



STAR WARS®

LOST TRIBE OF THE SITH

PARAGON



JOHN JACKSON MILLER



Lost Tribe of the Sith #3

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Chapter One

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The water was as warm as it was every day, streaming from the marble slot high on the wall down onto Seelah's body. There had been no refresher, no modern conveniences for the Sith stranded on Kesh for fifteen standard years. But they had learned to live with what they had.

The glistening droplets of meltwater clinging to her brown skin had come from a glacier half a continent away. Keshiri uvak-fliers, their beasts laden with massive kegs, had ferried the water from that faraway place to the Sith's mountain retreat. Rooftop attendants heated the water to her exact specifications, channeling it through a system thoroughly cleansed daily for mildew and other pollutants.

Below, Seelah meticulously raked at her wrist with pumice brought from the foot of the Sessal Spire, kilometers away. Keshiri artists had crafted the stones into pleasing shapes for her. The natives were more interested in appearance than function—but, in this, they had an ally. Seelah looked with her usual disdain at the stall, constructed for her personal use by her Sith brethren immediately after she'd moved into Commander Korsin's chambers. The place was more a temple than a home.

Well, she couldn't have everything. Not here.

Fifteen years. That's what it was by the Keshiri calendar, too—although who could trust that? She stepped dripping from the shower, wondering where the time had gone. Not to her body, she saw in the colossal mirror—working glass was another thing the Keshiri were good at. Twice a mother and living on food suited for farm animals back home, and yet Seelah looked as fit as she ever had. It had taken work. But time was one thing she'd had.

"I know you're here, Tilden," Seelah said. Tilden Kaah, her Keshiri attendant, always stayed out of sight from the mirror, never remembering she could sense him through the Force. Now he stood by the doorway, averting his large opal eyes and presenting a robe in his shaking hands.

Fifteen years hasn't changed him, either, Seelah thought with a silent chortle as she snatched the robe. But why shouldn't he look? All that drab purple skin—to call it lavender was flattery. And white hair—the color of age and uselessness. If Keshiri had found other Keshiri beautiful before, it was only because they hadn't yet seen the Sith.

And, besides, it was Tilden's job to worship her. One of the younger high priests of the Keshiri faith—which recognized Seelah and her fellow Sith as ancient deities from the heavens—Tilden lived to follow her everywhere. She rather enjoyed torturing him like this in the mornings. She was the sacrilege that started his day.

"Your son is hunting with the riders until tonight," he said. "Your daughter is in Tahv with the educators your people sent."

"Fine, fine," she said, discarding the gown he'd set out in favor of a brighter one. "Get to something important."

"Milady is expected in the ward this afternoon for

the reviewing,” he said, looking up from his parchment. Finding her fully dressed and standing before the great window, he smiled gently. “Otherwise, you are at your leisure.”

“And the Grand Lord?”

“His Eminence, our savior from above, has begun his meetings with his advisers. The usual people, born on high like milady. His giant friend is there, too.” He looked down at his notes. “Oh, and the *crimson man* has asked for an audience.”

“Crimson man?” Seelah’s gaze remained on the foaming ocean far below. “*Ravilan?*”

“Yes, milady.”

“Then I should go.” Seelah stretched mightily before turning abruptly to search for her shoes. Tilden had them. They were the only articles of clothing rescued from the crash of *Omen* that she continued to use. The Keshiri still hadn’t figured out decent footwear.

“I—I didn’t mean to turn this into a working day so early,” Tilden stammered, fastening her shoes. “Forgive me. Were you finished bathing? I could have the minders recycle the water.”

“Relax, Tilden—I *want* to go out,” she said, pinning back her dark hair with a sculpted bone clip, a gift from some local noble she couldn’t remember. She paused in the polished doorway. “But have the team step up the water deliveries—and have them bring it in from the far side of the mountain range. It’s better for the skin from over there.”

Seelah yawned. It wasn’t even high sun and the daily pantomime was already well under way. Commander Yaru Korsin, the Keshiri’s savior from above, sat in his old bridge chair, listening just as he used to on the command deck of *Omen*. But now the shattered wreck of the vessel lay behind him, sheltered in a part of the sturdy

structure not used for habitation, and his battered chair was incongruously plopped in the middle of a marbled colonnade, stretching out hundreds of meters. Here, high in the open air of the Takara Mountains—recently renamed for his precious mother, wherever in blazes she was—Korsin held court.

The architecture and location made for a good show for the Keshiri townsfolk who occasionally flew up here. That was according to design. But it was also big enough to accommodate every foolish supplicant that Korsin wanted to cram into his day. Seelah saw Gloyd the gunner, Korsin’s “giant friend,” at the front of the line as usual.

The lumpy-headed Houk’s jowls quaked as he presented his latest crazed idea: using one of the surviving boring lasers that still had a charge to fire signals into space. *Boring* seemed the right word to Seelah—and Korsin didn’t appear enthralled, either. How long must Gloyd have been prattling before she arrived?

“It’ll work this time,” Gloyd said, mottled skin sweating. “All we’ve got to do is get the attention of a passing freighter. An observatory. *Anything*.” He wiped his forehead. Seelah never thought the genetic lottery had been kind to Houks to begin with. But now it looked as if age and sun were causing Gloyd’s hide to melt from his skull.

“The intensity will dissipate to the inverse of the square of the distance from Kesh,” came a human voice from behind Korsin. Parrah, *Omen*’s relief navigator and now their main science adviser, stepped forward. “It’d be just more cosmic background noise. Didn’t they teach you anything where you came from?”

Probably not, Seelah mused. Gloyd had been a cast-away even before he joined the *Omen* crew. While other outsiders avoided the Stygian Caldera, Gloyd’s team of brigands had figured something truly amazing

must be there. There was: the Sith Empire. Few of Gloyd's companions had survived the discovery. But as gunner and foot soldier, he'd done combat with Jedi plenty of times in his earlier life, making him useful to Naga Sadow and, later, to Yaru Korsin.

But lately? Not so much. "I don't think it's going to work, old friend," Korsin said, spying Seelah out of the corner of his eye and winking. "And we just can't run the risk of burning out any more equipment. You know the score."

They all did. Even as they built their stone shelter for *Omen* in the months after the crash, the crew had steadily brought out equipment. Some of it they expected to restore to life with a few fabricated parts; the rest was immediately usable. And used.

That had been a mistake. It turned out there wasn't any metal to be found on Kesh. The Sith had ripped and clawed at the surface, expending most of their surviving munitions to no avail. Above, Kesh was pleasing to the eye—but below, it appeared to be little more than a dirtball. Much equipment running on internal power sputtered and died. Worse, something in Kesh's electromagnetic field was playing hob with everything from radio waves to electrical generation. The lightsabers still worked—thank the Lignan crystals for that—but the castaways, intrepid as they were at cannibalizing, weren't going to be able to reinvent everything. The tools simply weren't here.

"I get that," Gloyd said, seeming not so tall as before. "You know me. I'm built for battle. This peaceful paradise is getting to me—"

"I know something you can do battle with," Seelah said, her caftan shimmering as she stepped up and put her arm around Korsin. "I think I saw them preparing lunch back in the main hall." Korsin smiled.

Gloyd glared at the couple for a moment before let-

ting loose with a churning laugh. "What can I say?" he said, patting his paunch and turning. "The lady knows me."

Korsin looked past the retreating hulk to see another figure. "Ravilan! What's *your* next grand plan to get us off this rock?"

"Nothing along those lines," Ravilan said. The crimson man of Tilden's description stepped forward and regarded his leader civilly. "Not today."

"Really? Well, we're all getting older. The mind forgets."

"Not this one, Commander." Ravilan ran his finger along his right cheek tendril—an expression of thoughtfulness among the Red Sith. It made Seelah's skin crawl. She gripped Korsin tighter. Onetime quartermaster for *Omen's* complement of Massassi warriors, Ravilan had been left without a mission after his charges died during their first days on Kesh. Since then, he'd held a sequence of odd jobs. More importantly, he'd become the spokes-being for the Fifty-seven—the surviving crew members whose bloodlines to the red-skinned Sith species ran truest—and for those who, like Gloyd, were less interested in living on Kesh than leaving it.

But Ravilan's lot had grown increasingly bleak. His people hadn't numbered fifty-seven since their arrival. A dozen had fallen due to accident or professional incompetence—and none of the children of Ravilan's people had lived a day. Kesh had not been kind in equal measure to all its guests. As motives for wanting to leave went, his were fairly strong.

But they did not bring him before Korsin today, apparently. "There's something else," Ravilan said, eyeing Seelah. "People in the service of your . . . your *wife* have been trying to document the ancestries of all our crew. They have grown quite insistent," he added, cocking an eyebrow-stalk.

Feeling Seelah's grip tighten further, Korsin rose. "Your people don't have to worry about that, Rav. Human crew only."

"Yes, but many of us have at least some human blood," Ravilan said, walking along the colonnade with Korsin. The crowd parted; Seelah walked gingerly behind. "And many of your people have some of ours. The merger of the Dark Jedi line with that of my Sith forebears is an article of pride to my—to *our* people, Korsin. To have someone picking it apart—"

Korsin continued walking, enjoying the view of the ocean, strands of silver in his hair glistened in the sun. Seelah stepped up her pace to get closer. "It's still a foreign planet," Korsin said. "We don't know what killed your Massassi when we landed. We don't know what's been happening to—well, you know."

"I certainly do," Ravilan said, looking out at the ocean without seeming to see it. His coloring had faded to a somber maroon hue in his time on Kesh, and his earrings and other Sithly ornamentation only served to make the man beneath look more drab. "This is a world driven by tragedy, Korsin. For *all* of us. If you'd accept one of my people in the crèche as midwife, we might be better able to understand—"

"No!" Seelah said, interposing herself between the two. "They're not medical personnel, Korsin. In conditions like these, we've got to have some controls!"

Ravilan shrank back. "It was not a slight, Seelah. Your staff have done quite well since our mission turned . . . *generational* in nature. The Sith thrive." His face, wrinkled with age and worry, softened. "It should be so for *all* of the Sith."

Seelah looked urgently at Korsin, who waved his hand dismissively. *Dismissing us both?* she wondered. "We'll talk about it later," Korsin said. "Was there something else?"

Ravilan paused. "Yes—I will be in the south, as you requested, visiting the towns of the Ragnos Lakes." Seelah knew the project: The Keshiri had been harvesting some kind of fluorescent algae, and Korsin had assigned Ravilan to check it out, for potential use in lighting the Sith structures. "There are eight villages on various bodies of water, all with different specimens to examine."

"That's a lot of territory," Korsin said. "You alone?"

"As you requested," Ravilan said. "I start in Tetsubal, farthest away."

Seelah smiled. It was just the sort of mindless job that would drive the quartermaster to madness.

"Take your whole retinue," Korsin said, slapping a firm hand on Ravilan's shoulder. Korsin had grown no more physically imposing during his exile, but he still walked like a man Gloyd's size. "It's important—and it'll go faster if you split up. And you could *all* stand to get off this mountain for a few days."

He brought Ravilan closer and spoke into his sunken ear. "And, look—next time Seelah would like you to call me Grand Lord."

"That's just a name for the Keshiri."

"And there are Keshiri here. It's an order, Rav. Safe flight."

Seelah watched as Ravilan limped off. He'd lost an argument with an uvak in their second year here. It was one of a series of losses—and she wasn't about to let him win an argument now. She took Korsin aside. "Don't you *dare* accept any of his people in my wards!"

"You're pretty when you're territorial."

"*Korsin!*"

He looked at her with piercing eyes. "You're not living on Rhelg anymore. How long before you let go of the past?"

Seelah let a smoldering look speak for her—but

Korsin ignored it. Spotting something behind her, he grinned and turned to address the waiting crowd. “Sorry to cut this short, all of you—but I see my lunch companion has arrived.”

Seelah turned.

Adari Vaal waited at the edge of the plaza.

Chapter Two

The Sith Empire of Seelah's youth was a nest of star systems linked by common heritage, ambition, and greed. It was also, in a sense, a black hole from which little escaped.

The Stygian Caldera's limiting effects on hyperspace travel were disproportionate, making it far easier for unlucky outsiders to wander into Sith space than for the Sith Lords to venture out. Those who found their way in seldom returned, becoming slaves to one princeling or another. The arrivals frequently changed hands over the generations, forgetting their homes completely. They, too, were of the Sith now.

Some Sith Lords, such as Naga Sadow, saw value in the work of the descendants of the original Tapani refugees. Where their tentacle-faced masters with lineages back to the Sith species were more interested in sorceries, Seelah's people excelled at science. When allowed to practice, they did, forming the industrial and medical infrastructures for several Lords. Some even resolved problems of lightsaber-crystal fabrication and power generation that had eluded the Jedi of the Republic. Such feats were never heralded—no Sith Lord would share a new weapon. If failure was an orphan, success, for the Sith, was a secret love child.

The child Seelah had her own successes, serving on Rhelg with the rest of her family in the forces of Ludo Kressh, Sadow's greatest rival. At thirteen, Seelah was already a talented healer, drawing both on the Force and the medical knowledge of her forebears. Devotion had already borne fruit.

"We are advancing in this movement," her father had said. "You have done well, and it has been rewarded. Glory in the honor, Seelah—it is the greatest that can befall such as us."

She had been charged with the care of Lord Kressh's feet.

They were out all afternoon again, the two of them. Tilden had told her that, and Seelah had other confidants who provided regular reports. Korsin and the Keshiri woman would stroll the pathways painstakingly carved out of the once treacherous mountainside, discussing—what? Not a blasted lot, as far as she could tell.

Their walks dated from the beginning of Seelah's own relationship with Korsin. Back then, there had been a need. The Vaal woman had discovered the Sith on the mountain, and had acted as intermediary with the Keshiri. But as years progressed and the need for a single ambassador ebbed, the walks continued, ranging ever farther away. After the birth of Seelah and Korsin's daughter, Nida, the walks had become daily—including the occasional uvak-flight.

Seelah knew enough from her sources not to suspect infidelity—as if she would care—but the native woman had taken steps to improve her plain appearance. She'd recently begun turning up in vor'shandi face markings, a decoration unheard of for a Keshiri widow of an uvak-rider. But eavesdroppers confirmed that the generally mindless substance of their discussions hadn't

changed. *Where does the sun go at night, Korsin? Is air part of the Force, Korsin? Why are rocks not food, Korsin?* If she was a spy, she was pretty useless at it—but she did have command of a huge chunk of the Grand Lord's time. And more.

"She's . . . really something, isn't she?" he had asked in an unguarded moment after Adari flew back to Tahv one evening.

"I think your standards for playthings have plummeted," Seelah had responded.

"Along with my ship."

And my real husband, she had not said. Seelah thought back on that moment now as she stood outside the ward. Fifteen years with her beloved husband's hated brother. Fifteen years with the man who had probably orphaned her son. *Let the old purple wraith have him*, she thought. The less seen of Yaru Korsin, the better.

Korsin's seduction of Seelah had not taken long at all, once she'd convinced him he'd be met with something other than a dagger. It was an acceptable arrangement on both sides. By winning her approval, the commander had solidified his bonds with the restive miners his ship was carrying—and stripped away something that had belonged to his hated sibling. She even let him think it was his idea, though she bit her lip to ribbons that first year.

For her part, Seelah won power and influence in the new order—benefits going far beyond convenient morning ablutions. Little Jariad would be raised in the best lodgings wherever they were—first in the walled native city of Tahv, later in the mountain compound.

And she had a job. Administration of the Sith sick wards seemed like a worthless sinecure given the rude health of the Keshiri-pampered people. Certainly no one else wanted the assignment, not with a world to

conquer and an interstellar escape to engineer. Most Sith injured in disagreements never reached a healer, anyway.

But Seelah got to know more about the Sith who were stranded on Kesh than anyone, including the *Omen* officer originally responsible for keeping the ranks. She knew who was born and when and to whom—and that was the balance of power. The others weren't even looking. Their eyes were still on the sky, on getting out. Only Korsin seemed to understand that they might be settling into a permanent situation—though he clearly worked to prevent anyone but Seelah from sensing it. She didn't understand why he had been open with her about it.

Perhaps the wife of Yaru Korsin didn't merit hope. No matter. She didn't need it, anyway. She saw the future—here in the assembly yard behind the ward, as she walked through on her periodic reviews. Here, the youth of the Sith reported to see her. Or rather, to be seen.

"This is Ebya T'dell, daughter of the miner Nafjan and the bridge cadet Kanika." Seelah's willowy aide, Orlenda, stood behind a stern-faced pink child and read from a parchment. "Eight years old next month by our counting. No ailments."

Seelah's hand closed in a V around the young girl's chin. Seelah looked left and right, inspecting the child like livestock. "High cheekbones," she said, mashing her index finger against the youngling's face. The child didn't flinch. "I know your parents, girl. Are you a source of despair to them?"

"No, Lady Seelah."

"This is good. And what is your duty?"

"To be like you, milady."

"Not the answer I had in mind, but I won't argue," Seelah said, releasing the child and turning to Orlenda,

her aide. "I don't see any flaring of the skull, but I'm concerned about her coloring," she said. "Too florid. Check the genealogy again. She might yet have a family, if we choose properly."

With a pat on the rear from Orlenda, eight-year-old Ebya T'dell returned to play in the outer yard, momentarily safe in the knowledge that her life might not be a genetic dead end.

It was an important matter, Seelah thought as she watched the younglings duel with wooden staffs. Every child there had been born since the crash landing. Apart from the infusion of youth to the Sith population, it appeared that very little had changed. Every color from humanity's spectrum had been represented in the original *Omen* crew, and that continued to be the case. None of the casual pairings with Keshiri had produced any offspring whatsoever—Seelah thanked the dark side for that—and, of course, there was the problem with Ravilan's people. The number of relatively pure-blooded humans had been steadily increasing. So had the purity of that blood.

She had seen to that—with Korsin's full approval. It was sensible. Kesh had killed the Massassi. If it had not killed humans yet, then the Sith needed more humans. *Adapt or die*, Korsin had said.

"There were several more younglings on the list for this week," Orlenda said. "Did you want to see them today, Seelah?"

"I'm not in the mood. Is there anything else?"

Orlenda rolled up her parchment and shooed the remaining children to the exercise yard. "Well," she said, "we'll need a new Keshiri bearer for the wardroom."

"What happened to the last one, Orlenda?" Seelah smirked. "Did you finally kill him with your kindnesses?"

"No. He's dead."

“The big one? Gosem?”

“*Gorem*,” Orlenda said with a sigh. “Yes, he died last week. We’d loaned him to Ravilan’s team breaking down one of the decks of *Omen*, looking for whatever it is they look for to use. Gorem was, well, you remember, so *strong*—”

“Get to it.”

“I guess he’d been moving heavy plates, and it’s hot up there under that roof. He keeled over right outside the ship.” Orlenda clicked her tongue.

“Hmm.” She’d thought the Keshiri were made of stronger stuff. Still, it was a good chance to rib her lusty friend. “I imagine you wept at the funeral pyre?”

“No, they tossed him over the cliff,” Orlenda said, straightening her flaxen hair. “It was that day with the high winds.”

Just before dusk, Seelah found Korsin again on the plaza. The Keshiri woman was gone, and Korsin was looking at himself—or, rather, at a pretty bad replica. Crafters from Tahv had just delivered a four-meter-tall not-very-likeness of their savior, sculpted from an enormous slab of glass.

“It’s . . . a first pass,” Korsin said, sensing her arrival.

“Clearly.” Seelah thought it would befoul the killing fields of Ashas Ree. But her Keshiri aide thought it was marvelous. At a minimum.

“It’s positively *stupendous*, milady,” Tilden said. “Something truly worthy of the Skyborn—I mean, the *Protectors*.” He corrected himself quickly in the presence of the Grand Lord, but still seemed to swallow hard at the new word, so recently added to the religion of his birth.

Ravilan’s cousin, the cyborg Hestus, had worked for years with other linguists from the *Omen* to plumb the oral histories of the Keshiri. They’d sought any hint

that anyone had ever happened by—anyone who might return to Kesh again, to provide them escape. They hadn't found much. The Neshtovar, the uvak-riders who until recently had ruled the planet, had layered their religion of the Skyborn and the opposing Otherside over earlier tales of Protectors and Destructors. The Destructors periodically returned to rain disaster upon Kesh; the Protectors were destined to stop them, once and for all. Korsin, now at the focus of the Keshiri faith, had claimed a moment of revelation and decreed a return to the old names.

That, like much else over the years, had been Seelah's idea. The Neshtovar had considered themselves the Sons of the Skyborn. But no living Keshiri could claim kinship to the distant Protectors. Whatever status any native previously enjoyed was gone. And now, Seelah saw, the Keshiri were showing their respect with bug-eyed slabs of glass.

They'd better learn to get our faces right before they "respect" me, Seelah thought. "It's not that it looks bad," she said, once Tilden had stepped away. "It's that it doesn't look right *here*."

"Thinking again of moving us from the mountain?" Korsin smiled, wind-cracked wrinkles darkening in the shadows. "I think we wore out the Keshiri's patience when we stayed in Tahv the first time."

"And what difference does that make?"

"None." He grabbed her hand, surprising her. "Listen, I want to tell you how much I appreciate the work you've been doing at the ward. It's everything I hoped—everything I knew you were capable of."

"Oh, I don't think you know what I'm capable of."

Korsin looked away and laughed. "Well, let's not pursue that. Would dinner interest you instead?" His eyes shone. Seelah recognized the look. The man was capable, as ever, of keeping multiple sets of accounts.

Before she could answer, a shout came from above. Korsin and Seelah looked to the watchtower. No attacker threatened—the Sith had purged the range of predators years before. Instead, sentries simply sat in meditation, listening to the Force for messages from Sith traveling in the far-flung reaches of the land.

“It’s Ravilan,” called down a young red-faced sentry, only a child when *Omen* crashed. “Something has happened in Tetsubal. Something bad.”

Korsin looked up in aggravation. He could feel something in the Force, too—something chaotic—but he had no idea what. This was exactly why they shouldn’t have pirated their personal communicators in an earlier escape scheme.

Seelah looked up at the tower and mouthed, “Is . . . is Ravilan dying?”

“No,” the herald said, barely catching her words. “*Everyone else is.*”

Chapter Three

The Sith were about glorification of self and the subjugation of others. That much made sense, as the young Seelah saw life in Ludo Kressh's palace.

What did not make sense was why so many of her people—in her own family!—embraced the Sith teachings when they had no hope of advancement. Why would a Sith live as a slave?

It wasn't that way for everyone. In the grand scheme, the Sith Empire had been at rest for many years, but an empire of Sith is an empire of small schemes. From Kressh's command, newly adult Seelah had watched her master rage at the ventures of Naga Sadow. She had seen Sadow at several meetings in Kressh's company, almost all of them ending in fury. The two leaders differed on everything, long before the discovery of a space lane into the heart of the Republic set them at odds over the future direction of the Sith Empire.

Sadow was a visionary. He knew permanent isolation was a practical impossibility in an Empire comprising so many systems and so many potential hyperspace routes; the Stygian Caldera was a veil, not a wall, and he could see opportunity through it. And in Sadow's entourage, Seelah had seen many humans and members

of other species with apparent status. She even met Korsin's captain father once.

For Sadow, contact with the new was a thing to be desired—and outsiders could be as Sith as any born in the Empire. For Kressh, who spent his days in battle and his nights toiling on a magical device to protect his young son from all harm, there could not be a worse fate than escape from the Sith's cosmic cradle.

"Do you know why I do this?" Kressh had asked one night. His drunken rage had touched the entire household, Seelah included. "I have seen the holocrons—I know what waits beyond. My son looks like me—and so does the future of the Sith.

"But only as long as we're here. Out there," he'd spat, between bloody punches, "out there, the future looks like you."

Adari Vaal had once told Korsin that the Keshiri did not have a number large enough to describe their own population. The *Omen* crew had tried to make estimates in their initial years on Kesh, only to find ever more villages over the horizon. Tetsubal, at eighteen thousand Keshiri residents, had been one of the last cities counted before the Sith finally gave up.

Now they had given up again. The walls of Tetsubal were filled with corpses, making a body count impossible. As they arrived on uvak-back that night, Seelah, Korsin, and their companions could see them all from the sky, littering the dirt roads like branches after a storm. Some had collapsed within the doorways of their hejarbo-shoot huts. It was the same inside, they soon saw.

What they didn't see were survivors. If any existed, they were hiding well.

Eighteen thousand bodies was a good guess.

Whatever happened had happened suddenly. A nurs-

ing woman had fallen, locked together with her infant in a fatal embrace. Troughs laced through the streets, fed from the aqueduct; several Keshiri had fallen in and drowned right beside their floating wooden pails.

Alive and alone here stood Ravilan, rattled and clinging inside the still-locked city gate. He had held his position in Tetsubal throughout the evening, looking much the worse for it. Korsin approached him as soon as he dismounted.

"It started after I met with my contacts here," Ravilan said. "People started collapsing in restaurants, in the markets. Then the panic began."

"And where were *you* during all this?"

Ravilan pointed to the town circle, a plaza with a large sundial much like the one in Tahv. It was the tallest structure in the city, apart from the uvak-driven pulley system that fed the aqueduct. "I couldn't find the aide I'd brought with me. I leapt up there to call for her—and to survey what was going on."

"Surveying," Seelah snarled. "Really!"

Ravilan exhaled angrily. "Yes, I was trying to get clear! Who knows what plague these people might be carrying? I was up there for hours, watching people drop. I called for my uvak, but it was dead, too."

"Tether ours outside the walls," Korsin ordered. He looked flustered in the torchlight. He pulled a cloth from his tunic and placed it over his mouth, not seeming to realize he was the last in the party to do so. He looked at Seelah. "Biological agent?"

"I—I can't say," she said. Her work had been with the Sith, never the Keshiri. Who knew what they might be susceptible to?

Korsin tugged at Gloyd. "My daughter's in Tahv. Make sure she gets back to the mountain," he said. "Go!"

The Houk, uncharacteristically shaken, bolted for his mount.

"It could be airborne," Seelah said, walking dazed through the corpses. That would explain how it had hit so many, so quickly. "But we haven't been affected—"

A cry came from up ahead. There, Seelah saw what their scout had found beneath another body: Ravilan's missing assistant. The woman was in her forties, like Seelah. Human—and dead.

Seelah clutched the gauze over her face. *Fool, fool—I'm a fool! Is it already too late?*

"It's late enough," Ravilan said, catching her unguarded thought. He confronted Korsin. "You know what you have to do."

Korsin spoke in a monotone. "We'll burn the city. Of course, we'll burn it."

"It's not enough, Commander. We have to shut them out!"

"Shut *who* out?" Seelah snapped.

"The Keshiri!" Ravilan gestured to the bodies around them. "There is something killing them and it can kill us! We've got to remove them from our lives once and for all!"

Korsin looked completely taken aback.

Seelah grabbed his shoulder. "Don't listen to this. How will we live without them?"

"Like Sith!" Ravilan exclaimed. "This is not our way, Seelah. You have—*we* have become too dependent upon these creatures. They are not Sith."

"Neither are *we*, by your people's lights."

"Don't get political," Ravilan said. "Look around, Seelah! Whatever this is should have killed us by now. If it hasn't, we should take it for what it is. *This is a warning from the dark side.*"

Behind the cloth, Seelah's jaw dropped. Korsin snapped back to reality. "Wait," he said, taking Ravilan's arm. "Let's talk about this . . ."

Korsin and Ravilan began walking toward the gate,

which even now was being opened by their attendants. The village itself seemed to exhale, wretched air passing through the opening. Seelah didn't move, spell-bound by the bodies around her. The dead Keshiri looked all the same to her, purple faces and blue tongues, faces twisted in choking agony.

Her footing faltered, and she saw Ravilan's assistant. What was her name? *Yilanna*? *Illyana*? Seelah had known the woman's whole family tree the day before. Why couldn't she remember her name now, when the woman was on the ground, choked on her tongue, bloated and blue—

Seelah stopped.

She knelt beside the corpse, careful not to touch it. She drew her *shikkar*—the glass blade the Keshiri had fashioned for her—and carefully worked open the woman's mouth. There it was, the tongue a mad azure, blood vessels engorged and bursting. She'd seen it before in humans, at the edge of her memory . . .

"I need to go back," Seelah said, erupting from the village gates. "I need to go back home—to the ward."

Korsin, directing his henchmen building a bonfire, looked puzzled. "Seelah, forget about any survivors. *We're* the survivors. We hope."

Ravilan, lucklessly trying to calm the collected uvak Korsin had tethered outside the village wall, looked back in alarm. "If you think of bringing this disease into our sanctum—"

"No," she said. "I'm going alone. If we here are infected, nothing matters anyway." She took the bridle of an uvak from Ravilan and flashed him an unenthusiastic smile. "But if we're not infected, it's like you said. It's a warning."

Korsin watched her leave and turned to the task of burning the village. Seelah didn't look back, soaring into the night. There wasn't much time. She'd need to

meet with her entire staff at the ward, her most loyal aides.

And she'd need to see her son.

When dawn broke over the Takara Mountains, Seelah was not found in the shower by Tilden Kaah—as much as she now felt like she needed one. Seelah hadn't slept at all. With Korsin and Ravilan's return in the dead of night, the retreat had become a crisis center.

Communications were the real problem. The deaths of nameless Keshiri had stirred the Force little for those who didn't care about them anyway. But the aftermath had stirred such confusion in the minds of the Sith that even the most experienced heralds were having trouble fielding messages. Korsin had been careful in calling for the return of his people from the Keshiri towns and villages; so far, Tahv and the rest of the major cities had not heard of the disaster in Tetsubal, and he didn't want a mass withdrawal putting the natives on their guard. Sith abroad were instructed to casually remove themselves from public contact and make their way home.

What had befallen Tetsubal had not yet struck the major cities—but reconnaissance fliers were still out, checking on the surrounding areas. By the time word came in from the hinterlands, all of the Sith would be safely in their redoubt.

Seelah saw Korsin several times in the morning as she passed through. He wanted her staff to set up quarantines for reentry to the compound. None of the Sith who had torched Tetsubal were showing any symptoms of distress, but the stakes were high. Seelah had assignments of her own in the ward, and in fact few of her medical staffers appeared in public. "We're working on the problem," she had told him.

Reentering at noon, Seelah saw Ravilan standing with Korsin, monitoring reports. Korsin seemed haggard from lack of sleep—his little purple fluff wouldn't be coming for lunch today! But Ravilan, despite his harrowing experiences of the day before, seemed rejuvenated; his bald head was a robust magenta.

"It goes better than we feared, Korsin," Ravilan said. *No Grand Lord now*, Seelah noticed. *Not even Commander.*

Korsin grunted. "All your people are back?"

"I am informed they have all just arrived back at the stables. Not much of a vacation," Ravilan said, his facial tendrils curling slightly, "but then there is much work to be done. On our new priorities."

Seelah looked up. It should be about now.

"Rider coming!"

The herald sensed the uvak's approach long before it appeared on the southern horizon. Waved directly onto the colonnade, the rider set the beast down and leapt to the stone surface. All eyes were on the new arrival. All save Seelah's.

"Grand Lord," he said, short of breath. "It . . . has happened again . . . *in Rabolow!*"

Seelah heard Korsin's gasp—but she saw Ravilan's yellow eyes bulge. It took but a second for the quartermaster to find his composure. "Rabolow?"

"That's on the Ragnos Lakes, isn't it?" Seelah looked toward Ravilan and smiled primly. "That's where your people were assigned to go yesterday, wasn't it, Ravilan? Villages on the Ragnos Lakes."

He nodded. They'd all been there when it was being discussed. Ravilan cleared his throat, suddenly dry. "I—I should speak then with my associate who just returned from there." He hobbled past Seelah, turned, and bowed. "I—I really should meet them. Commander."

"You do that," Seelah said. Korsin said nothing, still flabbergasted by the recent news and the coincidence. He watched Ravilan disappear from sight, heading for the stables.

"Rider coming!"

Korsin looked up. Seelah thought he almost looked afraid, afraid of the news the rider would bring.

The news was of another city of death, on another of the Ragnos Lakes. A third rider told of a third. And a fourth. One hundred thousand Keshiri, dead.

Korsin goggled. "Something to do with the lakes? That—what was it—algae of Ravilan's?"

Seelah crossed her arms and looked directly at Korsin, stooped over and nearly her same height. She was tempted to let the moment linger . . .

. . . but there was work to be done. She called for Tilden Kaah.

Her worried assistant appeared from the direction of the ward, holding a small container. She took it and dismissed him. "Do you know what this is, Korsin?"

Korsin turned the empty vial over in his hand. "Cyanogen silicate?"

It was from her medical stores on *Omen*—and also from the stores Ravilan kept for the creatures in his care. In its solid form, she explained, it was used as a cauterizing agent by healers working with the Massassi. She had seen it used again and again in Ludo Kressh's service. Nothing weaker could do anything to those savages' hides.

"It's bad enough on its own," she said. "But if moisture gets into it, it breaks down—and intensifies a thousandfold. One particle per billion could do anything."

Korsin's bushy eyebrows flared. "What—what could it do in a water table? *Or an aqueduct?*"

Seelah held his hands firmly and looked directly into his eyes. "*Tetsubal.*"

She explained the story behind the death of her ward's bearer. Beefy Gorem had been seconded to Ravilan's team to help reach what remained in crushed sections of *Omen*. He'd apparently touched a stained deck plate from the Massassi apothecary and died outside, not long after washing his hands. Death was not instantaneous, but the victim never got far.

Ravilan must have seen Gorem's death, she said, and realized he had a tool against the Keshiri. A weapon that could force Korsin and the rest of the humans to forget about building on this world—and recommit to leaving it.

And now every city that members of the Fifty-seven had visited in the previous day had gone the same way as Tetsubal.

Korsin spun and shattered his bridge chair against a marble column. He didn't use the Force. He didn't need to.

"*Why would they do this?*" He grabbed Seelah. "Why would they do this, when it's so obvious I'd trace it back to them? How stupid—how *desperate* would they have to be?"

"Yes," Seelah said, curling around him. "How desperate *would* they have to be?"

Korsin looked into the sun, now beating down on the mountain. Releasing her, he looked into the faces of his other advisors, all waiting and wondering.

"Bring all the others in," he said. "Tell them it's time."

Chapter Four

Seelah had already set her mind on leaving Ludo Kressh before he executed her family. It was trivial; his ankle had been injured in a battle, and she had failed to stop the infection. He'd killed her father the first night, and his leverage lessened considerably after that. Seelah found her chance to go a few days later, when one of Sadow's mining teams stopped on Rhelg to refuel. She didn't have anybody left by then, anyway.

Devore Korsin had been her escape. She saw his immaturity and recklessness, but she also saw something there to work with. He, too, strained against the invisible chains limiting his ambition. He could be her ally. And in Sadow's service, at least, something could happen—as long as Devore didn't foul it up.

And if he did, well, there was always their son . . .

Lightsabers flashed in the night on the mountain—but not on the main plaza. Seelah walked calmly along the darkened colonnade, now festooned with added decorations: the tentacled heads of the Fifty-seven, staked at even intervals.

There was the young sentry from the tower, trapped and killed. He'd never abandoned his post. To the right was Hestus, the translator; Seelah had been involved

personally in his takedown. Korsin said they'd come back to Hestus in the morning to remove the cybernetic implants. Who knew, there might be something they could use there.

She could sense Korsin and his chief lieutenants beyond the outer wall now, driving the remnant to a last stand beside the precipice where *Omen* nearly met its end. No quarter would be offered; she could see Korsin hurling any who surrendered over the side.

Well, he has experience with that.

The stone silo of the stable master loomed before her. Uvak enclosures stretched out in all directions from this central hub, where Keshiri aides would wash the stinking beasts. The Keshiri were gone tonight, she saw as she entered the round room. At the center, watched only by a guard in the shadows, hung the limp but breathing body of Ravilan. Strong cords of Keshiri-woven fiber lashed his splayed arms to cornices high on either side of the structure. The arrangement was designed to keep uvak from bolting during their baths. Now it was doing the same for Ravilan, his feet dangling mere centimeters above the ground. Seelah stepped back as a rush of water poured from slots high in the tower, gagging the prisoner.

The flow stopped after a minute, but it was longer before the weary Ravilan registered the presence of his visitor. "All gone," he choked. "Right?"

"All gone," she said, stepping into his sight. "You are the last." Ravilan had been caught early, his bad leg failing him once and for all.

Ravilan shook his head. "We only did it one time," he said, his throat a gravelly trail. "In Tetsubal. These other cities—I don't know. We never planned—"

"—for *me*," Seelah said.

It had been surprisingly easy, once she'd realized Ravilan's ploy in Tetsubal. The only element was time.

She'd returned to the mountain retreat in the night and summoned her most trusted aides from the ward. Soon after midnight, her minions were in the air, propelling their creatures toward the lake towns of the south that Ravilan's people had been instructed to visit the day before. Her ward had held the only other surviving supply of cyanogen silicate; now it was in the wells and aqueducts of the lake cities—and in the bodies of dead Keshiri. Time was the key element—but she'd had help coordinating it all.

"Y-you did this?" Ravilan coughed and managed a weak chuckle. "I guess that's the first time you liked one of my ideas."

"It did the job."

Ravilan's crumpled grin vanished. "What job? *Genocide?*"

"You care about the Keshiri *now?*"

"You know what I mean!" Ravilan strained at his bonds. "My people!"

Seelah rolled her eyes. "Nothing's going on here that wouldn't have happened in the Empire eventually. You know how things were going. Whose movement were you in, anyway?"

"Naga Sadow didn't want this," Ravilan rasped. "Sadow valued power where he saw it. He valued the old and the new. He valued *us*—"

She nodded to the guard—and another crushing barrage of water slammed Ravilan.

It took longer for him to recover this time.

"It could have worked," he choked. "*We* could have worked . . . together, like the Sith and the fallen Jedi of old. If only our children—*my* children—had lived . . ."

Ravilan looked up, water streaming from his sagging face. "You."

Seelah fixed her silent gaze on the chutes, still dripping, near the ceiling high above.

"*You*," he repeated, louder. "You ran the crèche. You and your people." His face twisted into an agonized scream. The future of his people had already been smothered, long before. "What did you do? *What did you do to us?*"

"Nothing you wouldn't eventually have done to us." She stepped toward the shadows, near the guard. "We are not your Sith. We are something new, a chance to do it right. *A new tribe.*"

"Younglings—infants!" Wilted, Ravilan moaned. "What . . . what kind of mother *are* you?"

"The mother of a people," she said, looking toward the guard in the shadows. "Now, my son."

The guard stepped forward—and Ravilan saw the animal form of Jariad Korsin coming at him, blade drawn, the wild-eyed face of his father under jet-black hair. The teenager leapt at the prisoner, wielding a jagged vibroblade without remorse. At the last, he drew his lightsaber and cut Ravilan down in a violent flash of crimson.

"You've changed the world today," Seelah said, stepping close to her son and confederate. He'd been key to coordinating the previous night's gambit, getting her accomplices where they needed to go. It was right that he should have part of this moment.

The boy panted, looking down at his victim. "He's not who I want to kill."

"Be patient," Seelah said, stroking his hair. "*I have been.*"

Tilden Kaah walked quietly along the darkened pathways of Tahv, only recently paved with stones. The Sith had dismissed the other Keshiri attendants earlier in the morning, when the excitement began; he had been one of the last to leave. The streets, usually peopled with merry-makers even at this hour, were alarmingly still.

He only saw one middle-aged member of the Neshtovar standing station at a crossing; stripped of his uvak years before, the figure looked bored.

Tilden nodded to the watchman and passed into a plaza near one of the many village aqueducts. Sheets of fresh mountain water tumbled in long crescents from flumes, a cooling presence in what had become a hot night. Arriving before a wall of water, Tilden donned the robe he was carrying, raised the hood, and stepped into the downpour.

Or, rather, through it.

Tilden walked, dripping, down the dark passage leading deep into the stone structure. He followed hushed voices to the end of a passage. There was no light—but there was life. Tilden heard agonized chatter as he approached: the horrible news from the south had begun to arrive. The superstitious Keshiri would probably be expected to absorb the horror quietly, a voice said from the shadows. The Destructors would probably be blamed.

“It is done,” Tilden spoke to the darkness. “Seelah has rid the Skyborn of the Fifty-seven. Of the people not like them, only the bumpy man, Gloyd, remains.”

“Seelah doesn’t suspect you?” returned a husky female voice from the blackness. “She doesn’t *read your mind?*”

“She doesn’t think I’m worth it. And I speak of nothing but the old legends. She thinks me a fool.”

“She can’t tell our great scholars from our fools,” said a male voice.

“None of them can,” said another. “Good. Let’s keep it that way. Seelah has done us a favor, reducing their numbers. She may do more.” A blinding flash appeared as an old Keshiri man lit a lantern. There were several Keshiri there, huddled in the cramped space—their attentions not on Tilden, but on the figure stepping

from the shadows behind him. Tilden turned to recognize the woman who had first addressed him.

“Stay strong, Tilden Kaah. With your help—and with the help of all of us here—the Keshiri will finish the job.” Anger glistened in Adari Vaal’s eyes. “I brought this plague upon us. *And I will end it.*”

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

by Aaron Allston

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The rainforest air was so dense, so moist that even roaring through it at speeder-bike velocity didn't bring Luke Skywalker any physical relief. His speed just caused the air to move across him faster, like a greasy scrub-rag wielded by an overzealous nanny-droid, drenching all the exposed surfaces of his body.

Not that he cared. He couldn't see her, but he could sense his quarry, not far ahead: the individual whose home he'd crossed so many light-years to find.

He could sense much more than that. The forest teemed with life, life that poured its energy into the Force, too much to catalogue as he roared past. He could feel ancient trees and new vines, creeping predators and alert prey. He could feel his son Ben as the teenager drew up abreast of him on his own speeder-bike, eyes shadowed under his helmet but a competitive grin on his lips, and then Ben was a few meters ahead of him, dodging leftward to avoid hitting a split-forked tree, the recklessness of youth giving him a momentary speed advantage over Luke's superior piloting ability.

Then there was more life, *big* life, close ahead, with malicious intent—

From a thick nest of magenta-flowered underbrush twice the height of a man, just to the right of Luke's

path ahead, emerged an arm, striking with great speed and accuracy. It was humanlike, gnarly, gigantic, long enough to reach from the flowers to swat the forward tip of Luke's speeder bike as he passed.

Disaster takes only a fraction of a second. One instant Luke was racing along, intent on his distant prey and enjoying moments of competition; the next, he was headed straight for a tree whose trunk, four meters across, would bring a sudden stop to his travels and his life.

He came free of the speeder-bike as it rotated beneath him from the giant creature's blow. He was still headed for the tree trunk. He gave himself an adrenaline-boosted shove in the Force and drifted another couple of meters to the left, allowing him to flash past the trunk instead of into it; he could feel its bark rip at the right shoulder of his tunic. A centimeter closer, and the contact would have given him a serious friction burn.

He rolled into a ball and let senses other than sight guide him. A Force shove to the right kept him from smacking into a much thinner tree, one barely sturdy enough to break his spine and any bones that hit it. He needed no Force effort to shoot between the forks of a third tree. Contact with a veil of vines slowed him; they tore beneath the impact of his body but dropped his rate of speed painlessly. He went crashing through a mass of tendrils ending in big-petaled yellow flowers, some of which reflexively snapped at him as he plowed through them.

Then he was bouncing across the ground, a dense layer of decaying leaves and other materials he really didn't want to speculate about.

Finally he rolled to a halt. He stretched out, momentarily stunned but unbroken, and stared up through the trees. He could see a single shaft of sunlight penetrating the forest canopy not far behind him; it illuminated a

swirl of pollen from the stand of yellow flowers he'd just crashed through. In the distance, he could hear the roar of Ben's speeder bike, hear its engine whine as the boy put it in a hard maneuver, trying to get back to Luke.

Closer, there were footsteps. Heavy, ponderous footsteps.

A moment later, their origin, the owner of that huge arm, loomed over Luke. It was a rancor, humanoid and bent.

The rancors of this world had evolved to be smarter than those elsewhere. This one had clearly been trained as a guard and taught to tolerate protective gear. It wore a helmet, a rust-streaked cup of metal large enough to serve as a backwoods bathtub, with leather straps meeting under its chin. Strapped to its left forearm was a thick durasteel round shield that looked ridiculously tiny compared to the creature's enormous proportions but was probably thick enough to stop one or two salvos from a military laser battery.

The creature stared down at Luke. Its mouth opened and it offered a challenging growl.

Luke glared at it. "Do you really want to make me angry right now? I don't recommend it."

It reached for him.

SEVERAL DAYS EARLIER

Empty Space Near Kessel

It was darkness surrounded by stars—one of them, the unlovely sun of Kessel, closer than the rest, but barely close enough to be a ball of illumination rather than a dot—and then it was occupied, suddenly inhabited by a space yacht of flowing, graceful lines and peeling paint. That was how it would have looked, a vessel

dropping out of hyperspace, to those in the arrival zone, had there been any witnesses: nothing there, then something, an instantaneous transition.

In the bridge sat the ancient yacht's sole occupant, a teenage girl wearing a battered combat vac suit. She looked from sensor to sensor, uncertain and slow because of her unfamiliarity with this model of spacecraft. Too, there was something like shock in her eyes.

Finally satisfied that no other ship had dropped out of hyperspace nearby, or was likely to creep up on her in this remote location, she sat back in her pilot's seat and tried to get her thoughts in order.

Her name was Vestara Khai, and she was a Sith of the Lost Tribe. She was a proud Sith, not one to hide under false identities and concealing robes until some decades-long grandiose plan neared completion, and now she had even more reason than usual to swell with pride. Mere hours before, she and her Sith Master, Lady Rhea, had confronted Jedi Grand Master Luke Skywalker. Lady Rhea and Vestara had fought the galaxy's most experienced, most famous Jedi to a standstill. Vestara had even *cut* him, a graze to the cheek and chin that had splattered her with blood—blood she had later tasted, blood she wished she could take a sample of and keep forever as a souvenir.

But then Skywalker had shown why he carried that reputation. A moment's distraction, and suddenly Lady Rhea was in four pieces, each drifting in a separate direction, and Vestara was hopelessly outmatched. She had saluted and fled.

Now, having taken a space yacht that had doubtless been old when her great-great-great-grandsires were newborn, but which, to her everlasting gratitude, held in its still-functioning computer the navigational secrets of the mass of black holes that was the Maw, she was

free. And the impossible weight of her reality and her responsibility were settling upon her.

Lady Rhea was dead. Vestara was alone, and her pride at Lady Rhea's accomplishment, at her own near success in the duel with the Jedi, was not enough to wash away the sense of loss.

Then there was the question of what to do next, of where to go. She needed to be able to communicate with her people, to report on the incidents in the Maw. But this creaking, slowly deteriorating SoroSuub StarTracker space yacht did not carry a hypercomm unit. She'd have to put in to some civilized planet to make contact. That meant arriving unseen, or arriving and departing so swiftly that the Jedi could not detect her in time to catch her. It also meant acquiring sufficient credits to fund a secret, no-way-to-trace-it hypercomm message. All of these plans would take time to bring to reality.

Vestara knew, deep in her heart, and within the warning currents of the Force, that Luke Skywalker intended to track her to her homeworld of Kesh. How he planned to do it, she didn't know, but her sense of paranoia, trained at the hands of Lady Rhea, burned within her as though her blood itself were acid. She had to find some way to outwit a Force user several times her age, renowned for his skills.

She needed to go someplace where Force users were relatively commonplace. Otherwise, any use by her of the Force would stand out like a signal beacon to experienced Jedi in the vicinity. There weren't many such places. Coruscant was the logical answer. But if her trail began to lead toward the government seat of the Galactic Alliance, Skywalker could warn the Jedi there and Vestara would face a nearly impossible-to-bypass network of Force users between her and her destination.

The current location of the Jedi school was not known. Hapes was ruled by an ex-Jedi and was rumored to harbor more Force sensitives, but it was such a security-conscious civilization that Vestara doubted she could accomplish her mission there in secrecy.

Then the answer came to her, so obvious and so perfect that she laughed out loud.

But the destination she'd thought of wouldn't be on a galactic map as old as the one in the antique yacht she commanded. She'd have to go somewhere and get a map update. She nodded, her pride, sense of loss, and paranoia all fading as she focused on her new task.

TRANSITORY MISTS

Jedi Knight Leia Organa Solo sat at the *Millennium Falcon's* communications console. She frowned, her lips pursed as though she were solving an elaborate mathematical equation, as she read and re-read the text message the *Falcon* had just received via hypercomm.

The silence that had settled around her eventually drew her husband, Han Solo, to her side; his boyish, often insensitive persona was in part a fabrication, and he well knew and could sense his wife's moods. The chill and silence of her complete concentration usually meant trouble. He waved a hand between her eyes and the console monitor. "Hey."

She barely reacted to his presence. "Hm."

"New message?"

"From Ben."

"Another letter filled with teenage talk, I assume. Girls, speeders, allowance woes—"

Leia ignored his joking. "Sith," she said.

"And Sith, of course." Han sat in the chair next to

hers but did not assume his customary slouch; the news kept his spine rigid. “They found a new Sith Lord?”

“Worse, I think.” Finally some animation returned to Leia’s voice. “They’ve found an ancient installation at the Maw and were attacked by a gang of Sith. A whole strike team. With the possibility of more out there.”

“I thought Sith ran in packs of two. Vape both of ’em and their menace is ended for all time, at least for a few years, until two more show up.” Han tried to keep his voice calm, but the last Sith to bring trouble to the galaxy had been Jacen Solo, his and Leia’s eldest son. Though Jacen had been dead for more than two years, the ripples of the evil he had done were still causing damage and heartache throughout the settled galaxy. And both his acts and his death had torn a hole in Han’s heart that felt like it would last forever.

“Yeah, well, no. Apparently not anymore. Ben also says—and we’re not to let Luke know that he did—that Luke is exhausted. Really exhausted, like he’s had the life squeezed out of him. Ben would like us to sort of drift near and lend Luke some support.”

“Of course.” But then Han grimaced. “Back to the Maw. The only place gloomy enough to make its next door neighbor, Kessel, seem like a garden spot.”

Leia shook her head. “They’re tracking a Sith girl who’s on the run. So it probably won’t be the Maw. It may be a planet full of Sith.”

“Ah, good.” Han rubbed his hands together as if anticipating a fine meal or a fight. “Well, why not. We can’t go back to Coruscant until we’re ready to mount a legal defense. Daala’s bound to be angry that we stole all the Jedi she wanted to deep-freeze.”

Finally Leia smiled and looked at Han. “One good thing about the Solos and Skywalkers. We never run out of things to do.”

CORUSCANT**Jedi Temple**

Master Cilghal, Mon Calamari and most proficient medical doctor among the current generation of Jedi, paused before hitting the console button that would erase the message she had just spent some time decrypting. It had been a video transmission from Ben Skywalker, a message carefully rerouted through several hypercomm nodes and carefully staged so as not to mention that it was for Cilghal's tympanic membranes or, in fact, for anyone on Coruscant.

But its main content was meant for the Jedi, and Cilghal repeated it as a one-word summation, making the word sound like a vicious curse: "*Sith.*"

The message had to be communicated throughout the Jedi Order. And on review, there was nothing in it that suggested she couldn't preserve the recording, couldn't claim that it had been forwarded to her by a civilian friend of the Skywalkers. Luke Skywalker was not supposed to be in contact with the Jedi Temple, but this recording was manifestly free of any proof that the exiled Grand Master exerted any influence over the Order. She could distribute it.

And she would do so, right now.

DEEP SPACE NEAR KESSEL

Jade Shadow, one-time vehicle of Mara Jade Skywalker, now full-time transport and home to her widower and son, dropped from hyperspace into the empty blackness well outside the Kessel system. It hung suspended there for several minutes, long enough for one of its occupants to gather from the Force a sense of his own life's blood that had been in the vicinity, then it

turned on a course toward Kessel and vanished again into hyperspace.

JADE SHADOW

In Orbit Above Kessel

Ben Skywalker shouldered his way through the narrow hatch that gave access to his father's cabin. A red-headed teen of less than average height, he was well muscled in a way that his anonymous black tunic and pants could not conceal.

On the cabin's bed, under a brown blanket, lay Luke Skywalker. Similar in build to his son, he wore the evidence of many more years of hard living, including ancient, faded scars on his face and the exposed portions of his arms. Not obvious was the fact that his right hand, so ordinary in appearance, was a prosthetic.

Luke's eyes were closed but he stirred. "What did you find out?"

"I reached Nien Nunb." Nunb, the Sullustan co-owner and manager of one of Kessel's most prominent mineworks, had been a friend of the Solos and Skywalkers for decades. "That yacht did make landfall. The pilot gave her name as Captain Khai. She somehow scammed a port worker into thinking she'd paid for a complete refueling when she hadn't—"

Luke smiled. "The Force can have a—"

"Yeah, so can a good-looking girl. Anyway, what's interesting is that she got a galactic map update. Nunb looked at the transmission time on that to determine that it was pretty comprehensive. In other words, she didn't concentrate on any one specific area or route. No help there."

"But it suggests that she did need some of the newer information. New hyperspace routes or planetary listings."

“Right.”

“And she’s gone?”

“Headed out as soon as her yacht was refueled. By the way, its name is *She’s a Chancer*.”

“Somehow appropriate.” Finally Luke did open his eyes, and Ben was once again struck by how tired his father looked, tired to the bone and to the spirit. “I can still feel her path. I’ll be up in a minute to lay in a course.”

“Right. Don’t push yourself.” Ben backed out of the cabin and its door slid shut.

SEVERAL DAYS LATER

Jade Shadow, In High Dathomir Orbit

Luke stared at the mottled, multicolored world of Dathomir through the forward viewport. He nodded, feeling slightly abashed. Of *course* it was Dathomir.

Ben, seated to Luke’s left in the pilot’s seat, peered at him. “What is it, Dad?”

“I’m just feeling a little stupid. There’s no world better suited to be the home of this new Sith order than Dathomir. I should have realized it long before we were on our final leg here.”

“How so?”

“There are a lot of Force-sensitives in the population, most of whom are trained in the so-called witchcraft of Dathomir. There’s not a lot of government oversight to detect a growing order within the population. There are lots of individual, secretive tribes.” Luke paused to consider. “Jacen was here for a while on his five-year travels. I wonder what he learned and whether it relates to the Maw . . . And there are mentions in ancient records that there was a Sith academy here long, long ago.”

Ben nodded. “Well, I’ll prep Mom’s Headhunter and get down there. I’ll be your eyes and ears on the ground.”

Luke gave his son a confused look. "I'm not going down with you? I'm feeling much better. Much more rested."

"Yeah, but there's a Jedi school down there. The terms of your exile say that you can't—"

Luke grinned and held up a hand, cutting off his son's words. "You're a little bit behind the times, Ben. Maybe you need your own galactic map updated. More than two years ago, when the Jedi turned against Jacen at Kuat—"

"Yeah, and we set up shop on Endor for a while. What about it?"

"We pulled everyone out of the Dathomir school at the time. Jacen's government shut the school down. The Jedi have yet to reopen it."

Comprehension dawned on Ben's face. "So there's no school, and it's legal for you to visit."

"Yes."

"That's kind of getting by on a technicality, isn't it?"

"All law is technicality, Ben. Get authorization for landing."

DATHOMIR

Half an hour later, Luke had to admit that he was wrong. *Most* of law was technicality. The rest was special cases, and he, apparently, was a special case.

He stood on the parking field of the Dathomiri spaceport. Perhaps "spaceport" was too generous a term. It was a broad, sunny field, grassy in some spots, muddy in others, with thruster scorch marks here and there. Dull gray permacrete domes, most of them clearly prefabricated, dotted the field; the largest was some sort of administrative building, the smaller ones hangars for vehicles no larger than shuttles and starfighters. A tall mesh durasteel fence surrounded the

complex, elevated watchtowers dotting its length, and Luke could see the wiring leading to one of the perma-concrete domes that marked it as electrified. The spaceport facilities offered little shade, so the Skywalkers stood in the darkness cast by *Jade Shadow*, but even without the heat of direct sunlight, the moist, windless air was still as oppressive as a blanket.

Luke poured thoughts of helpfulness and reasonability into the Force, but it was no use. The man before him, nearly two skinny meters of red-headed obstructiveness, would not yield a centimeter.

The man, who had given his name as Tarth Vames, again waved his datapad beneath Luke's nose. "It's simple. That vehicle—" His wave indicated *Jade Shadow*. "Neither it, nor anything with an enclosed or enclosable interior, can be inland under your control or your kid's." He turned his attention to Ben, who stood, arms folded across his chest, beside his father. Ben glared but did not reply.

Luke sighed. "Is any other visitor to Dathomir operating under that restriction?"

"Don't think so, no."

"Then why us?"

Vames thumbed the datapad keyboard so that the message scrolled downward several screens. "Here, right here. An enclosed vehicle, according to these precedents—there's about eight screens of legal precedents—can be interpreted as a mobile school, especially if *you're* in it, especially if its presence constitutes a continuation of a school that's been here in the past."

"This is harassment." Ben's words were quiet, but loud enough for Vames to hear.

The tall man glowered at Ben. "Of course it's not harassment. The order came specifically from Chief of State Daala's office. Public officials at that level don't harass."

Ben rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

"Ben." Luke added a chiding tone to his voice. "No point in arguing. Vames, are you also prohibited from answering a few questions?"

"Always happy to help. So long as it's within latitudes permitted by the regulations."

"Within the last couple of days, have you seen any sign of a dilapidated yacht called *She's a Chancer*?" Luke knew the yacht had to be here; he had run his blood trail to ground on Dathomir, and the girl had not departed this world. But anything this man could add to his meager store of knowledge might help.

Vames entered the ship name in his datapad, then shook his head. "No vehicle under that name made legal landfall."

"Ah."

"Dilapidated, you say? A yacht?"

"That's right."

Vames keyed in some more information. "Last night, shortly after dusk, local time, a vehicle with the operational characteristics of a SoroSuub yacht made a sudden descent from orbit, overflew the spaceport here, and headed north. There was some comm chatter from the pilot about engines on runaway, that she couldn't cut them or bring her repulsors online for landing."

Ben frowned at that. "Last night? And you didn't send out a rescue party?"

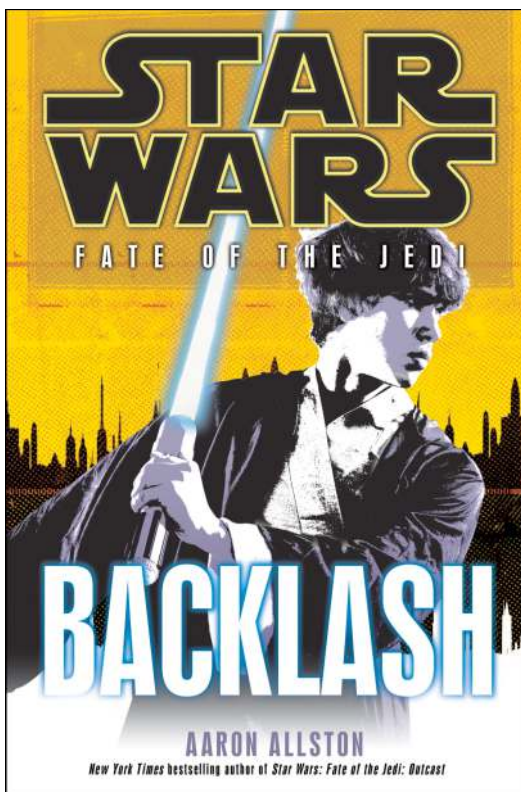
"Of course we did. As per regulation. Couldn't find the crash site. No further communication from the vehicle. We still have searchers up there. But no luck."

"Actually, that *is* helpful." Luke turned to his son. "Ben, no enclosed vehicles."

"Yeah?"

"Rent us a couple of speeder bikes, would you?"

Ben grinned. "Yes, sir."



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