzzle. "Is there something you don't want to talk about?"

"I wish." Ben told his father about the dark tentacle that had reached out to him after the *Shadow* departed Shelter so many years ago. "I guess what we're feeling now might be related. There was definitely some . . . *thing* keeping tabs on me at Shelter."

Luke considered this for a moment, then shook his head. "You were pretty attached to your mother. Maybe you were just feeling abandoned and made up a 'friend' to take her place."

"A *tentacle* friend?"

"You said it was a *dark* tentacle," Luke continued thoughtfully, "and guilt is a dark emotion. Maybe you were feeling guilty about replacing us with an imaginary friend."

"And maybe *you* don't want to believe the tentacle was real because it would mean you left your two-year-old son someplace really dangerous," Ben countered. He caught his father's eye in the mirrored section again. "I hope you're not going to try to psychoanalyze this away, because there's a big hole in your theory."

Luke frowned. "And that would be?"

"I was *two*," Ben reminded him. "And by all accounts, I didn't feel guilty about *anything* at that age."

Luke grinned. “Good point, but I still don’t think we should worry too much about this tentacle monster of yours.”

“It’s not *my* tentacle monster,” Ben retorted, miffed at having his concerns mocked. “You’re the one who made me dredge it up.”

Luke’s expression hardened into admonishment. “But *you’re* the one who’s still afraid of it.”

The observation struck home. Whether or not the dark presence he remembered was real, he had emerged from Shelter wary of abandonment and frightened of the Force. And it had been those fears that had allowed Jacen to lead him into darkness.

Ben sighed. “Right. Whatever this thing is, I’ve got to face it.” After a moment, he asked, “So how do we find these Mind Drinkers?”

“ ‘The Path of True Enlightenment runs through the Chasm of Perfect Darkness.’ ” Luke was quoting Tadar’Ro, the Aing-Tii monk who had told them that Jacen had left the Kathol Rift to search out the Mind Drinkers. “ ‘The way is narrow and treacherous, but if you can follow it, you will find what you seek.’ ”

Ben swung his gaze toward the black holes ahead. The brilliant whorls of their accretion disks were burning hottest and brightest along their inner rims, where a mixture of in-falling gas and dust was being compressed to unimaginable densities as it vanished into the sharp-edged darkness of twin event horizons.

“Wait. Tadar’Ro said *perfect* darkness, right?” Ben started to have a bad feeling about the monk’s instructions. “Like, beyond an event horizon?”

“Actually, it’s probably very bright on the way down a black hole,” Luke pointed out. “Just because gravity is too strong for light to escape doesn’t mean it can’t exist, and there’s all that gas compressing and glowing as it’s sucked deeper and deeper.”

“Yeah, but you’re *dead*,” Ben said, “and everything is dark when you’re dead. Still, I see what you mean. I doubt Tadar’Ro expects us to fly down a black hole.”

“No, not *down* one.”

There was just enough anxiety in Luke’s voice to make Ben glance into the mirrored section again. His father was frowning out at the two black holes, staring into the fiery cloud between them and looking just worried enough to twist Ben’s stomach into a cold knot.

“*Between* them?” Ben could see what his father was thinking, and it didn’t make him happy. In any system of two large bodies, there were five areas where the centrifugal and gravitational forces would neutralize each other and hold a smaller body—such as a satellite or asteroid—in perpetual equilibrium. Of those five locations, only one was directly *between* the two bodies. “You mean Stable Zone One?”

Luke nodded. “The Chasm of Perfect Darkness is an ancient Ashla parable referring to the twin perils of ego and ignorance,” he explained. “The Tythonians spoke of it as a deep dark canyon flanked by high, ever-crumbling cliffs.”

“So life is the chasm, darkness is falling all around,” Ben said, taking an educated guess as to the parable’s meaning, “and the only way to stay in the light is to go down the middle.”

Luke smiled. “You’ve got a real feeling for mystic guidance.” He lifted his hands away from the yoke. “You have the ship, son.”

“*Me? Now?*” Ben considered pointing out that his father was by far the better pilot—but that wasn’t the issue, of course. If Ben was going to face his fears, he needed to handle the flying himself. He swallowed hard, squared his shoulders, then confirmed, “I have the ship.”

Ben deactivated the mirror panel and accelerated toward the black holes. As the *Shadow* drew closer, their dark orbs rapidly began to swell and drift toward opposite sides of the cockpit, until all that could be seen of them were tall slivers of darkness hanging along the rear edges of the canopy. Ahead lay a fiery confluence of superheated gas, swirling in from two different directions and so bright it hurt Ben's eyes even through the *Shadow's* blast-tinting.

He checked the primary display and found only bright static; the navigation sensors were awash in electromagnetic blast from compressing gas. The *Shadow's* internal sensors were working just fine, however, and they showed the ship's hull temperature rising rapidly as they penetrated the cloud. It wouldn't take long for that to become dangerous, Ben knew. Soon the fierce heat inside the accretion disk would start fouling guidance systems and control relays. Eventually, it would compromise hull integrity.

"Dad, how about doing something with those sensor filters?" Ben asked. "My navigational readings are snow."

"Adjusting the filters won't change anything," Luke said calmly. "We're flying between a pair of black holes, remember?"

Ben exhaled in exasperation, then cursed under his breath and continued to stare out into the fiery ribbons ahead. At best, he could make out a confluence zone where the two accretion disks were brushing against each other, and the painful brilliance made it difficult to tell even that much.

"How am I supposed to navigate?" Ben complained. "I can't see anything."

Luke remained silent.

Ben felt the hint of disapproval in his father's Force aura and experienced a flash of rebellion. He let out a

cleansing breath, allowing the feeling to run its course and depart on a cushion of stale air, then saw how he had been blinded by his anxiety over the navigation difficulties.

“Oh . . . right,” Ben said, feeling more than a little foolish. “Trust the Force.”

“No worries,” Luke said, sounding amused. “The first time I tried something this crazy, I had to be reminded, too.”

“Well, at least *I* have an excuse.” Ben took the navigation sensors offline so the static wouldn’t interfere with his concentration. “It’s hard to focus with your dad looking over your shoulder.”

Luke’s crash webbing clicked open. “In that case, maybe I should get some—”

“Who are you kidding?” Ben shoved the yoke over, flipping the *Shadow* into a tight barrel roll. “You just want to bite your nails in private.”

“The thought hadn’t crossed my mind,” Luke said, dropping back into his seat. “Until *now*, ungrateful offspring.”

Ben laughed, then leveled out and checked the hull temperature. It was climbing even faster than he had feared. He closed his eyes and—hoping the gas was not so thick that friction would aggravate the problem—shoved the throttles forward.

It did not take long before Ben began to sense a calm place a little to port. He adjusted course and extended his Force awareness in that direction, then started to feel a strange, nebulous presence that reminded him of something he could not quite place—of something dark and diffuse, spread across a great distance.

Ben opened his eyes again. “Dad, do you feel—”

“Yes, like the Killiks,” Luke said. “We might be dealing with a hive-mind.”

A cold shudder was already racing down Ben’s spine.

His father had barely uttered the word *Killiks* before the memory of his stint as an unwilling Gorog Joiner came flooding back, and for the second time in less than an hour he found himself desperately wanting to withdraw from the Force. Gorog had been a dark side nest, secretly controlling the entire Killik civilization while it fed on captured Chiss, and Ben had fallen under its sway for a short time when he was only five. It had been the most terrifying and confusing time of his childhood, and had Jacen not recognized what was happening and helped Ben find his way back to the Force and his true family, he doubted very much that he would have been able to break free at all.

Thankfully, the presence ahead was not all that similar to Gorog's. There was certainly a darkness to it, and it was clearly composed of many different beings joined together across a vast distance—most of space ahead, really. But the distribution seemed more mottled than a Killik hive-mind, as though dozens of distinct individuals were joined together in something vaguely similar to a battle-meld.

Ben was about to clarify his impressions for his father when a familiar presence began to slither up inside him. It was cold and condemning, like a friend betrayed, and he could feel how angry it was about the intrusion into its lair. The Force grew stormy and foreboding, and an electric prickle of danger sense raced down Ben's spine. He could feel the darkness gathering against him, trying to push him away, and that only hardened his resolve to finally face the specter. He opened himself up, grabbed hold in the Force, and began to pull.

The presence jerked back, then tried to shrink away. It was too late. Ben already had a firm grasp, and he was determined to follow it back to its physical location. He checked the hull temperature and saw that it

was hovering in the yellow danger zone. Then he focused his attention forward and saw—actually *saw*—a thumbnail-sized darkness tunneling through the swirling fires ahead. He pointed their nose toward the black oval, then shoved the throttles to the overload stops and watched the fiery ribbons of gas stream past the cockpit.

The ribbons grew brighter and more deeply colored as the ship penetrated the accretion disk, and soon the gas grew so dense that the *Shadow* began to buck and shudder in its turbulence. Ben held on tight to the yoke . . . *and* to the dark presence he was clasping in the Force.

His father's voice sounded behind him. "Uh, Ben?"

"It's okay, Dad," Ben said. "I've got an approach lane."

"A *what?*" Luke sounded genuinely surprised. "I hope you realize the hull temperature is almost into the red."

"*Dad!*" Ben snapped. "Will you please let me concentrate?"

Luke fell silent for a moment, then exhaled loudly. "Ben, the gas here is too dense for these velocities. We're practically flying through an atmo—"

"*Your* idea," Ben interrupted. The black oval swelled to the size of a fist. "Trust me!"

"Ben, *trust me* doesn't work for Jedi the way it does for your uncle Han. We don't have his luck."

"Maybe that would change if we trusted it more often," Ben retorted.

The black oval continued to expand until it was the size of a hatch. Ben fought the turbulence and somehow kept the *Shadow's* nose pointed toward it, then the ship was inside the darkness, flying smooth and surrounded by a dim cone of orange radiance. Startled by the abrupt transition and struggling to adjust to the

sudden change of light, Ben feared for an instant that the dark presence had led him off-course—perhaps even out of the accretion disks altogether.

Then the cone of orange began to simultaneously compress and fade, becoming a dark tunnel, and a far worse possibility occurred to him.

“Say, Dad, would we know if we were flying down a black hole?”

“Probably not,” Luke said. “The time-space distortion would make the journey last forever, at least relative to Coruscant-standard time. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no reason,” Ben said, deciding not to alarm his father any more than necessary. If he *had* flown them past an event horizon, it was too late to do anything about it now. “Just curious.”

Luke laughed, then said, “Relax, Ben. We’re not flying down a black hole—but will you *please* slow down? If you keep this up, you really *are* going to melt the hull.”

Ben glanced at his display and frowned. The hull temperature had climbed into the critical zone, which made no sense at all. The surrounding darkness and the lack of turbulence meant they were no longer being blasted by heat from the accretion disk. The hull ought to be cooling rapidly, and if it wasn’t . . .

Ben jerked the throttles back and was pitched against his crash webbing as friction instantly began to slow the *Shadow*. The area surrounding them wasn’t dark because it was *empty*—it was dark because it was filled with cold matter. They had entered Stable Zone One, where gas, dust, and who-knew-what-else was floating in limbo between the two black holes. Worried that they weren’t decelerating fast enough, he used the maneuvering thrusters to slow the ship down even further . . . then realized that during the excitement, he had lost contact with the dark presence he had been using as a reluctant guide.

“Blast,” Ben said. He expanded his Force awareness again, but felt only the same meldlike presence he had sensed earlier—and it was too diffuse to be much of a navigation beacon. “We’re back to flying blind. I can’t feel anything useful now.”

“That’s not really a problem,” Luke pointed out. “There’s only one place in here where anything can have a permanent habitat.”

Ben nodded. “Right.”

Stable Zone One wasn’t actually very stable. Even the slightest perturbation would start a mass on a long, slow fall into one of the adjacent gravity wells. Therefore, anything *permanently* located inside the zone could only be at the precise center, because that was the only place where the forces were in absolute equilibrium.

Ben brought the navigation sensors back up. This time, the screen showed nothing but a small fan of light at the bottom, rapidly fading to darkness as the signals were obscured by cold gas and dust. He activated the *Shadow*’s forward flood lamps and continued onward. The beams tunneled ahead for perhaps a kilometer before vanishing into the black fog of dust and gas. Ben decelerated even further, then adjusted headings until all external forces affecting the *Shadow*’s travel vector were exactly zero, and set a waypoint. Theoretically, at least, they were now on course for the heart of the stable zone.

When Ben shifted his attention forward again, he saw a blue fleck of debris floating in the light beam ahead. He instantly fired the maneuvering thrusters to decelerate again, but in space, even a relative creep was a velocity of hundreds of kilometers an hour, and they covered half the distance to the object before the *Shadow* responded.

Instead of the stony boulder or ice ball that Ben had expected, the object turned out to be a young Duros.

Ben could tell that he was a Duros because he wasn't wearing a pressure helmet, and his blue, noseless face and big red eyes were clearly visible above the collar of a standard Jedi-issue flight suit. Hanging on his shoulder was what, at that distance, appeared to be a portable missile launcher.

"Dad?" Ben asked. "Are you seeing this?"

"Duros, no helmet?"

"Right."

Luke nodded. "Then yes, I—"

The Duros was silhouetted by a white flash, and the silver halo of an oncoming missile began to swell in front of the *Shadow's* cockpit. Ben shoved the yoke forward and hit the thrusters, but even a Jedi's reflexes weren't that quick. A metallic bang echoed through the hull, and damage alarms began to shriek and blink. In almost the same instant, the Duros and the missile launcher floated past mere meters above the cockpit, and the muffled thud of an impact sounded from far back in the stern.

"Definitely no hallucination," Luke commented.

"Dad, that looked like—"

"Qwallo Mode, I know," Luke replied. Mode was a young Jedi Knight who had disappeared on a standard courier run about a year earlier. When an exhaustive search had failed to find any trace of him, the Masters had finally concluded that he had perished. "He's a long way from the Tapani sector."

"Assuming that *was* Qwallo." Ben extended his Force awareness behind them, but did not sense any hint of the Jedi's presence. "Should I make another sweep to see if we can recover him?"

Luke thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Even if he's still alive, let's not give him another shot at the *Shadow*. Before we start taking those kinds of chances, we need to figure out what's going on here."

“Yeah,” Ben agreed. “Like how come he didn’t need a helmet.”

“And how he got here in the first place—and why he’s shooting at us.” Luke clicked out of his crash webbing, then added, “I’ll handle the damage. If you see anyone else floating around with a missile launcher and no pressure suit, don’t ask questions, just—”

“Open fire.” Ben deployed the blaster cannons, then checked the damage display and saw that they were bleeding both air and hyperdrive coolant. To make matters worse, the yoke was sticking, and that could mean a lot of things—none of them good. “Got it. We’ve taken enough damage.”

Ben switched his threat array to the primary display. At the top of the screen, the gray form of a mass shadow was clarifying out of the darkness. A yellow number-bar was adding tons to the mass estimate faster than the eye could follow, but he was alarmed to see that it was already into the high five digits and climbing toward six. There was no indication yet of the object’s overall shape or energy output, but the tonnage alone suggested something *at least* as large as an assault carrier.

Unsure whether it was better to slow down to prevent a collision or accelerate to avoid being an easy target, Ben started to weave and bob. There was just a vague hint of danger tickling the base of his skull, but that only meant nothing had set its sights on the *Shadow* yet.

On the third bob downward, the yoke jammed forward and wouldn’t come back. Ben cursed and tried to muscle it, but he was fighting the hydraulic system, and if he fought it too hard, he would break a control cable. He hit the emergency pressure release, dumping the control system’s entire reservoir into space, and then checked his threat array again.

The mass ahead was no longer a shadow. A silvery, elongated oval had taken shape in the middle of the display, the number-bar in its core now climbing past seven million tons. The oval was slowly drifting toward the bottom of the screen and shedding alphanumeric designators, indicating the presence of a debris field *and* the danger of an impending collision with the object itself. Ben hit the maneuvering thrusters *hard*, and the *Shadow* decelerated.

He heard a toolbox clang into the main cabin's rear bulkhead, and his father's alarmed voice came over the intercom speaker. "What did you hit?"

"Nothing yet." Ben pulled back on the yoke, using his own strength to force the vector plates down. "The control yoke's power assist is gone, and we've reached a debris field."

"What sort of debris?" his father demanded. "Ice? Rock? Iron-nickel?"

Ben thumbed the SELECT bubble active and slid it over to one of the designators: OBJECT B8. An instant later a density analysis offered a 71 percent probability that OBJECT B8 was a medium transport of unknown make and model.

But Ben did not immediately relay the information to his father. As the *Shadow's* nose returned to its original plane, an enormous, gray-white dome was slowly coming into view. Dropping down from above and upside down relative to the ship, the dome hung at the base of a large, spinning cylinder ringed by a dozen small, attached tubes. Floating between the cylinder and the *Shadow* were nearly twenty dark flecks with the smooth lines and sharp corners suggestive of spacecraft, all drifting aimlessly and as cold as asteroids.

"Ben, you're worrying me," his father admonished. "How bad is it?"

"Uh, I don't really know yet." As Ben spoke, the

Shadow's lamp beams continued to slide up the spinning cylinder, to where it joined a gray metal sphere that looked to be about the size of one of Bepin's smaller floating cities. "But maybe you should come back to the flight deck as soon as things are secure back there."

"Yeah," Luke said. "I was just thinking the same thing."

As the lamp beams continued to reveal more of the station—at least that's what Ben *assumed* he was looking at—he began to grow even more confused and worried. With a second, dome-capped cylinder rising out of the sphere directly opposite the first, the thing reminded him of a station he had helped infiltrate during the recent civil war. It didn't seem possible that two such structures could exist in the galaxy by mere coincidence, or that he would have happened on this one by mere chance even if the two *were* related. He had the uneasy feeling that the Force was at play here—or, to be more precise, that the Force was putting *him* in play.

Now that they were actually in visual range of their target, Ben brought the full suite of sensors back online and began to investigate. To both his relief and puzzlement, all of the contacts appeared to be derelict vessels. They ranged widely in size, from small space yachts like the *Shadow* to an antiquated Tibanna tanker with a capacity in excess of a hundred million liters. Ben did a quick mental calculation of the total tonnage of the abandoned ships and shuddered. If these were captured spoils, there were some very impressive pirates hiding around here somewhere.

Starting to envision sensor masks and ambushes, Ben slid the *Shadow* into the cover of an old TGM Marauder. The ship looked as deserted as its sensor profile suggested, tumbling slowly with cold engines,

open air locks, and no energy emanations whatsoever. But there was no apparent combat damage, or anything else, to suggest it had been taken by pirates.

Ben turned the sensors on the station itself and found it marginally less derelict. Its power core was active, but barely. A few warm areas suggested that at least some of its atmospheric seals remained intact. Approaching closer, he could see that three of the dark tubes attached to the upper cylinder had come loose at one end and were in danger of being launched away by centrifugal force. Whoever lived here—if anyone did—they were not much on maintenance.

The *clack-clack* of boots-in-a-hurry echoed through the open hatchway at the rear of the flight deck, then suddenly stopped. Ben activated the canopy's mirror panel and found his father standing behind the copilot's chair, jaw hanging slack as he stared at the slowly spinning station ahead.

"Remind you of anything?" Ben asked.

Luke's gaze remained fixed on the space station. "What do you think?" he asked. "It could be a miniature Centerpoint Station."

Centerpoint had been an ancient space station located in the stable zone between the Corellian worlds of Talus and Tralus. Its origins remained cloaked in mystery, but the station had once been the most powerful weapon in the galaxy, capable of destroying entire star systems from hundreds of light-years away. One of the few positive things to come of the recent civil war, in Ben's opinion, had been the facility's destruction. He was far from happy to discover another version hidden here, deep inside the Maw.

"I was afraid you'd say that," Ben said with a sigh. "What do we do now? Lob a baradium missile at it?"

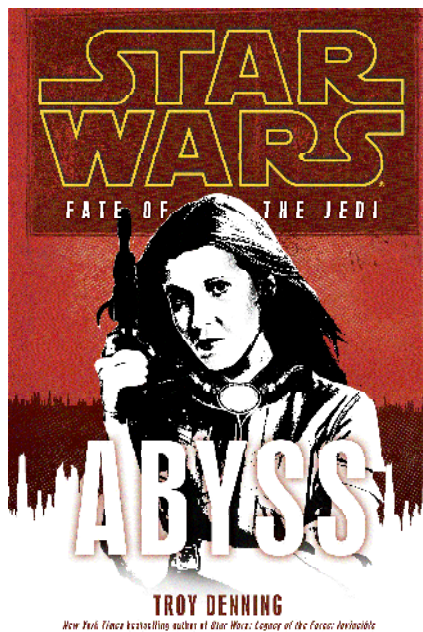
Luke's voice grew disapproving. "Do we *have* a baradium missile?"

Ben dropped his gaze. “Sorry. Uncle Han said it was always smart to keep one—”

“Your uncle isn’t a Jedi,” Luke interrupted. “I wish you’d remember that.”

“Sure,” Ben said. “But maybe this one time we should think about the way he would handle this. If this place was built by the same beings that designed Centerpoint Station, the smartest thing we can do is get rid of it.”

“And maybe we will—*after* we unjam our vector plates and replenish our hydraulics.” Luke slipped into the copilot’s seat behind Ben. “In the meantime, try to avoid hitting anything. I’ll see if I can find a safe place to dock this bird.”



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