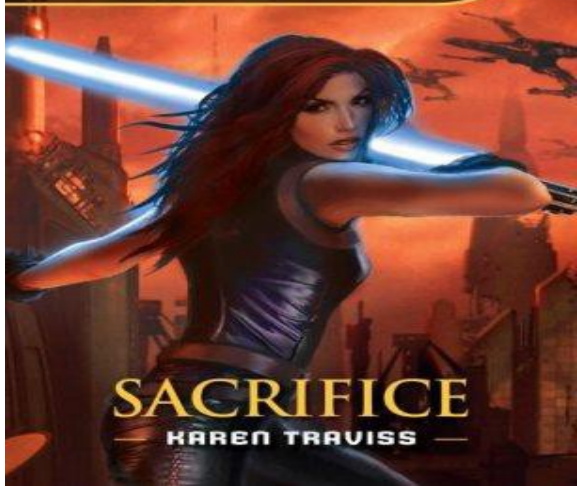


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



**STAR
WARS**

LEGACY OF THE FORCE



SACRIFICE

KAREN TRAVISS

Star Wars

:

SACRIFICE

Legacy of the Force -05

Karen Traviss

dramatis personae

Ben Skywalker; junior GAG officer (human male)

Boba Fett; Mandalore and semi-retired bounty hunter
(human male)

Cal Omas; Chief of State, Galactic Alliance (human
male)

Cha Niathal; admiral, Galactic Alliance (Mon Calamari
female)

Dinua Jeban; Mandalorian soldier (human female)

Dur Gejjen; Prime Minister, Corellia (human male)

Ghes Orade; Mandalorian soldier (human male)

Goran Beviin; Mandalorian soldier (human male)

Jacen Solo; Jedi Knight (human male)

Jaina Solo; Jedi Knight (human female)

Jori Lekauf; GAG corporal (human male)

Leia Organa Solo; Jedi Knight, copilot, Millennium Falcon (human female)

Lon Shevu; GAG captain (human male)

Luke Skywalker; Jedi Grand Master (human male)

Lumiya; Dark Lady of the Sith (human female)

Mara Jade Skywalker; Jedi Master (human female)

Medrit Beviin; Mandalorian soldier (human male)

Mirta Gev; bounty hunter, Boba Fett's granddaughter
(human female)

Novoc Vevut; Mandalorian soldier (human male)

P

rologue

THE SKYWALKERS' BEDROOM,

ROTUNDA ZONE, CORUSCANT: 0300 HOURS

This is going to be another sleepless night.

But should I have killed him?

Maybe I should try some meds. Warm milk, even.

I've taken a lot of lives. Ever since Ben asked us how many, I've been counting.

Maybe Luke's been adding up the tally, too. But he hasn't mentioned it since.

Where's Ben ?

I was better placed than anyone to assassinate Palpatine.
Now I look back on it

and wonder how history would have turned out if I'd
come to my senses and killed him

when I had the chance. I'd have been a traitor then; I'd
be a hero now. And he'd still be

dead either way. Perspective is a funny thing.

How many people died because I didn't make that call? I
didn't even realize that I

could.

Ben, I feel you're alive. But where are you? It's been
days.

So . . . how would I have known when it was the only
option left?

When things had gone too far, and someone had to do it? And how come Luke is

sleeping like a comatose nerf? I wish I could. If I switch on the holonews, though, even

without the audio, it might disturb him. Meditation isn't working, either. Maybe I

should just get up and go for a walk.

Ben . . . if Jacen doesn't know where you are, what are you up to?

I have to stop doing this.

He's a smart kid and he's been trained by the best. He'll be okay. And maybe he

knows now that killing someone is a split second, a heartbeat, a thing you're trained to

do until you don't stop to debate it, and then it can't ever be undone. Now that he's

killed for himself, and knows the mark it leaves in your head, perhaps he won't judge me or his father harshly.

That's his legacy from Mom and Dad: assassin, freedom fighter, soldier, call it

what you will. It all ends in a body count. Ben's joined the family business.

But I don't know what he's doing or even where he is right now. I'm worried sick.

I don't care how strong his Force powers are. Jedi die like everyone else, and it's a big

and pitiless galaxy, and he's just a kid. My kid.

Ben, if you can feel me, reach back. Let me know you're okay.

Luke never believes me when I tell him he snores. He

snores, all right.

Ben . . .

"You okay?" Luke's awake. He can do that without warning. Bang

-he just snaps

alert. "It's the middle of the night."

"I know."

"You're worrying about Ben."

"No, he can look after himself." Why do I say that? Luke knows what I'm

thinking. "I shouldn't have eaten so late."

"I'm worried about him, too." He punches the pillow into a more comfortable

shape and buries his head in it. "But he's okay. I can still feel him."

Nothing is okay now.

Luke knows it. I know it. The whole family knows it.

There's a war going on across the galaxy, but it's the war within my family that I

care about most. My son's a stranger most days.

And Jacen . . .

I don't think I know Jacen Solo at all. And Lumiya . . .

She tried to kill my kid. For that, sweetheart, you're going to have to answer to

me. I'm coming for you, and soon.

I think I can get some sleep now. I feel more relaxed already.

Chapter one

He will choose the fate of the weak.

He will win and break his chains.

He will choose how he will be loved.

He will strengthen himself through sacrifice.

He will make a pet.

He will strengthen himself through pain.

He will balance between peace and conflict.

He will know brotherhood.

He will remake himself.

He will immortalize his love.

- "Common Themes in Prophecies Recorded, in the
Symbology of Knotted

Tassels;" by Dr. Heilan Rotham, University of
Pangalactic Cultural Studies. Call for

papers: the university invites submissions from
khipulogists and fiber-record analysts

on the subject of the remaining untranslated tassels from
the Lorrd Artifact.

Symposium dates may change, subject to current security
situation.

SITH MEDITATION SPHERE,

HEADING, CORUSCANT-ESTIMATED

It was odd having to trust a ship. Ben Skywalker was
alone in the vessel he'd

found on Zioist, trusting it to understand that he wanted it
to take him home. No

navigation array, no controls, no pilot's seat . . . nothing.
Through the bulkheads he

could see stars as smeared points of light, but he'd
stopped finding the ship's

transparency unsettling. The hull was there. He could both see it and not see it. He felt

he was in the heart of a hollowed red gem making its sedate way back to the Core.

And there was no yoke or physical control panel, so he had to think his command.

The strange ship, more like a ball of rough red stone than a vessel made in a shipyard,

responded to the Force.

Can't you go faster? I'll be an old man by the time I get back.

The ship felt instantly annoyed. Ben listened. In his mind, the ship spoke in a male

voice that had no sound or real form, but it spoke: and it wasn't amused by his

impatience. It showed him streaked white lights streaming

from a central point in a

black void, a pilot's view of hyperspace, and then an explosion.

"Okay, so you're going as fast as you can . . ." Ben felt the ship's brief satisfaction

that its idiot pilot had understood. He wondered who'd made it. It was hard not to think

of it as alive, like the Yuuzhan Vong ships, but he settled for seeing it as a droid, an

artifact with a personality and-yes, emotions. Like Shaker.

Sorry, Shaker. Sorry to leave you to sort it all out.

The astromech droid would be fine, he knew it. Ben had dropped him off on

Drewwa. That was where Shaker came from, like Kiara, and so they were both home

now. Astromechs were good, reliable, sensible units, and Shaker would hand her over

to someone to take care of her, poor kid . . .

Her dad's dead and her whole life's upended. They were just used to lure me to

Ziost so someone could try to kill me. Why? Have I made that many enemies already?

The ship felt irritated again, leaving Ben with the impression that he was being

whiny, but he said nothing. Ben didn't enjoy having his thoughts examined. He made a

conscious effort to control his wandering mind. The ship knew his will, spoken or

unspoken, and he still wasn't sure what the consequences of that might be. Right then,

it made him feel invaded and the relief at finding the

it made him feel invaded, and the relief at making the ancient ship and managing to

escape Ziost in it had given way to worry, anger, and resentment.

And impatience. He had a comlink, but he didn't want to advertise his presence in

case there were other ships pursuing him. He'd destroyed one. That didn't mean there

weren't others.

The Amulet wasn't that important, so why am I a target now?

The ship wouldn't have gone any faster if he'd had a seat and a yoke to occupy

himself, but he wouldn't have felt so lost. He could almost hear Jacen reminding him

that physical activity was frequently displacement, and that he needed to develop better

mental discipline to rise above fidgeting restlessness. An
unquiet mind wasn't

receptive, he said.

Ben straightened his legs to rub a sore knee, then settled
again cross-legged to try

meditating. It was going to be a long journey.

The bulkheads and deck were amber pumice, and from
time to time, the surfaces

seemed to burn with a fire embedded in the material.
Whoever had made it had had a

thing about flames. Ben tried not to think flame, in case
the ship interpreted it as a

command.

But it wasn't that stupid. It could almost think for him.

He reached inside his tunic and felt the Amulet the stupid

He reached inside his tunic and for the Amulet, the stupid worthless thing that

didn't seem to be an instrument of great Sith power after all, just a fancy bauble that

Kiara's dad had been sent to deliver. Now the man was dead, all because of Ben, and

the worst thing was that Ben didn't know why.

I need to find Jacen.

Jacen wasn't stupid, either, and it was hard to believe he'd been duped about the

Amulet. Maybe it was part of some plan; if it was, Ben hoped it was worth Faskus's life

and Kiara's misery.

That's my mission: put the Amulet of Kalara in Jacen's hands. Nothing more,

nothing less.

Jacen could be anywhere now: in his offices on Coruscant, on the front line of

some battle, hunting subversives. Maybe this weird Force-controlled ship could tap in

and locate him. He'd be on the holonews. He always was: Colonel Jacen Solo, head of

the Galactic Alliance Guard, all-around public hero holding back the threats of a

galaxy. Okay, I'm feeling sorry for myself. Stop it. He couldn't land this ship on a

Coruscant strip and stroll away from it as if it were just a TIE fighter he'd salvaged.

People would ask awkward questions. He wasn't even sure what it was. And that meant

it was one for Jacen to sort out.

"Okay " Ben said aloud "Can you find Jacen Solo? Have

any, Ben said aloud. Can you find him? Have you got a way of

scanning comlinks? Can you find him in the Force?"

The ship suggested he ought to be able to do that himself. Ben concentrated on

Jacen's face in his mind, and then tried to visualize the Anakin Solo, which was harder

than he thought.

The sphere ship seemed to be ignoring him. He couldn't feel its voice; even when

it wasn't addressing him or reacting to him, there was a faint background noise in his

mind that gave him the feeling the vessel was humming to itself, like someone

occupied with a repetitive task.

"Can you do it?" If it can't, I'll try to land inside the GAG

compound and hope for

the best. "You don't want Galactic Alliance engineers crawling all over you with

hydrospanners, I bet."

The ship told him to be patient, and that it had nothing a hydro-spanner could grip

anyway.

Ben occupied himself with trying to pinpoint Jacen before the ship could. But

Jacen's trick of hiding in the Force had become permanent; Ben found he was

impossible to track unless he wanted to be found, and right then there was nothing of

him, not a whisper or an echo. Ben thought he might have more luck persuading the

ship to seek holonews channels-or maybe it was so old

that it didn't have the

technology to find those frequencies.

Hey, come on. If it managed to destroy a freighter on the power of my thoughts

alone, it can find a holonews signal.

Ah, said the ship.

Ben's mind was suffused with a real sense of discovery. The ship dropped out of

hyperspace for a moment and seemed to cast around, and then it felt as if it had found

something. The starfield-visible somehow, even though the fiery, rocky bulkheads

were still there-skewed as the ship changed course and jumped back into hyperspace.

It radiated a sense of happy satisfaction, seeming almost .

. . excited.

"Found him?"

The ship said it had found what it was seeking. Ben decided not to engage it in a

discussion of how it could find a shutdown Jacen hiding in the Force.

"Well, let me know when we get within ten thousand clicks," Ben said. "I can risk

using the comlink then."

The ship didn't answer. It hummed happily to itself, silent but filling Ben's head

with ancient harmonies of a kind he'd never imagined sounds could create.

COLONEL JACEN SOLO'S CABIN, STAR DESTROYER ANAKIN SOLO.

EXTENDED COURSE, HEADING 000 -

CORUSCANT, VIA THE CONTRUUM SYSTEM

None of the crew of the Anakin Solo seemed to find it odd that the ship was taking

an extraordinarily circuitous course back to Coruscant.

Jacen sensed the general resigned patience. It was what they expected from the

head of the Galactic Alliance Guard, and they asked no questions. He also sensed Ben

Skywalker, and it was taking every scrap of his concentration to focus on his apprentice

and locate him.

He's okay. I know it. But something didn't go as planned.

Jacen homed in on a point of blue light on the bridge repeater set in the bulkhead.

He felt Ben at the back of his mind the way he might
smell a familiar but elusive scent,

the kind that was so distinctive as to be unmistakable.
Unharmmed, alive, well-but

something wasn't right. The disturbance in the Force-a
faint prickling sharpness at the

back of his throat that he'd never felt before-made Jacen
anxious; these days he didn't

like what he didn't know. It was a stark contrast with the
days when he had wandered

the galaxy in search of the esoteric and the mysterious for
the sake of new Force

knowledge. Of late, he wanted certainty. He wanted
order, and order of his own

making.

I wasn't ridding the galaxy of chaos then. Times have

those on the operations consoles at the heart of the ship.
He'd started to lose the habit of

waiting for the Force to reveal things to him. It was easy
to do after taking so much into

his own hands and forcing destiny in the last few months.

Somewhere in the Anakin Solo, he felt Lumiya as a
swirling eddy eating away at a

riverbank. He let go and magnified his presence in the
Force.

Ben . . . Pm here, Ben . . .

The more Jacen relaxed and let the Force sweep him up-
and it was now hard to

let go and be swept, much harder than harnessing its
power-the more he had a sense

of Ben being accompanied. Then . . . then he had a sense
of Ben seeking him out,

groping to find him.

He has something with him. Can't be the Amulet, of course. He'll be angry I sent

him on an exercise in the middle of a war. I'll have to explain that very, very carefully. .

.
It had just been a feint to get him free of Luke and Mara for a while, to give him

some space to be himself. Ben wasn't the Skywalkers' little boy any longer. He would

take on Jacen's mantle one day, and that wasn't a task for an overprotected child who'd

never been allowed to test himself far from the overwhelmingly long shadow of his

Jedi Grand Master father.

Maybe a lot tougher than they think. Aunt's name Ben?

You're a lot tougher than they think. Aren't you, Ben?

Jacen felt the faint echo of Ben turn back on him and become an insistent pressure

at the back of his throat. He took a breath. Now they both knew they were looking for

each other. He snapped out of his meditation and headed for the bridge.

"All stop." The bridge was in semi-darkness, lit by the haze of soft green and blue

light spilling from status displays that drained the color from the faces of the

handpicked, totally loyal crew. Jacen walked up to the main viewport and stared out at

the stars as if he might see something. "Hold this station. We're waiting for ... a ship, I

believe."

Lieutenant Tebut, current officer of the watch, glanced up from the console

without actually raising her head. It gave her an air of disapproval, but it was purely a

habit. "If you could narrow that down, sir . . .,"

"I don't know what kind of ship," Jacen said, "but I'll know it when I see it."

"Right you are, sir."

They waited. Jacen was conscious of Ben, much more focused and intense now, a

general mood of business-as-usual in the ship, and the undercurrent of Lumiya's

restlessness. Closing his eyes, he felt Ben's presence more strongly than ever.

Tebut put her fingertip to her ear as if she'd heard something in her bead-sized

earpiece. "Unidentified vessel on intercept course. Range ten thousand kilometers off

the port beam."

A pinpoint of yellow light moved against a constellation of colored markers on

the holomonitor. The trace was small, perhaps the size of a starfighter, but it was a ship,

closing in at speed.

"I don't know exactly what it is, sir." The officer sounded nervous. Jacen was

briefly troubled to think he now inspired fear for no apparent reason. "It doesn't match

any heat signature or drive profile we have. No indication if it's armed. No transponder

signal, either."

It was one small vessel, and this was a Star Destroyer. It was a curiosity rather

than a threat. But Jacen took nothing for granted; there were always traps. This didn't

feel like one, but he still couldn't identify that otherness he sensed. "It's decelerating,

sir."

"Let me know when you have a visual." Jacen could almost taste where it was and

considered bringing the Anakin Solo about so he could watch the craft become a point

of the reflected light of Contruum's star, then expand into a recognizable shape. But he

didn't need to; the tracking screen gave him a better view. "Ready cannons and don't

open fire except on my order."

In Jacen's throat, on a line level with the base of his skull,
there was the faint

tingling of someone's anxiety. Ben knew the Anakin Solo
was getting a firing solution

on him.

Easy, Ben . . .

"Contact in visual range, sir." Tebut sounded relieved.
The screen refreshed,

changing from a schematic to a real image that only she
and

"You did well, Ben."

"I found it on Zios, in case you want to know. And that's
where I got the ship,

too. Someone tried to kill me, and I grabbed the first
thing I could to escape."

The attempt on Ben's life didn't hit Jacen as hard as the mention of Ziost-the Sith

homeworld. Jacen hadn't bargained on that. Ben wasn't ready to hear the truth about the

Sith or that he was apprenticed-informally or not-to the man destined to be the

Master of the order. Jacen felt no reaction from Lumiya whatsoever, but she had to be

hearing this. She was still lurking.

"It was a dangerous mission, but I knew you could handle it." Lumiya, you

arranged this. What's your game'? "Who tried to kill you?"

"A Bothan set me up." Ben said. "Dyur. He paid a courier to take the Amulet to

Ziost, framed him as the thief, and the guy ended up dead. I got away with the Bothan

dead. I got even with the Botnan,

though-I blew up the ship that was targeting me. I hope it was Dyr's."

"How?"

Ben gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. "It's armed. It seems to have

whatever weapons you want."

"Well done." Jacen got the feeling that Ben was suspicious of the whole galaxy

right then. His blue eyes had a gray cast, as if someone had switched off the

enthusiastic light in him. That was what made him look older; a brush with a hostile

world, another step away from his previous protected existence-and an essential part

of his training. "Ben, treat this as top secret. The ship is

now classified, like your

mission. Not a word to anyone."

"Like I was going to write to Mom and Dad about it . . . what I did on my

vacation, by Ben Skywalker, age fourteen and two weeks." Ouch. Ben was no longer

gung-ho and blindly eager to please . . . but that was a good thing in a Sith apprentice.

Jacen changed tack; birthdays had a way of making you take stock if you spent them

somewhere unpleasant. "How did you fly this? I've never seen anything like it."

Ben shrugged and folded his arms tight across his chest, his back to the vessel, but

he kept looking around as if to check that it was still there. "You think what you want it

to do, and it does it. You can even talk to it. But it doesn't have any proper controls."

He glanced over his shoulder again. "It talks to you through your thoughts. And it

doesn't have a high opinion of me."

A Sith ship. Ben had flown a Sith ship back from Ziost. Jacen resisted the

temptation to go inside and examine it. "You need to get back home. I told your parents

I didn't know where you were, and hinted they might have made you run off by being

overprotective."

Ben looked a little sullen. "Thanks."

"It's true, though. You know it is." Jacen realized he hadn't said what really

mattered. "Ben, I'm proud of you."

He sensed a faint glow of satisfaction in Ben that died down almost as soon as it

began. "I'll file a full report if you want."

"As soon as you can." Jacen steered him toward the hangar exit. "Probably better

that you don't arrive home in this ship. We'll shuttle you to the nearest safe planet, and

you can get a more conventional ride on a passenger flight."

"I need some credits for the fare. I'm fed up with stealing to get by."

"Of course." Ben had done the job, and proved he could survive on his wits. Jacen

realized the art of building a man was to push him hard enough to toughen him without

alienating him. It was a line he explored carefully. He fished in his pocket for a mix of

denominations in untraceable credcoins. "Here you go. Now get something to eat, too."

With one last look at the sphere ship, Ben gave Jacen a casual salute before

striding off in the direction of the stores turbolift. Jacen waited. The ship watched him:

he felt it, not alive, but aware. Eventually he heard soft footsteps on the deck behind

him, and the ship somehow seemed to ignore him and look elsewhere.

"A Sith meditation sphere," said Lumiya.

"An attack craft. A fighter."

"It's ancient, absolutely ancient." She walked up to it and placed her hand on the

hull. It seemed to have melted down into a near hemisphere, the vanes and-Jacen

assumed-systems masts on its keel tucked beneath it. Right then it reminded him of a

pet crouching before its master, seeking approval. It actually seemed to glow like a

fanned ember.

"What a magnificent piece of engineering." Lumiya's brow lifted, and her eyes

creased at the corners; Jacen guessed that she was smiling, surprised. "It says it's found

me."

It was an unguarded comment-rare for Lumiya-and almost an admission. Ben

had been attacked on a test that Lumiya had set up; the ship came from Ziost.

Circumstantially, it wasn't looking good. "It was searching for you?"

She paused again, listening to a voice he couldn't hear. "It says that Ben needed to

find you, and when it found you, it also recognized me as Sith and came to me for

instructions."

"How did it find me? I can't be sensed in the Force if I don't want to be, and I

didn't let myself be detected until-"

A pause. Lumiya's eyes were remarkably expressive. She seemed very touched by

the ship's attention. Jacen imagined that nobody-nothing-had shown any interest in

her well-being for a long, long time.

"It says you created a Force disturbance in the Gilatter system, and that a

combination of your . . . wake and the fact you were looking for the . . . redheaded

child . . . and the impression that the crew of your ship left in the Force made you

trackable before you magnified your presence."

"My, it's got a lot to say for itself."

"You can have it, if you wish."

"Quaint, but I'm not a collector." Jacen heard himself talking simply to fill the

empty air, because his mind was racing. I can be tracked. I can be tracked by the way

those around me react even though I'm concealed. Yes

those around the table, even though I'm concerned. Yes,
wake was the precise word. "It

seems made for you."

Lumiya took a little audible breath, and the silky dark
blue fabric across her face

sucked in for a moment to reveal the outline of her
mouth.

"The woman who's more machine, and the machine that's
more creature." She put

one boot on the ramp. "Very well, I'll find a use for this.
I'll take it off your hands, and

nobody need ever see it."

These days, Jacen was more interested by what Lumiya
didn't say than what she

did. There was no discussion of the test she'd set for Ben
and why it had taken him to

Ziost and into a trap. He teetered on the edge of asking her outright, but he didn't think

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he could listen to either the truth or a lie; both would rankle. He turned to go. Inside a

day, the Anakin Solo would be back on Coruscant and he would have both a war and a

personal battle to fight.

"Ask me," she called to his retreating back. "You know you want to."

Jacen turned. "What, whether you intended Ben to be killed, or who I have to kill

to achieve full Sith Mastery?"

"I know the answer to one but not the other."

Jacen decided there was a fine line between a realistically demanding test of Ben's

combat skills and deliberately trying to kill him. He wasn't sure if Lumiya's answer

would tell him what he needed to know anyway.

"There's another question," he said. "And that's how long I have before I face my

own test."

The Sith sphere ticked and creaked, flexing the upper section of its webbed wings.

Lumiya stood on the edge of the hatch and looked around for a moment, as if she was

nervous about entering the hull.

"If I knew when, I might also know who," she said. "But all I feel is soon, and

close." Something seemed to reassure her, and she paused as if listening again. Perhaps

the ship was offering its own opinion. "And you know that, too. Your impatience is burning you."

Of course it was: Jacen wanted an end to it all-to the fighting, the uncertainty, the chaos. The war beyond mirrored the struggle within.

Lumiya was telling the truth: soon.

MEETING OF THE CLANS, MANDALMOTORS
HALL, KELDABE,

CAPITAL OF MANDALORE

A hundred or so of the hardest-looking males and females that Fett had ever seen

were gathered in the stark charcoal-gray granite building that MandalMotors had

donated to the community.

The hardest face of all was that of his granddaughter.
Mirta Gev watched him

from the side of the meeting hall with his father's eyes.
My own eyes.

Fierfek, she really did have the Fett eyes. Maybe he was
seeing what wasn't really

there, but the look bored through into his soul anyway. It
was a look that said: You

failed. He didn't hear the murmur of voices around him,
just the soundless accusations

that his daughter Ailyn was dead, that he had never been
there for her until it was too

late, and that he might also be too late to start being a
worthy Mandalore. His father

had groomed him to be the best, and even if he'd never
mentioned being Mandalore one

day, it went with the legacy. Jaster's legacy.

Better be quick, then. I'm dying. I've got business to take care of. Priorities: a

cure, then find out what happened to my wife, what happened to Sintas Vel.

It wasn't that Mirta wouldn't tell him.

She didn't know. She had the heart-of-fire gem he'd given Sintas as a wedding gift,

but it had turned up at a dealer's shop. It was just bait. And he'd taken it.

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But, Fett being Fett, it was more than bait. It was a motivator: it was another piece

of evidence.

It's never too late to find out. I thought it was, but it's not.

The hubbub of the chieftains of the clans, heads of companies, and an assortment

of veteran mercenaries faded voice by voice into silence. They watched him warily.

Not all of them were human, either: a Togorian and a Mandallian, both wearing

impressive armor, leaned against the far wall, massive arms folded across their chests.

Species didn't matter much to Mandalorians. Culture defined them. Fett wondered what

that made him.

"Oya!" It was muttered at first, then shouted a few times. "Oya!" It was a word

with a hundred meanings for Mandalorians. This time it meant "Let's go, let's get on

with it." They always started their gatherings this way.

with it. They always started their gatherings this way, and this was the nearest

Mandalorians ever came to a senate. They didn't go in for procedural nicety.

A chieftain with an ornately shaved beard and an eye patch stood up to speak

without ceremony. "So, Mand'alor? he said. "Are we going to fight or what?"

"Who do you want to fight?" Fett noted that they reverted to Basic when

addressing him, in deference to his ignorance of Mando'a. "The Galactic Alliance?

Corellia? Some Force-forsaken pit on the Rim?"

"There's never been a war we haven't fought in."

"There is now. This isn't our fight. Mandalore's got its own troubles."

"The war's escalating. Their troubles might come and find us."

Fett stood by the long, narrow window that ran the height of the west-facing wall.

It was more like an arrow loop than a view on the city. Mandalorians built for defense,

and public buildings were expected to serve as citadels, even more so now. The

Yuuzhan Vong had wreaked terrible vengeance on Mandalore for its covert work for

the New Republic during the invasion, but the carnage had just made Mando'ade more

ferociously determined to stay put. The nomadic habit was still there: it was more about

a refusal to yield than love of the land. But they couldn't lose a third of the population

and shrug it off, not while many still remembered the Imperial occupation.

Sore losers, the Vong. But it's not like I had any alternative. Better the New Republic than the crab-boys.

Fett scanned the hall, aware of Mirta's fixed and almost baleful stare.

"What's the first rule of warfare?"

On seats, on benches, leaning in alcoves, or just standing with arms folded, the

leaders of Mandalorian society

-or as many as could get to Keldabe-watched him

carefully. Even the head of MandalMotors, Jir Yomaget, wore traditional armor. Most

had taken off their helmets, but some hadn't. That was okay by Fett. He kept his on,

too.

"What's in it for us," said a thickset human man leaning back in a chair that

seemed to have been cobbled together from crates.
"Second rule is how much is in it for

us."

"So . . . what is in it for us this time?"

Us. Fett was Mand'alor, chieftain of chieftains,
commander of supercommandos,

and he couldn't avoid the us any longer. He didn't feel
like us. He felt like an absent

husband who'd sneaked home to find an angry wife
demanding to know where he'd

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been all night not sure how to head off the inevitable

been all night, not sure how to head off the inevitable argument. They made him feel

uncomfortable. He examined the feeling to see what was causing it.

Not up to the job.

He might have been the best bounty hunter, but he didn't think he was the best

Mandalore, and that unsettled him because he had never been simply adequate. He

expected to excel. He'd taken on the job; now he had to live up to the title, which was

much, much easier in war than in peacetime.

Fenn Shysa must have thought he could do it, though. His dying wish was to have

Fett assume the title, whether he wanted it or not. Crazy barve.

The thickset Mando shrugged. "Credits, Mand'alor. We need currency, in case you hadn't noticed."

"To spend on importing food."

"That's the idea."

"I suppose that's one way of balancing supply and demand."

"What is?"

"Back one side or the other in this war. That'll reduce the number of mouths to feed. Dead men don't eat."

There were snickers of laughter and comments in Mando'a this time. Fett made a

mental note to program his helmet translator to deal with it, and that felt like the

ultimate admission of defeat for a leader: he couldn't speak the language of his own

people. But they didn't seem to care.

"I'm with the Mand'alor on this," said a hoarse male voice at the back of the

assembly. Fett recognized that one: Neth Bralor. He'd known a few Bralors in his time,

but they weren't all from the same clan. It was a common name, sometimes simply an

indication of roots in Norg Bral or another hill-fort town. "We lost nearly a million and

a half people fighting the vongese. That might be small change for Coruscant, but it's a

disaster for us. No more-not until we get Manda'yaim in order. We'll eat bas neral if

we have to."

A murmur of rumbling agreement rippled around the hall.
A few chieftains

slapped their gauntlets on their armor in approval. One of
them was the woman

commando Fett had met in Zerria's on Drall, Isko Talgal.
Her expression was still as

grim, graying black hair scraped back from her wind-
tanned face and braided with

silver beads, but she banged her fist on her thigh plate in
enthusiastic approval. Fett

wondered what she looked like when she was unhappy.

"You wanted a decision from me. You got it." Fett felt
time accelerating past him,

and it eroded what little patience he had. Every bone

in his body ached right through to his spine. "Galactic
Alliance or

Confederation-you think it's going to make any difference to us?"

"No," said another voice, thick with a northern Concordian accent. "Coruscant

won't be asking us to disarm anytime soon. They might need us if they get another

vongese war."

"Chakaare!" someone laughed. But the debate picked up pace, still mostly in

Basic.

"And what if the war comes too close to home? What if it spreads to a

neighboring system or two?"

"Even if we side with the Alliance, what's to say they won't turn on us and expect

us to toe their nice tidy disarmed line?"

"It's not disarmament they want, it's pooling every planet's assets into the GA

Defense Force, and we all know how slick and efficient that's going to be . . ."

Fett stood back and watched. It was both uplifting and entertaining in its way. It

was the kind of decision-making process that could happen only in a small population

of ferociously independent people who knew immediately when it was time to stop

being individuals and come together as a nation.

Funny, that's the last thing Mandalore is: a nation. Sometimes we fight on

different sides. We're scattered around the galaxy. We're not even one species. But we

know what we are and what we want, and that's not going to change anytime soon.

The arguments were all coming down to one thing. A lot of people needed the

credits. Times were still tough.

Fett brought his fist down hard on the nearest solid surface-a small table-and

the crack brought the hubbub of discussion to a halt.

"Mandalore has no position on the current war, and there'll be no divisions over

it," he said. "Anyone who wants to sell their services individually to either side-that's

your business. But not in Mandalore's name."

He looked for the cessation of argument from the sudden

He braced for the eruption of argument from the sudden silence, thumbs hooked

in his belt. His helmet's wide-angle vision caught a fully armored figure standing at the

rear of the hall. It wasn't always possible to tell if a Mando in armor was male or

female, but Fett was sure this was a man, medium height and with his hands clasped

behind his back. The left shoulder plate of his purple-black armor was a light metallic

brown. It wasn't unusual to see odd-colored plates, because many Mandalorians kept a

piece of a dead loved one's armor, but this was striking for a reason Fett couldn't work

out. Something glittered in the central panel of the man's breastplate, a tiny point of

light as the sun cut across the chamber in a shaft so sharp

and white that it seemed

solid.

I should do that. I should wear a piece of Dad's armor with my own, every day.

He felt bad that he didn't, but jerked his attention back to the meeting.

"That's okay, then," said a cheerful, white-haired man sitting a few paces from

him. A dark blue tattoo of a vine emerged from the top of his armor and ended under

his chin. Baltan Carid, that was his name. Fett had last seen him dispatching Yuuzhan

Vong with a battered Imperial-era blaster at Caluula Station. "That's all we needed to

know. That there's no ban on mercenary work."

"I'll make it clear to both sides that there's no official involvement in their

dispute," Fett said. "But if any of you want to get yourselves killed, it's your call."

"So we might see Mando fighting Mando in this aruetiise's war." Everyone

looked around at the man in the purple armor. Fett saw no need to learn the language,

but there were words he couldn't avoid: aruetiise. Non-Mandalorians. Occasionally

pejorative, but usually just a way of saying not one of us. "Hardly conducive to

restoring the nation, is it?"

"But fighting's our number one export," said Carid. "What do you want, make

Keldabe into a tourist spot or something?" He roared with laughter. "I can see it now

Visit Mandalore before Mandalore visits you. Take home some souvenirs-a slab of uj cake and a smack in the mouth."

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"Well, our economic policy right now seems to be to earn foreign credits . . . get killed . . . and neglect the planet."

Carid had a magnificent sneer. He was far more intimidating without a helmet.

"You got a better idea? Oh, wait-is this going to be the all-day diatribe on kadikla

self-determination and statehood? 'Cos I ain't getting any younger, son, and I'd like to

be home in time for dinner, 'cos my missus is making pea-flour dumplings."

That got a lot of laughs. Carid generally did. There were shouts and guffaws.

"Yeah, we know about the dumplings, Carid . . ."

But . . . kadikla. So the Mandalore-first movement had a name now, even its own

adjective, too. He hadn't come across Kad'ika yet, the man they said was driving the

new nationalism. Fett thought that was remiss of the man, seeing as he'd done just what

was asked of him and returned to lead Mandalore.

"Critical mass, ner vod." Purple Man ignored the howls of laughter. His voice had

the tone of someone who'd argued this many times before. "We have a population of

fewer than three million here, and maybe as many as three times that in diaspora. We

lost a lot of our best troops, our farmland's been poisoned, and our industrial

infrastructure is still shot to harem after ten years. So maybe this is the ideal time to

bring some people home. Gather in the exiles while the rest of the galaxy is busy."

Carid was focused on the debate now, and Fett was temporarily forgotten. "Yeah,

group up to make a nice easy target. All of us in one place."

"Nobody except the vongese has attacked us in a long time."

"The Empire gutted us. You've got a short memory. Or maybe you were still in

diapers when Shysa had to kick some pride back into us."

"Okay, so let's abandon Mandalore. Go totally nomad again. Keep moving. Rely

on the whim of every government except our own."

"Son, we are the shabla government," Carid said. "So what do you want to do

about it?"

"Consolidate Mandalore and the sector. Bring our people home, and build

something nobody's ever going to overrun again." Purple Man had a faint accent; a

little Coruscanti, a little Keldabian. "A citadel. A power base. So we choose when we

stay home and when we go expeditionary."

"Funny, I thought that was just what we were doing."

Fett watched the exchange, fascinated. Then he realized

everyone was staring at

him, waiting for him to respond-or at least to call a halt.
So this was leadership off the

battlefield. It was just like running his business, only more
... complex. More variables,

more unknowns-he hated unknowns-and something that
was utterly alien to him:

responsibility for other people, millions of them, but
people who could take care of

themselves and ran the place well enough without any
bureaucracy.

Or me. Do they need me at all?

"What's your name?" Fett asked.

Purple Man was leaning against the wall, but he pushed
himself away from it with

a shrug to stand upright. "Graad," he said.

"Okay, Graad, it's policy as of now. I'm asking for two million folks to return to

Mandalore. How many you think we'll get?" It made sense: the planet needed a

working population. It needed extra hands to clean up the soil that the vongese had

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poisoned and to cultivate the land left fallow by dead owners. But every Mandalorian

in the galaxy didn't add up to a single town on many planets. "We're still short on

credits until we become self-sufficient in food production again."

"We'll contribute half our profits," said the MandalMotors chief. "As long as we

can sell fighters and equipment to either side, of course."

"Business is business." Fett gave him an acknowledging nod. "I'll chip in a few

million creds, too."

Carid looked around him as if to single out anyone mad enough to dissent, but

everyone had what they wanted from the meeting. Mirta still managed to look baleful.

The slice of her mother's heart-of-fire stone dangled on a leather cord around her neck.

At least she had a decent helmet now, apparently her first, so that showed just how

much of a Mandalorian her father had been-or how little she'd seen of him.

Maybe Mando fathers have been disappointing her all her life.

"One last thing," Fett said. "I'm going to be away from base for a few days.

Uncontactable."

"How will we notice?" someone muttered.

It was a fair point. "So I'm not the governing kind. But I haven't let you down yet.

While I'm away, Goran Beviin stands in for me."

There was no dissent. Beviin was solid and trustworthy, and he didn't want to be

Mandalore. He was also a complete savage with a beskad, an ancient Mandalorian iron

saber, as many Yuuzhan Vong had discovered the hard way. Any argument about the

isolationist policy in Fett's absence wouldn't last long.

"We're done here," said Carid. "You give me the

inventory of all the farmland

lying fallow, and my clan will make sure it gets allocated to whoever returns to farm

it." He hung back for a moment and made an exaggerated job of replacing his helmet.

"I'm glad you brought Jango home, Mand'alor. It was the right thing to do."

Was it? Home for his father was Concord Dawn. It was right for Mandalore,

maybe. They liked their figureheads where they could see them, even their dead ones.

"Nobody has to listen to me if they don't feel like it."

"Never known you to stay out of a fight. You've got your reasons. That's why

we're listening." Carid paused. "I'm sorry about your daughter."

"Yeah." So everyone knew about Ailyn. Fett didn't remember telling anyone that

she was dead, let alone that Jacen Solo had killed her. Mandalore wasn't her home,

either; she wouldn't have appreciated ending up buried here. "And I bet you're all

wondering why that Jedi isn't a pile of smoking charcoal by now."

"Like I said, you have your reasons. Anything we can do-just say the word."

"His time will come. Leave him to me." But not now, Fett thought. He had to get

back to the hunt for a clone with gray gloves and his best chance of a cure for his

terminal illness.

As the hall cleared, Mirta was left standing alone, arms

folded, leaning against the

wall. "I wonder if Cal Omas has such an easy time in the Senate," she said.

"You can't rule Mandalorians. You just make sensible suggestions they want to

follow." Fett walked outside and swung his leg over the seat of the speeder that Beviin

had lent him, wincing behind his visor. He was close to giving in to daily painkillers.

"And since when have Mandalorians needed to be told what makes sense?"

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"Since they got in the habit of ba'slan shev'la when situations didn't look

winnable."

Fett remembered that phrase. Beviin had used it a lot in the Yuuzhan Vong war. It

translated as "strategic disappearance"-scattering and going to ground in uncertain

times. It was hard to wipe out a people that fragmented like mercury droplets and

waited for the right time to coalesce again. It wasn't retreat. It was lying in wait.

"Come on," he said. "I've got some leads to follow up on the clone."

Mirta scrambled onto the pillion seat. Her armor clanked against his. She had the

full set now, even a jet pack, courtesy of Beviin. "Has it ever taken you this long to

track somebody? It's been months."

Don't push it. "I make it about sixty-five days."

"You believe he exists, then."

"You wouldn't lie to me again, and you wouldn't make up the name Skirata."

"No. You want me to come with you?"

"You think I need a nurse?"

"I said I wouldn't lie to you again."

Fett almost wished he hadn't told her. He really should have told Beviin first. That

was a man he could trust. As the speeder swooped over Keldabe and out into the

countryside beyond, the scale of the Yuuzhan Vong's retribution became all too clear

again. The course of the winding Kelita River was visible for kilometers now because

most of the woodland surrounding it had been flattened.

Keldabe stood on a bend in the

river, a defiant flat-topped hill glittering with granite, and MandalMotors's hundred-

meter tower had somehow survived the war despite the damage it had sustained. The

shattered stone and scorch marks were still there as a reminder that Mandalore could be

battered, bruised, and temporarily subdued, but never completely conquered.

The small settlements of tree-homes in the branches of the slow-growing, ancient

veshok forest had been wiped off the face of the map. Beneath the speeder there were

no longer patches of crops in clearings. There was blackened soil and charcoal stumps

of trees, and still nothing grew, not even the seedlings that usually emerged after fires.

"Scum," Fett cursed. He banked the speeder sharply and heard Mirta hold her

breath. "They didn't even try to plant their Vong weeds here. They just poisoned the

soil."

It was a high price to pay for double-crossing the invaders. But the alternative

would have been much, much worse.

"No help from the New Republic or the GA?" Mirta said. "No reconstruction

funding like everyone else?"

"We didn't expect anything. And we didn't get it."

Fett gunned the speeder's drives and headed out over the countryside, mindful of

the fact that he'd have taken on the Vong Vong even

the fact that he'd have taken on the Yuuzhan Vong even if they'd been the New

Republic's best buddies. The Beviin-Vasur farm appeared in the distance almost on cue

as a kind of reassurance that the devastation wasn't global.

And there was Slave I, sitting on a makeshift landing pad. That was home. His

ship, his father's ship, the cockpit where he had spent literally years of his life.

"So am I coming with you or not?"

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Mirta was more trouble left to her own devices. Besides, he didn't want to let that

heart-of-fire necklace stray too far. It was the one link he had to finding out how Sintas

had died.

"Okay," he said. She was his grandchild, even if she had tried to kill him. He

didn't care about that, but he struggled to find that protective devotion he'd seen in his

own father. Something just didn't click. So he acted it out, because that was how he'd

learned everything that became second nature to him—he went through the motions

until it was part of him. He could learn to be a good grandfather, too. He could excel at

it. "What's the best way to find another bounty hunter?"

"Think like him?"

Fett shook his head and set the speeder down with a thud. He'd have to tell Beviin

where he was going. If anything happened to him, Corran

where he was going. If anything happened to him, Goran Beviin was his chosen

successor.

Fett hadn't told him yet, but Beviin took that kind of news in his stride.

"No," Fett said. "You hire him."

19

chapter two

If you can't beat them, divide them.

-Cal Omas, Chief of State, Galactic Alliance.

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF STATE, SENATE
BUILDING, CORUSCANT

"Not exactly our finest hour admiral."

Chief of State Cal Omas looked a much older man than he'd been just a few

months earlier. Cha Niathal prided herself on a decent understanding of human facial

expressions and the telltale little signs of fatigue and stress. Omas had them all: fluid-

filled bulges under his watery blue eyes, a peppering of reddish spots on his chin, and a

sour smell of caf when she got too close to him.

But mainly it was the eyes. Human eyes told her everything she needed to know.

When she glanced at Jacen Solo, he was a model of confidence and composure-

except for his eyes. There were no signs

of poor health, but he was far from the glacially calm facade he presented. She

could see the changes in the pupils of his dark eyes. Small almost imperceptible but

his pupils flickered, showing that some things got to him.

That was useful to know.

"We didn't lose the battle at Gilatter Eight," she said.

"Whatever the

Confederation claims."

"We didn't win it, either," said Omas. He'd developed a habit of moving sheets of

flimsi around his desk. He didn't need hard-copy records, but it seemed to give him

some comfort to handle them, as if they were the last tangible grip he had on his own

government. "Consider this a wash-up."

"We've had our wash-up," Jacen said. "We know what went wrong and why we

Call for a new leader."

tell for a trap."

"Poor intel," said Omas. "As a Jedi, do you not sense these ambushes?"

Niathal noted Jacen's three rapid blinks. There was little love lost between the two

men now. That remark really stung Jacen for some "reason, even though he was far too

smart to delude himself with ideas of omniscience.

"We're neither invincible nor infallible," he said softly. That was when he was at

his most lethal, when he sounded quietly reasonable. "I had unreliable intelligence, and

that's an occupational hazard. The fact that we got out in one piece is largely due to

Jedi skills. Ironically, my parents' and my uncle's skills . . ."

Don't mind me, Jacen. Or the fleet. "You're too modest, Colonel Solo," she said.

"I hear you fought quite remarkably."

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Jacen let the comment pass without reply or a self-effacing half smile, which was

his usual response. Omas flicked the controls of the holoscreen set in his office wall. A

fly-through image of a planet resolved into a cityscape; hololinks showed inset three-D

images of explosions and smoking skylines. "Now we have reports of fighting breaking

out on Ripoblus."

"Why?" Jacen asked. "Nobody in the Sepan system has any interest in the

Confederation. It's had no intelligence."

Confederation. I've had no intelligence-

"They don't need any love for either cause," said Niathal.

"We've reached the free-

for-all stage. What better time than during a civil war

to resurrect their dispute with Dimok? Like a cantina brawl. One fight breaks out

and everyone suddenly remembers they have a score to settle."

"There'll be plenty more me-too conflicts." Omas sighed.

"And we have to ask

where we draw the line."

Jacen looked as if he was studying the schematic of Ripoblus's capital. Niathal

judged that he was actually fretting about the limited scope of his intelligence.

"Chief of State, even the Empire never managed to stop

the Sepan wars, and it

was prepared to take far more extreme measures than we are," she said. "We should

resist any pressure to get involved. We're getting perilously close to overstretch."

Omas changed the holoinage to a tote board of the Senate composition. The

names of most of the member planets were listed in red, but some were in blue; there

were more blue names than she remembered from the last time she'd seen this list.

"Two more members seceded last night," Omas said. "Las Lagon and Beris.

Minor worlds, but let's do the arithmetic. The more planets that secede from the GA,

the fewer military assets I have to call on, and the more

assets there are that are

potentially available to the Confederation."

Jacen was a master of expressionless contempt. "I think I can work that out, yes."

"And you still believe in responding with maximum force-within the boundaries

of ethical treaties."

"Yes."

"Then we're on the downward spiral." Omas walked into the center of the room

and gave Niathal a glance that verged on pleading: Come on, you're the military, you

know this is true. "Sooner or later, secessions reach a point where the GA becomes the

rump-where the Confederation equals and then outnumbered us." Omas held up two

fingers and counted off theatrically. "Problem one: We would be outgunned. Problem

two: Where's our legitimacy? What peace would we be enforcing? "

Niathal decided to let Jacen respond and keep her powder dry. Omas had an

excellent point, but it was a politician's point, not a chief of staff's. Her job at that

moment was to decide how to use force to achieve Omas's objectives, not to define

what those objectives should be.

That was a battle for Jacen Solo. She watched.

"In that case," Jacen said, so softly that it was almost a whisper, "they can defeat

us without a shot being fired. They can break us with a

sheet of HIMS. I'd call that

surrender."

"I'd call it war-gaming the worst scenario." Omas looked to Niathal again. "And

you, Admiral, will know when we reach the military tipping point."

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Niathal had two strategies—one with all the GA pieces she had in play at the

current time, and one with Coruscant-based forces alone. It made sense to work on the

basis of the latter if support was falling away. She glanced at the list of red names and

the growing tally of blue ones while keeping an eye on Jacen—humans always had a

hard time working out where Mon Calamari were

looking-and realized that the graph

wouldn't be a straight line. If there was to be an erosion of the Alliance, it wouldn't be a

tidy progression; it would be a sudden collapse.

"That point hasn't come," she said at last. "I'll let you know as soon as I start

getting nervous. But I can tell you that we're already overstretched because of the

geography. Multiple fronts. Not good."

"And if we withdraw support from allies, then we magnify the problem," Omas

said. "They'll switch."

Jacen inhaled audibly. "This is why I advocated going in very hard and very fast

in the first place."

Omas smiled, but without humor. "Ah. I told you so. I wondered how long it

would be before we reached that stage."

"Chief Omas, I know hindsight gets us nowhere now, but we might as well be

honest with each other, and recognize what we can each contribute."

Niathal was working through her phases of Jacen. First he'd been a useful ally;

then an instrument for getting the tougher decisions past Omas. He was still good for

the Alliance, she thought, but he was far more the politician than the soldier lately. His

language had changed-less direct, more circumspect. She longed for plain talking.

But she wasn't doing any in front of Jacen now.

"My sources tell me the Corellians failed to recruit the Mandalorians fairly early

on," she said. "For some obscure reason, they appear to be staying neutral. Unless

they've had some collective lobotomy, I call that interesting."

Omas looked at Jacen pointedly, hands in pockets. "Have we approached them?

Have any of your shadowy little operatives signed some of them up? They were pretty

handy during the last war, as I recall."

Jacen looked serene-except for his pupils. "No, and I suspect we wouldn't

receive a positive response."

"Why? Don't tell me they've discovered pacifism after millennia of warring and

minima of pilaging and

destroying. They're congenital thugs. Any excuse for a fight that they can get paid for."

You think I don't know what you did, Jacen. Niathal feigned mild interest. But

word gets around. Let's see if you play this straight.

Jacen was completely still except for the fact that he meshed his fingers in his lap.

It looked like a meditation pose, utterly at odds with his black Galactic Alliance Guard

coveralls.

"There's the small matter of the fact that I . . . lost Boba Fett's daughter during an

interrogation," he said.

Aha.

"Lost." Omas blinked a few times. "What exactly is lost?"

"She died while I was interrogating her. I had no idea who she was at the time."

Omas looked stunned for a moment but then let out a small involuntary "Hah!" of

oddly horrified amusement. "And Fett knows this?"

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Jacen's face was as calm and impenetrable as a statue's. "He does now."

"Then I imagine you'll be looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life,

Colonel."

Jacen looked as if he hadn't thought about that. His composure wobbled for a

second as he rearranged his clasped hands. "Asking him for a favor wouldn't be the

smartest thing to do, no."

Niathal wondered if Jacen had finally bitten off more than he could chew. Gossip

reached her ears, and gossip from Jacen's secret police was a wholly different and much

more reliable source than the murmurings in the pleekwood-paneled Senate corridors.

But it didn't suit her plans to have Jacen crash and burn. And she didn't have to

like people to work with them.

"I've arranged to meet the ambassadors from Las Lagon and Beris with the

diplomatic corps later today," said Omas. "Let's see if we can talk them back inside the

fold. I don't want to start a stampede."

"What's their problem?" asked Niathal.

"Unwilling to commit troops."

"Give them a waiver."

"And what kind of message does that send to Corellia?
That's backpedaling."

Omas seemed indignant. "That's why we went to war in
the first place-the principle of

pooled defensive capability for the Alliance."

"Las Lagon and Beris between them contribute twenty
thousand troops, tops. The

diplomatic benefit strikes me as outweighing both the
principle and any use they might

be." The worst thing in the world, Niathal decided, was a
politician who discovered

scrupulous principle halfway through the game. "They're

badly trained and poorly

equipped, so I don't think I'll miss their military input to the GA."

Jacen eased himself out of his chair and stood up, making it clear he was heading

for the door. "Well, at least there's some positive news on the counterterrorism front.

It's the second month running that arms seizures are up. We're shutting down their

supply routes."

"Are you certain they're all politically motivated, and not just criminals?" Omas

asked.

"If you were shot by one of them," Jacen said, "would you care about that fine

distinction? Ordinary crime and terror tend to become

distinction? Ordinary crime and terror tend to become bedfellows sooner or later. And

ask Coruscant Security Force for their latest violent-crime statistics. It's becoming a lot quieter all around."

He gave them both a polite nod and left. Omas watched the doors close behind

him and then wandered over to the main window overlooking the plaza to stare out in calculated silence.

"What have we come to, Admiral, that my first thought on hearing that Colonel

Solo kills a prisoner is that he might now have enemies big enough to keep him off my back?"

It was a blisteringly frank admission. "You're only

human," she said.

Omas didn't see the other side of that verbal coin. "It's an indictment of what

we've all become that my inner circle of advisers isn't the security or justice secretary,

or even diplomats, but the chief of staff and the head of the secret police." Omas began

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his ritual amble around the office, leaving faint and short-lived footprints in the pale

blue pile of the carpet. "I think about that, you know. I wonder how a colonel rises to

be so influential, and I really don't know if I let it happen because he's a Jedi, or

because he's GAG."

Niethel thought it was smart of Omas to keep the real

initial thought it was smart of Ormas to keep the real discussions to a handful of

people who could be trusted not to shift allegiance to Corellia. There was no telling

with some Senators. "In these uncertain times, it's necessary. We can convene all the

emergency committees we like, but the conduct of the war is a matter for very few. The

war beyond our boundaries, and the war within them."

"Do you think we still have a war within?"

"Enough Coruscanti think we do. There's no such thing as 'only' thousands dying

in terror attacks. Lose a ship with thousands of crew, and civilians say that's too bad,

that's what they signed up for. Lose a few civilians, and it's a planetary tragedy." The

GAG had smashed most of the terror networks in a matter of months: they were very

efficient at tracking down funding and establishing links. But they were still active, and

lacking down different doors now-Bothan, Confederation sympathizers, and a few

people who just "breached the peace" while emergency powers were in force. "It's as

valid to deal with the fear of terrorism as with the reality."

Omas paused to try to look her in the eye. "Admiral, you strike me as an officer

raised in the traditions of decency. Honor. The rule of law. That goes out the window

all too often in trying times."

"I stick to what I'm tasked to do, and I'm grateful I don't have to get involved in

GAG business."

Omas appeared to note the ambivalence. "Nominally, the GAG is under your command."

Nominally . . . "You feel Colonel Solo is exceeding his boundaries and that I should apply them a little more emphatically."

"I'm concerned about his operating procedures with suspects, I'll admit that."

"What do you want-for me to admit I'm concerned, too?"

"Are you?"

"Sometimes."

Omas's brows lifted in a split second of hope. "I appreciate that it's not easy to

curb an officer who does so much to reassure the public."

"We all need heroes in difficult times, even if we don't need their protection as much as we think."

"Indeed. And for all their muttering, I do believe the Jedi Council secretly relishes

seeing one of their own kind adored for his two-fisted and muscular approach to

keeping the peace. It dispels the image of their being passive mystics out of touch with

grim reality."

"Success is everyone's child. Failure is an orphan."

Omas smiled ruefully. "Well, he'll either win the war for us ... or bring us down."

He went back to his polished plain of a desk, looking somewhat shrunken when he sat

behind it now. The small bronzium vase holding a single purple kibo bloom made the

desk look all the more vast and empty. "Heroes have a habit of doing that."

Us. Bring us down.

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And politicians had a habit of sowing doubts and ideas that wormed into the

subconscious. Niathal noted Omas's subtle warning and almost began to explain that

she already had the required degree of paranoia for a more political career, but he

probably knew that by now. If he didn't, she was slipping.

"I'll bear that in mind," she said.

Omas was a consummate statesbeing who'd survived attempts on his life and his

career several times. He'd understand the entire conversation that was packed into that

one line: that she knew Jacen was a loose cannon, that she knew he was massively,

overwhelmingly ambitious, and that she knew she might find herself sidelined by him

if she didn't keep on her toes. And that she knew Omas was aware that her eyes were

on his job, and that he might make that accession easier for her one day if she worked

with him rather than with Jacen Solo.

Us. Political code was a very economical way of imparting delicate information

imparting sensitive information

without actually using incriminating words. It saved a lot of time and trouble.

Niathal took the silence as a cue that the meeting was over. As the doors closed

behind her, she glanced back at Omas; her last glimpse

was one of a man who shut his eyes for a second as if completely exhausted.

He'll strut back into the Senate in a couple of hours as if everything's under

control. Do I really want a job like that?

She still thought she did.

She had lunch in one of the Senate's many eateries. There was always at least one

tapcaf or restaurant open at any time of the day or night, some of them relaxed, some of

them formal, all of them hotbeds of gossip, debate, and deal making. More government

business went on in these places than ever transpired in the Senate chamber. They were

also relatively safe places to talk to beings who might attract attention if she met them

at the officers' club. Hiding in plain sight worked remarkably well now, and nobody

took much notice of the fact that she happened to be grabbing a snack at the same table

as a Gossam called Gefal Keb, a senior civil servant in the public protection

department. Their voices were drowned in the general chatter. They referred to Jacen as

the New Boy, the GAG as the Club; Omas became, inevitably, the Boss. It was

unoriginal, but for ears attuned to picking out names from across the room, it seized no attention.

"Is the New Boy under any threat from our boisterous friends in Keldabe?" she asked.

"Not a word coming out of there." Keb had a way of slowly taking in everything around him, 360 degrees. "But if they were planning anything, they wouldn't tell CSR

Word is that Shevu is seriously hacked off with his way of doing business, too."

"Shevu's very old-fashioned about losing prisoners. Anyone else in the Club unhappy with the management?"

"Oddly, no. The New Boy's willingness to lead from the front does breed loyalty,

I admit."

"Who's he spying on now?"

"Not you, as far as I can tell. I'd be very surprised if he wasn't keeping an

unauthorized eye on the Boss, but I don't have any hard evidence yet. The Club's good

at covering its tracks, as you'd expect."

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"Anything else I ought to be aware of?"

"Minor procurement issues, but that's nothing to do with the New Boy."

"How minor?"

"Gripping in the mess about substandard kit and difficult

shortages at the moment.

You might want to kick a few data pushers before it turns into a problem."

"I'll have someone look at it." It would keep Jacen occupied. He cared about troop

welfare. "Matters like kit seem to hit morale hardest."

It was a brief conversation, two GA personnel who had every reason to be

exchanging a few words. Nobody took any notice. The Supreme Commander and

senior domestic security staff talked all the time.

Nobody knew that the three individuals who were running the war dared not turn

their backs on one another.

That was politics. Admiral Cha Niathal was determined to get used to it.

to get used to it.

STAR SYSTEM M2X329O5, NEAR BIMMIEL

There was a presence following her, and Lumiya could pick it out like a beacon

even at this range. So could the meditation sphere.

Broken, said the ship.

In the back of her mind, the presence manifested as a jagged, shattered mass of

black and white glass. If she concentrated on it long enough, it resolved into a whole

vessel again, but the cracks were still visible.

"It's broken, all right," Lumiya said. "What shall we do, allow it to catch up? Or

shall we see how good a hunter it is?"

The meditation sphere felt elated. The smoldering red

flame that seemed

embedded in its bulkheads grew brighter and more golden, and Lumiya felt a

conspiratorial sense of humor flood her. The ship was enjoying itself. Of course: it had

been dormant on Zios for untold years, a conscious thing waiting for purpose and

interaction.

Nothing in the galaxy enjoyed being alone, be it flesh or metal.

Lumiya rocked back on her heels, still a little disoriented by a cockpit that didn't

wrap around her. It didn't feel like an extension of her body as a starfighter did. Instead

of neatly arranged screens and controls within her reach, there was nothing except

stark, grainy, stone-like surfaces in which images appeared and then vanished again.

The ship's bulkhead showed her a pattern of lights. A small craft matched their

course at a range of five thousand kilometers. The asteroid belt where her base was

hidden appeared as a sprinkling of stars on a dark blue ground as if a hole had been

punched in the bulkhead, and she almost expected to feel air rushing past as the

vacuum beyond claimed her.

"Time to jump," she said.

The meditation sphere felt as if it took a deep breath and lunged forward. There

was no inertia, no sensation of movement whatsoever, and yet Lumiya was sure her

stomach leapt and her head spun with the acceleration. The tracking screen was gone.

She was looking at the streaming lights of stars and then velvet blackness, unlit except

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for random pinprick flares. She could see beyond the ship. It was as if it weren't there.

She knew where she was. She could feel the pursuing vessel dwindling to nothing

behind her, and the transparisteel shattering into broken chaos again.

For a moment, she felt panic.

For a moment, she was in a stricken TIE fighter, struggling for life-broken, fired

upon by Luke Skywalker, certain she'd die.

Instantly the bulkheads became red-hot pumice again. She jerked back to the

present.

You're safe, the ship said.

It felt almost guilty for alarming her. She wanted to reassure it: Just a memory,

she thought, nothing to concern you. And it seemed reassured. Nobody-nothing-had

cared about her welfare for a very long time, not since she'd been in Imperial training.

Luke Skywalker's brief affection didn't count.

The broken -pursuer has jumped, too, said the ship.

"Try not to outrun it too far." Lumiya searched herself for regret and loneliness,

and found none. It was still good to find a sense of

kinship with another intelligence.

"We don't want it to lose us."

It is still following us, said the ship.

"What did you think of your last pilot?" Lumiya asked.

Not like us.

"Not Sith material, then."

No. The ship knew Ben wasn't fit to be Jacen's apprentice. Less like us than the

one who follows.

The meditation sphere dropped out of hyperspace and made convincing speed for

the asteroid. Lumiya gave it a mental image of marking time until the pilot on their tail

had located them again, and then showed it her habitat on the asteroid.

They prepared to dock, Lumiya and the ship, somehow one mind for brief

moments. Ben had proven he wasn't the right apprentice for Jacen. For all his fierce

courage on Zios, the boy had still succumbed to a sentimental Jedi urge and risked his

life to rescue that child. He lacked the ruthless edge a Sith needed. But at least he had

done something right: without him, she wouldn't have this rare vessel. It would be

instrumental in Jacen's future. She could see it in the Force. Somehow her own future

wasn't linked with it, but she'd look after it until the time came to relinquish control.

Ben. She bore the boy no ill will, but he was simply surplus to requirements now.

Is it him, though? Is this who Jacen has to kill?

Perhaps the Force had spared Ben from her plot for a reason. Perhaps it was his

destiny to help his Master by sacrificing his life, and so it wasn't Lumiya's to take.

I don't know what Jacen has to do. I just don't know. I can't see the bridge he has

to cross to become the Sith Lord he's destined to be.

Did Jacen believe that she had no more answers to that question than he did?

She doubted it.

He had to immortalize his love-to kill it, to destroy what he loved most.

As the meditation sphere slipped into the docking bay of her habitat, Lumiya

pondered on what Jacen Solo loved and couldn't bear to lose, the sacrifice that would

take him beyond the mundane world and into greatness. His sister, Jaina? No, he'd

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already tried to have her court-martialed. His parents? He'd ordered their arrest. But

punishment was one thing, and killing was another.

Home, said the ship. I can defend you against the one who follows.

"Thank you." Lumiya was taken aback. "It's not necessary. Let the other ship

land."

Would it be Ben Skywalker? The boy was the nearest Lumiya had

seen to someone Jacen loved. He wanted Ben to

seen to someone Jacen loved. He wanted Ben to succeed. He ignored the weakness in the boy.

Luke Skywalker? No, Jacen cared nothing for Luke, and perhaps even despised

him. Mara? She might have been the last person to stand by Jacen, but he had less

feeling for her than for his own parents. Ben, then. It was almost certainly Ben.

Or . . . maybe it wasn't a person. Maybe he had to kill an organization, or

something abstract. Perhaps he didn't have to kill anything at all. Lumiya fought

impatience; whatever Jacen's destiny might be, whatever pivotal act he had to perform,

it would be soon. She could almost feel the fabric of the Force anticipating it. And

perhaps . . . it's going to be me he kills.

But she was Sith, and any Sith would expect that of her pupil. It was a price she

had to be ready to pay.

Very broken, said the ship, snapping her out of her thoughts. Lumiya got to her

feet and stood in front of the bulkhead. The glowing pumice thinned to transparency,

but it wasn't a visual illusion; the bulkhead opened to the atmosphere and a ramp

formed from the ship's casing. When Lumiya walked down it into the hangar area, an

old Conqueror assault vessel was edging through the air locks. She hadn't seen one of

the figure-eight-shaped ships in a long time.

The hatch popped and someone emerged, partly swathed in a cloak but with a

distinctive limping gait.

"You take your risks, dancer." Lumiya was beginning to find Alema Rar a

liability. "I might have fired on you."

The Twi'lek threw the cloak back from her face and tilted her head. It was the

practiced pose of a woman who had spent so much of her life being coquettish that it

had become unconscious habit. She had been used to male attention and still behaved

as if she deserved it, even if there were no males around, and even if her looks had been

ruined by lightsaber wounds. The severed stump of her lekku gave her a grotesquely

comic look.

But Alema wasn't a laughing matter at all. She was, as the ship put it, broken. This

was a damaged, vengeful creature that wanted to lash out, and Lumiya had no patience

with lack of discipline. Alema was also insane, and a Dark Jedi with those problems

was a very dangerous complication.

"But you didn't." The Twi'lek's eyes were on the meditation sphere. "We find this

ship interesting."

"I thought you might." Lumiya indicated the doors leading to her chambers. Home

wasn't the word. "Seeing as you're here, you might as well come in."

Alema prowled around the ship, gazing at it from all angles, clearly fascinated.

"It thinks," she said. "This ship thinks"

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"Thinking's useful. Try it sometime." Lumiya knew she ought to handle a

madwoman more carefully, but she was short on tolerance today. She strained to sense

what the ship might be saying, but all she could detect was its watchfulness, its sensors

taking a wary interest in Alema. It could probably taste her darkness. "What brings you

here?"

"We have been tracking the Anakin Solo. We have considered Jacen Solo's

attitude to his parents, and we think we might gain access to Han and Leia Solo by working with Jacen."

Alema put a caressing hand on the meditation sphere, and Lumiya felt it flinch,

then somehow soften. It knew Alema was damaged. Its duty was to aid, to take care of

its pilot. That tendency seemed to make it oddly sympathetic to those in need of

assistance.

Lumiya sighed to herself. That was the last thing she needed: a Sith vessel that felt

sorry for a crazy Twi'lek trollop. She sent the ship a sharp image of Alema, face twisted

with psychotic rage, crashing the sphere into a jagged mountain. The ship got the idea

right away. Alema pulled back as if burned.

"It would be helpful for all of us," Lumiya said carefully, "if you avoided crossing

Jacen Solo's path at the moment. There's a war on, you know . . ."

"We have our task, and you have yours. Ours is to have Balance for what the

Solos did to us. Leia will still be trying to bring her precious son back to the light, and

that means he remains good bait for our purposes."

"Let me put it another way," Lumiya said kindly, steering her toward the doors.

"Get in my way, and I'll kill you."

Alema gave her a curious lopsided smile but allowed herself to be ushered into the

living quarters.

"Do you know who you're dealing with?" Alema asked.

Lumiya probed Alema's presence again. It felt like shards of broken glass in her

mouth, as alien as any being she'd ever encountered. She'd been in the minds of the

insane before, but never a Jedi, and never one this deluded. It was almost frightening. It

was the sense of us that was most disturbing. She found it hard to pick her way between

the hive-mind elements and the fragmented personality of one being.

"Yes, I do," Lumiya said. "And I'll still kill you if you let this feud ruin bigger

strategies. There'll be time for you to have your revenge later. Interfere with my plans

and I'll kill the Solos myself, and then you'll never have your Balance." Lumiya

lowered her voice to a soothing whisper. "And you know I can do that, don't you?"

Seemingly unperturbed, Alema gazed around Lumiya's quarters. They were

sparsely furnished now because she'd taken most of her necessary possessions back to

the safe house on Coruscant-or the latest address, anyway-except for duplicates of

the equipment she kept to maintain her cybernetic prosthetics, and basic essentials for a

brief stay. Alema had the look of someone sizing up an apartment and deciding

whether to buy it.

"No, you can't stay here," said Lumiya. Telepathy was

beyond her, but she knew a

proprietary look when she saw it. It made sense to keep an eye on Alema: she was so

fixated and reckless that she might-just might-put a hydrospanner in the works, and

that wasn't something Lumiya was prepared to risk. The stakes were too high, the

moment too close.

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If I had any sense, I'd kill her now before she becomes too much trouble. But . . .

Alema still had her uses, until her madness became too unmanageable.

"You understand revenge," said Alema. She settled on a sofa, one arm

conspicuously limp, and a reticent frown creased her

conspicuously limp, and a petulant frown creased her brow for a moment. "Luke

Skywalker destroyed your life. He left you scarred, too."

"Oh, much more than scarred." Lumiya pulled her veil from her face and let

Alema see the damage to her jaw. Then she placed one boot on a chair, took out a

vibroblade, and rammed it into her thigh. There was a metallic scrape. Alema's

expression was suitably surprised.

"I'm actually more machine than organic," Lumiya went on. "There's a point, I

think, at which a woman ceases to be a human with cybernetic implants and becomes a

machine with organic parts. I believe I've passed that threshold. And you know what?

"I'm not unhappy with that."

"You want to punish Luke, as we want to punish Leia."

Lumiya leaned over Alema and caught her by her collar, jerking her face close to

hers so she couldn't look away.

"Luke seems to think that, too, which I find staggeringly arrogant." Was that a

little fear in Alema's eyes? Sometimes it was interesting to play the madwoman herself.

"The galaxy revolves around him, he thinks, but then many men think that way. No, I

don't miss my beauty, you fool, because it would have vanished by now anyway. Once

I understood that my injuries freed me from worrying about such trivia, I realized I had

a task that only I could fulfill." She tightened her grip on

a task that only I could handle. She tightened her grip on the flimsy fabric at Alema's

throat. "And that task is close to completion, so if you thwart me in any way, I'll

become very focused on you. Do you understand?"

For a moment, Alema lost that oddly demented expression and looked like a

normal sane person in fear of her life. Lumiya wasn't sure what she looked like herself

at that moment, but it seemed to work.

"We will . . . respect your wishes," Alema said imperiously.

Lumiya decided not to backhand her, but it took an effort. She didn't have time for

this nonsense.

"Do yourself a favor," she said, and let Alema's collar

slide out of her grasp with a

hiss of sheer fabric over her gloves. "Ask yourself what you have against Leia Solo

other than the fact that she made you ugly. If there's nothing beyond that, then your

quest for Balance is a waste of time."

Alema blinked as if she'd been slapped. Maybe it was the first time anyone had

used the word ugly to her. She wasn't; she wasn't anything. In a galaxy of vastly diverse

life-forms, Lumiya had ceased to be able to judge appeal, or even want to. It was

fascinating how the once beautiful fared so much worse than lesser mortals when age

and disfigurement overtook them. It was all illusion. The millions of species in the

galaxy couldn't agree on what constituted beauty anyway.

But Alema looked as if she was thinking it over.

"We still wish to help you achieve your objective."

"Good," said Lumiya. The way Alema used we gnawed away at her patience for

some reason. She knew it was a hive-mind remnant of her Joiner days, but it irked her.

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"Because if hurting Leia is what you want most, letting Jacen get on with what he has

to do is going to hurt her most of all."

"Do you want to hurt Leia?"

"She's done nothing to me. I have no feelings either way. There might be

something you can do to help me, something you do better than anyone." Appeal to her

vanity. It's big enough. "Keep tabs on Jacen for me. Covert observation."

"We will, but can you not locate him anytime you want?"

"Not closely enough." Lumiya didn't have the complete Sith ability to see all the

pieces in the game, every element in the battle. That was for a full Sith Master. But she

didn't need to let on that she had fewer powers than Aleria might think. "I don't have

time to log his movements, but for his own safety, I need to know exactly where he is

at all times, especially when he leaves Coruscant. Do you think you can do that? It's

tedious work, but necessary."

"We can."

"And lose the Conqueror. I'll find you a less conspicuous ship."

"The orange sphere?"

"No." Alema seemed to have taken a fancy to the Sith vessel. Perhaps it was

because she could communicate with it: once Lumiya penetrated the jagged chaos in

her mind, there was a sense of isolation in the Twi'lek that made her recoil. "Something

more suitable. And cover your tracks when you leave- don't lead anyone back to this

asteroid."

"Our expertise is surveillance and assassination," Alema said stiffly. "We aren't an

amateur."

Lumiya took her through the winding passages that honeycombed the asteroid and

brought her to the emergency access-even in space, she thought of it as the

backdoor-where a few small ships were standing idle. Once she'd had a battle fleet,

but it was long gone in the Yuuzhan Vong war. Her needs were different now anyway.

She needed stealth, not firepower.

"There." She pointed Alema to a decidedly scruffy shuttle, the kind that priority

couriers used to ferry urgent consignments between worlds. It was fifteen meters long,

and a third of that was now given over to a hyperdrive and discreet armaments. A

courier shuttle needed to be fast and able to defend itself against piracy, but this one

had considerably more than the standard specifications. Lumiya waited for Alema to

complain about it.

"We won't be noticed in this," the Twi'lek said, appearing satisfied.

"You can change the identification transponder and the livery panel to any of a

hundred courier companies." That configuration was actually standard, but Lumiya had

added a few bogus and untraceable companies for good measure. "It's not luxurious,

but it does the job."

Alema lifted the hatch. It sprung away from the casing to

form an awning. She

peered inside.

"She took everything from us." Her voice was muffled by the hatchway. Then she

pulled out again. "We're alone. She's made us solitary."

Oh, give me strength, she's rambling again. "Who did?"

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"Leia Solo. She took our lekku, and so we can't communicate fully with others.

She caused the destruction of our nest, too. And she took what attracted others to us,

our beauty." Alema had been thinking, then: she'd chewed over Lumiya's challenge and

worked out what really drove her. "We're lonely, and we can never touch the world

properly again."

Lumiya had been trained never to drop her guard, and pity wasn't something she

was accustomed to feeling. She didn't quite feel pity for Alema, but she did get a

sudden and painful glimpse of her loss, and it must have been a particularly agonizing

one for a Twi'lek; without both lekku intact, she would have difficulty communicating

with others of her kind, feeling pleasure-even loving someone. The head-tails were

part of her nervous system. And how much more in need of intimacy was she now,

after becoming part of a close-knit Killik nest?

Alema did have her reasons for wanting retribution, then. Lumiya was careful not

to let that brief flood of pity start her thinking about what normality she, too, had lost.

"I'm sorry," Lumiya said, and meant it. "Now use that to remain focused, and to

bide your time."

Alema looked at the courier shuttle and seemed to be somewhere else entirely.

Then she gazed down at the deck of the hangar and began swaying a little as if listening

to music. She raised one arm-the other hung limp, paralyzed by Luke Skywalker's

lightsaber-and seemed to be going through the motions of a dance, turning slowly and

with difficulty on her crippled foot.

For a moment Lumiya thought it was one of her affectations. Then she realized

that it was quite genuine: Alema was remembering her past, and what she could no longer do.

"We were a dancer," she said wistfully, but she was talking to herself. "We loved to dance."

Lumiya tried to think of all the things she had once loved to do, in the days before

she entered Imperial service, and remembered none of them. "Get a move on, dancer,"

she said. "You can start by tracking the Anakin Solo."

The past didn't matter, any of it. There was only the future.

SANVIA VITAJUICE BAR, CORUSCANT

Mara swirled the sediment of groundapple and

Malara swirled the sediment of groundapple and dewflower juice around her glass

and drank reluctantly as Kyp Durrone watched. He clearly had something to say that he

didn't want to bring up in the Jedi Council Chamber-or in front of Luke.

And Ben still hadn't called in. The Anakin Solo had arrived back at Coruscant two

days earlier and there was no sign of Ben. Somehow she'd hoped he would have made

his way to Jacen even if he wasn't feeling communicative. Just feeling that he was alive

and unharmed wasn't enough.

He was her little boy. She didn't care how many Centerpoints he could take out.

This was her kid, and she couldn't stand it. Sometimes, when she looked at their lives

through the eyes of a normal mother for a brief moment, she was horrified.

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"If I didn't know better," Kyp said, "I'd think you were avoiding me. The whole

Jedi Council, in fact."

"Just busy. But you called me here for a reason, and it wasn't to boost my

antioxidant levels."

"Well, maybe I'm just observant, but we have an out-of-control Jedi on the loose.

Maybe the Council can help you with that. Y'know, combined efforts of the most

experienced Jedi in the galaxy?"

"What if I say Luke and I can handle it on our own?"

What if I say Luke and I can handle it on our own.

"Oh, family business . . ."

"That. And the fact that not all the Council is on the same side, so we don't want

to open a rift," Mara said.

"Been there-"

"-done that. Put yourself in Corran's position. Would you feel comfortable

helping the chief of the GA's bullyboy police after what he's been doing to Corellians

and even his own parents? Better we clear up our own family mess."

"I'm surprised that Luke's tolerated Jacen this long," Kyp commented. "I wasn't

entirely joking when I said we should make Jacen a Master. People tend to stop

throwing rocks when they're inside the tent."

"I think now might not be the best time."

"Is Luke embarrassed he's got problems within his own family?"

Mara almost blurted out that she'd stopped Luke from acting more than once and

now she bitterly regretted it, but that wasn't wholly true.

"If I tell you that I've identified

the root cause and I'm going to deal with it, will you back off?"

"I note the pronoun."

"Luke knows what I'm doing."

"Which is?"

"I'm going to kill Lumiya."

"That removes the threat to Ben, but how does it deal with Jacen?"

"She's infiltrated the GAG. I don't know who her insiders are, but we have to

assume she can get at Jacen, too. She might even influence him. She's got to go."

"What took you so long? The old cyborg must be running low on lube oil by now.

You could take her anytime."

"Luke tends to favor taking people alive and trying to talk them around." She

couldn't bring herself to tell Kyp that Luke had had a civilized chat with Lumiya on the

resort satellite. Touched her-even when she had her lightwhip in the other hand. He

said her intentions felt peaceful. What was he thinking?

"But she's not so decrepit,

believe me. I won't have an easy time of it."

"I'll help you if you want backup."

"I don't think I'll need it, but thanks." Mara couldn't avoid the next question.

"What are the rest of the Council members saying?"

"That you need to get a grip on this. We talk, you know."

"So we have a Jedi Council with the Skywalkers, and a shadow Council meeting

without them . . . sounds like a fault line's forming."

"Well, you decided to go whack a Sith without consulting us . . ."

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Mara tried to see the double standard, spotted it easily, and ignored it. "If I'd stood

up in Council and said, Hey, this lunatic is threatening my kid and keeps coming after

my husband, so Pm going to take her head off-you really think the other members

would have nodded politely and voted on it? There are folks who think like Luke does,

that the Council doesn't condone assassinations, and that would make that fault line

into a big rift faster than a greased Podracer."

Kyp inspected the depths of his juice. He'd ordered something thick and opaquely

orange that he didn't seem to be enjoying. "So you're saving us from the moral

dilemma."

"If that's the way you want to see it."

The vitajuice bar was quiet and smelled unappetizingly of wet raw greenery like a

flower shop. Maybe that was why it was so quiet; it made it a good place to meet.

Nobody knew them here. Most of the customers seemed to be Ementes, probably

because they could guarantee getting totally fruit-based nourishment here, prepared

right in front of their six eyes. Ementes weren't big on trust, least of all in Coruscant's

catering industry.

How much do I expect everyone to trust me?

Mara struggled with not telling her husband the entire truth while she confided in

a friend. That was the problem: they were all friends, the whole Jedi Council. The

Galactic Alliance Senate could tear chunks out of itself and not feel it, because it was

thousands of rivals and enemies and even strangers, but the Council-they'd grown up

together in many cases. They'd fought together. They were family, and not just because

they were Jedi.

Cilghal often cited the ancient rule of no attachments, but the Council was one big

attachment in its own right.

Mara realized she didn't like dewflower, mused on ways to get around a

lightwhip, and then flinched as her comlink chirped. She pulled it from her belt and

raised it to see Ben's face.

"Mom, I just landed," he said. "I-"

"Ben? Are you at the military port?"

"No, the civilian one. Galactic City. Look, I'm sorry that-"

"Stay right where you are. Don't move, okay? I'll meet you at Arrivals Seven-B,

okay?"

"Mom-"

"No arguing this time. Be there." Mara snapped the comlink closed and grabbed

her jacket. "If you're thinking of telling Luke, Kyp, give me a head start."

"Wouldn't dream of getting involved," he said, shrugging. "I'm glad Ben's okay."

Just remember that kids like clear limits. He's still too

young to set his own."

"Tried that," Mara said, and strode for the doors. "And he set his own just fine."

She worked her way through the crowds at the spaceport, sensing Ben's location.

There were black-suited GAG personnel operating openly now, on foot patrol in the

arrivals hall with blue-uniformed CSF officers. They were pretty conspicuous for secret

police. Jacen was adept at hearts-and-minds operations; he seemed to like to have his

deterrents visible. It certainly seemed to reassure the public, despite the black visors

that gave the GAG troopers the facelessly dispassionate air of battle droids.

And suddenly there was Ben, sitting on the white marble pedestal of the ten-meter

abstract statue of Prosperity that formed one of the supports for the central dome of the

roof of the arrivals hall. Prosperity, Progress, Culture, and Peace.

Peace. Fat chance.

Ben looked like any other fourteen-year-old kid, drumming his heels idly against

the marble, staring intently at his datapad and keying in something one-handed. A

GAG trooper passed him. Ben looked up, nodded in acknowledgment, and got a

respectful nod back.

If Mara needed a reminder that Ben was anything but a normal teenager, that was

it. He was a junior lieutenant. He commanded troopers like that. Her son helped run the secret police.

But she'd learned the most silent and efficient ways to kill the Emperor's enemies

by Ben's age, and Luke had been just five years older when he joined the Rebellion.

What did we expect to give birth to, a librarian?

"Hi, Mom." Ben slid the datapad into his jacket pocket. He had that tight-lipped

look that went with bracing for a dressing-down. "You're mad at me, right?"

Mara paused, wanting at the same time to yell at him for terrifying her and to grab

him in a ferocious hug. She settled for swallowing both reactions and ruffling his hair.

He'd never live it down back at the barracks otherwise.

"You couldn't call us?" she said. "You couldn't even tell Jacen where you were?"

Ben frowned slightly. "I'm sorry. I was on a mission and I didn't want to give

away my location."

"We can talk about it later. Let's have lunch." She gestured toward the exit. "It's

okay. Your dad will be happy just to see you back safe. No yelling. I promise."

Ben slid off the pedestal in uncharacteristic silence, and they walked to the

speeder platforms. Mara kept a careful eye on the crowd, not entirely sure if she'd

recognize or even sense Lumiya if she was around.

Lumiya might even send one of her

minions, and she had people within the GAG. The biggest threat might be one of Ben's

own troopers.

"What are you frightened of, Mom?" Ben asked.

Mara didn't take her eyes off the crowds around them. She scanned constantly, as

she had been trained to do. "Okay, you might as well know. Lumiya is trying to kill

you."

Ben gave a little grunt that might have been disbelief and seemed to mull over the

idea rather than show alarm. "Because she's still got this vendetta with Dad?"

"Mainly because you killed her daughter."

"Uh . . . okay, I'll take her word for it."

Mara shielded Ben as he got into the speeder. It was always a vulnerable moment:

she'd taken a few targets as they ducked into vehicles, caught off-balance for a moment.

The hatches closed with a sigh of air, and she turned to look at him closely.

"I mean it, Ben. She's dangerous and she's subtle, so until we neutralize her, you

have to be on your guard. She's got connections within the GAG. It could be anyone."

"If she was going to have this spy of hers in the Guard kill me, she'd have done it

by now." He slouched in the passenger's seat. "But I'll be careful. Wow, this is getting

messy. What with Jacen on Fett's list for killing his

daughter, and me killing Lumiya's .

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. . I suppose that's what the job's about, isn't it? You collect enemies. Hey, the boys

have got a bet going on when and how Fett's going to come after Jacen."

Mara wasn't sure if Ben was making light of the threat for her sake or just

indulging in normal teenage dismissal. Fett was the least of her worries. "And . . . have

you placed your bet?"

"Oh, Jacen can take him. But it's kind of weird that Fett hasn't made a move. The

longer he waits, the more people get freaked, I suppose."

"If Fett comes for Jacen," she said, "let him handle it. Okay?"

The speeder climbed into one of the automated sky lanes and headed for the

Rotunda Zone. Ben gazed out of the side screen in silence.

"So can you tell me what this mission was?" Mara asked.

Ben did that three-second pause that meant he was framing his words carefully. "I

had to bring back a prototype vessel. I wasn't in any more danger than I could

comfortably handle."

That was a relief. It was just an errand, although why Jacen hadn't known about it

baffled her. "And you missed your birthday celebration."

"You know how folks say that you get to a point in life when birthdays don't

matter? That's how it felt."

"Sweetheart, that's only when you get a lot older. Not fourteen." If anything could

break Mara's heart, it was that: Ben's childhood had passed him by. "Next year, I

promise, we'll have a family get-together. Really mark the day."

"You think the war will be over by then?"

"If it's not, we'll still have a party. All of us."

"Uncle Han and Aunt Leia, too? Even after I tried to arrest Uncle Han?"

And that was the bizarre reality of a civil war: a teenage boy sent to

detain his aunt and uncle, and then fretting over whether they'd attend his next

birthday party. Mara sometimes tried to add up the days she'd lived that weren't about

killing and warfare, and there were so very, very few. She wanted a different future for

Ben.

"Yes, even after that," she said. "Ben, does Jacen know you're back?"

"Yeah." He didn't volunteer any more. "It's okay. I report back for duty at oheight-

hundred tomorrow. I haven't gone AWOL."

"I'll have one last try, then. Ben, I worry about you. Your dad and I would really

sleep a lot better if you left the GAG and came on missions with us."

Mara braced for incoming. But Ben thought visibly for a while, and when he

spoke his tone was soft and unsettlingly adult
-unsettlingly old.

"Mom, have you ever had to do something you didn't want to do, but knew you had to?"

Mara certainly had, so many times that she took it for granted. And at any given time, whether working for the Empire or for the New Republic, or whatever the stang her paymaster called itself, she'd always thought it was right.

"Yes, sweetheart, I have," she said, and knew she now had no moral high ground from which to look down upon her son, or anyone else for that matter. "And the

problem was that when I looked back, I found I'd done the wrong thing sometimes. But

it'll be years before I'll know if what I'm doing now is right."

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"You have to go with the best data you have at the time."

It was a weary man's statement, not a boy's. Ben was a soldier. He was what she

and Luke had made him. She'd wanted a Jedi son, and now she had one.

"Next year," she said. "Next year, we'll have that party, come what may."

37

chapter three

Mishuk gotal'u meshuroke, pako kyore.

(Pressure makes gems, ease makes decay.)

-Mandalorian proverb

SLAVE I. EN ROUTE TO BADOR, KUAT SYSTEM

Mirta Gev had settled for being tolerated by her grandfather, and although she

made an effort to love him, it was hard. Part of her still wanted to make him pay for the

life her mother-and grandmother-had endured. And part saw a man who had every

form of regard shown him except love, and pitied him. Overall, she saw a man who put

up duracrete barriers and defied anyone to breach them. As he took the Firespray out of

Mandalore's orbit and prepared to jump to hyperspace, his expression was set in

apparent blank disdain for the everyday world. She decided his helmet presented the

softer face of the two.

At least she got to sit in the copilot's seat. That seemed to be the nearest that Boba

Fett could ever get to approving of her as his own flesh and blood.

"Your clone's not an active bounty hunter," said Fett. There was never any

preamble in his conversations, no small talk, no intimacy. He was all business. "I

checked every bounty hunter and wannabe on the books, but none is called Skirata.

Plenty of people on Mandalore knew Kal Skirata, and then-gone. Vanished."

"But he was on a hunt, I know that. He told me to get out of his way " Did Fett

believe her? She'd stitched him up and tried to lure him to his death, so she could

hardly blame him if he was having second thoughts about the clone. The man was real,

all right. "So we're retracing his steps?"

"Yours."

"How are you going to pass yourself off as a client looking to hire a bounty

hunter?"

"I'm not. You are."

Mirta suddenly realized why he'd agreed to let her ride along. "My, I do come in

handy, don't I?"

"Earn your keep. Rules of any partnership."

Mirta thought that sounded remarkably like her dead mother. Ailyn Vel was more

a chip from the granite block of Fett than she'd ever admit, but that was impossible.

She'd been a baby when Fett had left her grandmother, too young to pick up his callous

ways.

"How do you cope?" Mirta asked.

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"What?"

"How do you cope with being alone?"

"Are you going to yap all the way to Kuat?"

"You can't bring yourself to tell me to shut up, can you?"

"I cope because I like it that way," Fett said.

"Well, Mama was all I had and I don't like it that way."

Fett paused, and there was the faintest movement of his lips-as if he was

stopping himself from saying something he'd regret. He ought to have understood, she

thought. He'd lost his father at the hands of a Jedi, too.

"Yeah," he said. "What about your dad?"

"He died in a hull breach. Not even in combat."

"Why'd Ailyn marry a Mando? Sintas must have warned her we're bad news."

Mirta found she was clutching the heart-of-fire pendant tight in her fist. It was just

half of the original stone. The other slice, split from it with a blow from the butt of

Fett's blaster, was buried with Ailyn Vel in a modest

grave outside Keldabe, in an

ancient wood that the vongese hadn't managed to destroy.

I can't feel anything from this stone. It ought to tell me something. I'm Kiffar. Part

Kiffar, anyway.

"She hung around Mando'ade to get a better idea of how to hunt you. Then she

met Papa. It didn't last."

"Romantic."

"She cared about him."

"And she let him make a Mando of you."

"I spent two summers with Papa on Null, after he and Mama split up. He taught

me everything he could. And then he got killed."

the everything he could. And then he got killed.

She didn't say it to shut Fett up. He was hardly a talkative man anyway, but there

was quiet, and then there was breath-holding silence. That was what she heard now.

"That's too bad," he said.

"Don't try to out-orphan me, Ba'buir. I know what it's like."

She struggled between the hatred she'd been taught to feel for him and the

evidence of her own eyes that he wasn't a monster-at least not the monster painted by

her mother. The very thought felt disloyal to the dead. After almost two months, she'd

reached the stage where she had days when her mother wasn't her first waking thought,

and didn't haunt her dreams. That felt like betrayal, too.

But life had to go on. She had to make sense of this, and not let Ailyn Vel's death

be for nothing.

"No need to discuss it, then." He inhaled. He looked like he'd been holding his

breath all that time. "Are you okay living where you are?"

"Yeah."

"I could buy you a house of your own. Anywhere."

Mirta never knew when he was going to flip over into awkward generosity. Beviin

said he had his moments. He might, of course, have been trying to get rid of her with

the lure of a place on a far planet.

"I'm okay where I am thanks." No. that sounded

dismissive. "I meant that I like
living with Vevut's family."

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Fett said nothing. She knew what he was thinking now.

"Yes, I do like Orade," she said. "He's a good man."

"You're a grown woman. None of my business."

But everyone knew she was a Fett now, and that carried
with it some burdens. It

took a brave man to risk a Mand'alor for a grandfather-
in-law, especially one with

Boba Fett's reputation. Mirta shut her eyes and tried to
listen for whispered messages

from the heart-of-fire.

"Why can't you get information from that?" Fett asked
suddenly.

suddenly.

"I'm only part Kiffar. I don't have the full ability to sense things from objects."

She opened her eyes again. Fett was still an implacable statue of detachment. She

studied his profile to see what of him might be in her. "It's called psychometry. They

say some Jedi can do it, too."

Mentioning Jedi might not have been a good idea, but Fett didn't show any

reaction. "The stone absorbs memories from the giver and receiver," he said. "Sintas

said so." Ah. Under the veneer there might have been a man who wanted to either relive

happier times or hide the ones he preferred to forget. The stone held a little bit of Sintas

Vel's spirit, and a little bit of his. There was more veneer to him now than core, Mirta

suspected, but she'd seen him cry, and nobody else had ever seen the adult Boba Fett

weaken, she was sure of that. Maybe he hadn't even cried as a kid.

"I'm trying hard, Ba'buir."

"Worst thing you did was tell me you knew what happened to Sintas."

It was a slap in the face. When she'd said it, she hadn't even known if it would do

the trick and lead him into her mother's ambush. Now she regretted hurting a dying

man, even if she had been raised to loathe him.

"We'll find out how Grandmama died, I promise."

"After I get that clone," Fett said, all gravel and

And I get that clone, Fett said, all gravel and calculation, "I'll find a full-

blooded Kiffar to read the stone."

Mirta took it as a cue to shut up. Playing happy families wasn't the Fett way. She

wondered how many other families had the record of violent death and attempted

murder that theirs did. I hope what's in me is more like Papa. Then she recalled Leia

Solo deflecting her blaster shot at Fett, and knew that it was Ba'buir blood in her veins

after all

-Grandpapa's.

"Stand by," said Fett.

He didn't deploy full dampers when Slave /jumped. He never did. The acceleration

to lightspeed and beyond felt like being punched in the chest and then sat on by a Hutt.

She made a point of biting her lip discreetly as the stars streaked to lines of blue-white

fire and the crushing sensation passed.

That had to hurt him, too. He was a sick man. Mirta fumbled in her pocket, pulled

out some painkiller capsules, and held them out to him. He took them without a word.

His fingertips were cold.

It felt like a long, silent lifetime to Kuati space. Mirta filled it with planning how

she would disembowel Jacen Solo if and when she got the chance. There was already a

line forming for the privilege. Ba'buir wouldn't say what he had in mind for him: all

he had in mind for him, all she was certain of was that Boba Fett never turned his back on a score that required settling.

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"Decelerating in half a standard hour," he said.

She wanted very badly to love him, but couldn't. If she had found out what

happened between him and her grandmother, she might have found it easier, but she

knew it might also have confirmed her legacy of revenge. One thing she'd learned fast

was that it was a subject to avoid. It wasn't that she was afraid of asking; she just

couldn't get past the silent routine. He could make the world outside vanish if he

wanted to.

Bador was a striking contrast to Mandalore. Slave /swept on a descent path past

orbiters and over cities studded with straight roads and open plazas. Mirta checked her

datapad to orient herself.

"What was your dad's name?" Fett asked.

"Makin Marec."

Fett always had a reason for asking questions. Perhaps he was wondering who

else he might be related to. They landed at one of the massive public ports in Bunar and

Fett went through his ritual of setting all the alarms, trip-beams, and other lethal traps

that would greet anyone stupid enough to try breaking

into Slave I. He'd brought a

small

speeder bike in the hold, and he swung onto the seat a lot more easily than he had

last time. The painkillers were strong enough to anesthetize a bantha.

"You're navigating," he said. He bounced a little on the leather saddle as if testing

whether he could feel any pain. "Get on."

Mirta patched her datapad into her helmet's system. "Head down that speeder lane

and go south for five kilometers."

She was getting used to wearing a buy'ce. At first, it had seemed suffocating and

disorienting, but weeks of being surrounded by people

who relied on theirs had made

her feel a misfit without one. The streaming data on the HUD now got her attention

without distracting her. She hadn't fallen over anything for a while.

And-it made her feel Mando. Her father would have approved, but she tried not

to think what Mama would have said. I miss you, Mama. I miss you so much, and I

never even said good-bye. Fett's tattered cape slapped against her visor in the

slipstream, jerking her out of her memories, and Mirta wondered if she'd eventually

become like her grandfather-or like her mother. Bitter resentment about being robbed

of a parent seemed to run in the family.

Fett steered the speeder through increasingly seedy neighborhoods and canyons of

high-rise warehouses and apartment houses. Bounty hunters tended not to ply their

trade in the better parts of town. The number of shabby family homes decreased and the

scattering of unsavory characters loitering on corners and in speeders increased.

"So what were you after here?" Fett asked.

"Recovering stolen data."

"You mean people around here can read?"

"No, I have clients who can. The locals steal anything, even if they don't know

what it is. I go and persuade them to hand it back."

"And your clone with the gray gloves was definitely
1. "

here."

"Yes."

41

After a couple of wrong turns, the cantina appeared right on cue. In daylight, it

looked even worse than it had when she'd last visited. A peppering of blaster burns had

left blisters in the paint on the doors, and the masonry was pocked with holes from

ballistic rounds that hadn't been there last time-as far as she could tell. A trail of blood

drops from the door ended in a larger pool, dried to a dull tarry blackness. Street

cleaning wasn't frequent here.

A sign above the door said welcome to the paradise cantina. It also said no

helmets.

"I'm offended that they don't respect cultural diversity," Fett muttered.

"That's how I know what the clone in gray looked like. He took his helmet off."

"Fine." A couple of low-life males—a human and a Rodian—ambled to within ten

meters of the speeder and stared at it. Then they seemed to notice Fett, and then his

blaster and rocket-loaded backpack, and suddenly they appeared to remember pressing

business elsewhere. Fett locked the speeder and set the anti-theft device with a thermal

detonator. The two males broke into a run in the opposite direction and vanished.

"They don't seem to know we have cameras. Maybe

"They don't seem to know me here, anyway. Fame's fleeting."

Mirta took off her helmet. Fett ignored the request above the doors. The bar

smelled as bad as it ever had, a mix of vomit, stale ale, and oil that could have been

from machines or very old fried food. The clientele matched their environment,

possibly because they'd spent their disposable income on state-of-the-art weaponry.

The Kuati barkeeper was filling small dishes on the countertop with pickles that bore

an unappetizing resemblance to eyeballs, so they stood at the bar trying to look

normal-normal for the Paradise, anyway.

The barkeep caught sight of Mirta first. She must have been staring at the pickles

too carefully.

"You got to buy a drink," he said. "No snacks without-"
Then his gaze swiveled.

The helmet got his attention the way a chest plate alone didn't. "Ohhh, you got the

nerve to come in here, have you, you Mando slag?"

He ducked below the counter for a split second, and that meant only one thing.

Mirta wasn't sure if she had her blaster level before Ba'buir did, but when the man

straightened up with a highly illegal short-barreled Tenloss disruptor that could have

reduced them both to ground nerf, he was looking down the muzzles of Fett's sawn-off

EE-3 and her BlasTech 515.

It startled the barkeep long enough for Fett to land a left hook straight in his face.

He fell back against the glasses stacked behind him, and a couple smashed on the tiles.

Fett caught the disruptor as it clattered onto the counter; Mirta instinctively covered his

back, but none of the customers moved. She was starting to feel comfortable doing this

double act. The sense of camaraderie-a long way short of family bond-had crept up

on her.

Fett examined the disruptor and jammed the safety catch on hard, one-handed.

"Remember-no disintegrations."

The bartender staggered upright, cupping one hand under his nose to catch the

dripping blood. "The last Mando who came in here wrecked this place. You're all the

kriffing same, and I don't want you in here, so why don't you-

Mirta realized she must have missed some fun and games after she'd left the gray

clone to his hunting. "That was a long-lost relative," she said. "We're looking for him."

42

"Well, when you have your family reunion, I want him to pay for the damage

from last time."

The man didn't seem to recognize Ba'buir, but then Fett wouldn't have taken a

contract from this low down the food chain. Senators,

crime lords, and the wealthy who

could afford him knew his armor. Bar-keeps tended not to.

"Time we shared some reminiscences about my wayward kin," said Fett, tapping

his forefinger impatiently against the trigger guard of his blaster. "I'm not as careful as

him. My name's Fett."

The barkeeper's face drained of what blood there was left in it. Mirta actually

watched his color change to a pasty gray. She'd never seen physical fear like that

before. The man's eyes scanned Fett's visor, and the revelation was almost comic.

"It was awhile ago . . ."

"Mandalorian in gray armor with gray gloves. Called

Skirata." If the bartender

was expecting some credits to be slapped on the counter to jog his memory, Fett wasn't

playing. "What do you know?"

"Okay, he killed a guy here. Lot of damage. Lot of attention from security, too."

The barkeeper stared at Mirta now, and he was evidently piecing things together.

"Yeah, you were with him, weren't you?"

"Not for long," said Mirta. She'd moved out of the clone's way fast-into a

different cantina, in fact. "Who did he kill?"

"Gang boss called Cherit. It made the local holonews, even."

Obviously most shoot-outs here didn't warrant a headline. Mirta made a mental

headline. Mirra made a mental

note to check the archives. "What do you know about Cherit that didn't make the

news?"

"Nothing."

"I realize a blow to the face can affect your memory." Fett still hadn't lowered his

blaster. "Try again."

"Okay, Cherit's outfit supplied rak, Ixetallic, and Twi'lek girls to some minor

Kuati nob. He was doing his deals here for a while. Maybe he was muscling in on

your relative's turf."

"Doesn't sound like our line of work."

Fett stood facing the man for a long, long time. The

barkeeper looked like he was

grasping for something else to say to fill the silence. Eventually Fett leaned his blaster

against his shoulder, muzzle up in the safety position, and seemed appeased.

"If you see him again, tell him little Boba wants to see him about a job."

"How's he going to get in touch with you?"

"Mandalore. Right turn off the Hydian Way. Can't miss it."

"Okay

"And where does Cherit's gang hang out now?"

The barkeeper turned to the shelves behind him and fumbled frantically in a pile

of flimsi sheets. "Don't tell Fraig I gave you this." It was a nankin embossed with a

napkin embossed with a

logo that said THE TEKSHAR FALLS CASINO.

"You'll find Fraig there most

afternoons at the sabacc tables. Kuat City. Fraig took over from Cherit."

Fett pocketed the napkin and strode out. Mirta followed him, backing through the

doors more from habit than fear of attack.

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"You reckon Fraig paid the clone for a change of management?" she said,

scrambling astride the speeder behind him. "That's what I'm thinking."

"If he did, he'll know how to find him."

The speeder bike swooped over the rougher parts of Bunar and headed back to

Slave I. "Do you play sabacc?" Fett asked.

Mirta knew without asking that her grandfather wasn't a recreational gambler.

"No."

"Plan B, then."

"What Plan B?"

"I'll tell you when I've worked it out."

"What was Plan A?"

"Dress you up nice, send you in to play a hand or two, and wheedle something out

of Fraig."

"Thanks."

"It'd never have worked anyway. You're not the wheedling type."

It might have been an insult or a compliment, but she had no way of knowing with

Fett.

I want to like him. He's not likable, but he's not what you told me he was, either,

Mama. How could you even know?

Mirta found herself arguing with a dead woman, hating herself for it, and finding

that nothing she thought she knew was solid any longer. She took one hand off the

speeder's grab bar and eased the heart-of-fire from under her chest plate to grasp it.

Maybe it would tell her something sooner or later.

"Great painkillers," said Fett. She could see the dried blood on the knuckles of his

left glove as he flexed his fist. The stain was bothering him. "Thanks."

There was the faintest tinge of warmth in his voice. It was a start.

JACEN SOLO'S OFFICE, GAG HQ, CORUSCANT

There was a voice in Jacen's head, and he never knew whose it was. At times it

was clearly Vergere, clearly a memory, but at others he wasn't sure if it was his own

thoughts, or Lumiya's suggestions surfacing from his subconscious, or something else

altogether. There were times when he even thought it was his conscience.

It was his conscience now, he was sure of it. All he could see was his daughter,

Allana.

So you're not thinking about Tenel Ka, then . . .

Whatever act he had to perform to become a full Sith Lord, it would be extreme. It

had to be harder than killing a fellow Jedi; harder even than herding Corellians into

camps, or turning on his own parents and sister, or subverting democracy.

It had to be the most painful decision he'd ever taken.

I just can't kill my little girl.

Who says I have to? What would that prove?

That you'd do anything to acquire the powers to bring peace and order to the

galaxy.

It was Allana's future that had made him start down this path. Now it would be a

secure future for everyone's kid except his own.

That's what it's about, Jacen. Service, painful service. Embrace that pain.

No, it wasn't service. It was insane. He wouldn't do it. But was it any different

from sending your own children to war, making the same sacrifice as millions of other

parents? Wasn't it always harder to give a loved one's life than your own?

No. The only sacrifice worth making is your own life.

But Lumiya said he'd know. She said he'd know what he had to do when the time

came, and she couldn't tell him. He'd been with Tenel Ka and Allana since then. He'd

felt nothing, no hint from the Force that this was the final step, that these were the

people he had to kill.

Maybe this is denial. Delusion.

It's not Allana. It's not even Tenel Ka.

"It's not them," he said. "It has to be Ben."

And then he was back in his office, horribly aware, looking up at a bewildered

Corporal Lekauf. There was a cup of caf on the desk in front of him and he hadn't seen

anyone put it there.

He'd never been that distracted before. It scared him. He couldn't afford another

lapse like that.

"Lieutenant Skywalker hasn't reported for duty yet, sir."
Lekauf-grandson of the

officer who had faithfully served Lord Vader-had a
scrubbed freckled cheerfulness

that prevented him from looking menacing even in black
GAG armor with a BT25

blaster. "Can I help?"

Jacen felt his face burn. "Apologies, Corporal. I was
thinking aloud."

"That's okay, sir. I thought you were doing some of that
Jedi stuff. Communing."

Jacen had to think for a moment. "Melding?"

"That's the stuff."

"I think I need more caf before I try that today. Thank
you."

"Did you get Admiral Niathal's message about kit sir?"

Did you get a similar warning message about him, sir.

"What's that?" Jacen checked his datapad and assorted comlinks. Bureaucracy

didn't come easily to him. He'd make sure he had the best administrators when he-

When I what?

When I rule as a Sith Lord.

The idea was 90 percent sobering, 9 percent inappropriately exciting, and 1

percent repellent. If he could have identified the source of the revulsion-a distaste for

power, an old Jedi taboo, plain ignorance-he would have listened to it. But the voice

wasn't loud enough. It was his small fears, his reluctance to accept responsibility, and

that was something he had to ignore.

"She says some of the front-line units are having problems getting the kit they

need," Lekauf said. "Annoying stuff. Specialist ordnance, comm parts, but some

seriously non-negotiable items like medical supplies, too. They're also complaining that

the cannon maintenance packs aren't up to standard and they've had some

malfunctions." Lekauf raised his eyebrows. "We're starting to find problems acquiring

what we need, too, sir."

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That got Jacen's attention. "This is the richest and most technically advanced

planet in the galaxy, and we can't keep our forces adequately supplied in a war?"

inequity supply and demand.
Lekauf gave Jacen a significant nod that directed him to his holo-screen. "I think

the admiral put it a little more emphatically, but that's her general reaction as well."

"Is there a reason for this?"

"Procurement and Supply seem to be dragging their feet, sir."

"Time I undragged them," Jacen said. He hit the comm key and opened the line to

Procurement. "I'm sure it's fixable."

"If you'd like me to talk to them, sir . . ."

"I think they need a full colonel to motivate them, Lekauf, but I'm grateful for

your offer." Jacen suddenly felt it was the most pressing task on his list. He and Niathal

expected a lot from the armed forces, and it wasn't too much to expect the military

bureaucracy to back them up. "I'll get things moving. Find Captain Shevu for me, will

you?"

"He's out on surveillance, sir. Intercepted some nasty ordnance, so he's out with

Sergeant Wirut watching a drop-off point."

Shevu was hands-on. He didn't seem to be as enthusiastic about the GAG's role as

he had been a few weeks earlier, but he did his job and led from the front. There was

nothing more Jacen could ask of an officer.

"Okay, I'll catch up with him when he's relieved."

Procurement frustrated Jacen from the start. When he

got an answer from the

comm, his status as commander of the GAG didn't seem to open as many doors as it

did in the rest of the Alliance. By the time he was put through to a senior civil servant

in Fleet Supply-a woman called Gellus-he wasn't impressed, and his caf was cold.

"We can't bypass the supply system, sir," said Gellus. "All requests are dealt with

in sequence."

"Shouldn't they be dealt with by urgency, as in front line?"

"I don't have the power to do that under the procurement regulations, sir."

"Who do I talk to about quality of supplies?"

"Which supplies? You see, we have four item departments."

departments--

"Cannon maintenance packs. We're getting complaints about poor-quality

replacement parts."

"That would be Engineering Support. They have their own system. You'll have

to--"

Jacen had learned patience and a dozen ways to calm his mind in crisis from as

many esoteric Force-using schools. He didn't want to use any of them. He wanted to

lose his temper. He wanted action.

"There's a war on," he said quietly. "All I want is for the right kit to get to the

people fighting. What's the fastest way to do that?"

"You're not Fleet, are you, sir? GAG is domestic."

"Meaning?"

"This isn't your chain of command. We'd need authorization from a senior officer

from Fleet to pursue this request. It's the regulations, sir."

But I'm commander of the Galactic Alliance Guard. I don't even have this much

trouble getting to see Chief Omas. The apparently limited scope of his authority galled

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him. He could call on Star Destroyers and entire armies, but getting past a bureaucrat

was impossible.

"Would the Supreme Commander's word do?"

Gellus swallowed audibly. "Yes, sir."

"Then I'll come back with that."

Jacen closed the link, furious. Rules. He wasn't used to these arbitrary limits. If he

couldn't get simple supply issues ironed out, then his future as a Sith Lord looked

limited.

His rational mind told him this was an annoyance that could be solved with a

message to Niathal and a little delegation to a junior officer, but another sense entirely

told him he had to stick with this.

Good for morale, he thought.

No, it was something else. He couldn't put his finger on it.

Rules and regulations. He scrolled through the comm

rules and regulations. He scrolled through the command codes for the Alliance

defense departments and found Legal and Legislative. He tapped the sequence, and a

human voice answered.

"Can I borrow a legal-analyst droid?" he asked the assistant. Jacen preferred his

legal advice from the most dispassionate and unimaginatively honest sources. A droid

could grind through the small print in the statutes for him.

"Right away, sir."

That was more like it. Jacen's mood improved.

In the meantime, he still needed that simple authorization from Admiral Niathal to

get the kit moving.

Good officer. Good tactician. Hidebound attitudes.

But he needed her as much as she needed him.

Lekauf returned with fresh caf. He should have been off-duty, according to the

roster. "You're too busy to do routine administration, sir," he said. "Are you sure I can't

take it off your hands?"

"I'm sure," said Jacen. "Procurement and I need to get a few things straight

between us."

Lekauf grinned. "You show 'em, sir."

Something told Jacen that it was more important to "show 'em" than he could ever

imagine.

And that voice-he listened to it.

THE SKYWALKERS' APARTMENT, CORUSCANT

Luke looked at his hands, right then left. One was prosthetic, and one was flesh,

and had been touched by someone he was beginning to think of as his nemesis.

Lumiya.

In the middle of a battle, he'd had the chance to kill her, and they'd ended up

touching hands in a gesture that between normal people might have been considered

reconciliation.

I said I didn't want to kill her.

LUKE SKYWALKER had never wanted to kill anyone. Sometimes it happened, though.

He stood up and took the shoto out of his belt, the short lightsaber that he felt he

needed to deal with Lumiya and her lightwhip.

What's happening? What does she want?

She'd never been one to play mind games like Vergere. She was a soldier: a pilot,

an intelligence agent, a fighter. He'd yet to put the pieces together, but she was

connected to Jacen's slide into darkness in some way.

Luke made a few idle practice passes with the shoto and tried to visualize what

might happen if he ran into Lumiya again. Then he wondered what he'd have done at

nineteen, and he knew he wouldn't have thought about it

too much. He wanted things to

be that clear again.

The doors to the apartment opened, and he heard Mara and Ben talking. Relief

flooded him. He laid the photo on the table and every rehearsed line of warning and

disapproval vanished, replaced by a simple need to grab his only son and crush him in a

hug.

Ben stood rooted to the spot and submitted to it. Mara gave Luke a warning with a

raised eyebrow, but he wasn't planning to scold Ben.

"I'm glad you're safe," Luke said. "But if anything I did made you go off like that,

we need to talk about it."

Ben looked at Mara as if seeking a cue to explain. "I was working. I was on a mission, that's all."

Jacen, you liar. You said he resented the fact that I stopped him being your apprentice.

Only Jacen would-could-send him on a mission.

Luke considered casually asking Ben who'd sent him, but he knew anyway, and

he didn't want to descend to tricking his own son into giving him information or putting

him on the spot about Jacen. He didn't need any more proof that his nephew wasn't

going to turn back to the light without some substantial help. It was help that Han and

Lera couldn't give. It was beyond the Jedi Council, too.

This was family trouble. He'd sort it out, with or without Mara.

"Comlink silence?" he asked.

"Yes, Dad. Sorry." Ben might have been surprised by the hug, but he hadn't

recoiled, either. "I can't discuss it. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course I do, son." And I bet I know who told you not to. "I really hoped you

weren't going to stay in the GAG."

"I'm good at that kind of work."

"I know."

"I can't ever be a good little academy Jedi now, Dad. I have to see this through.

We've had this argument before, haven't we?" Ben's tone was regretful, not a whiny

teenager's protest about his parents' unfairness. It was sobering to see him growing up

so fast. Growing up? No, aging. "There's a war going on, and once you've served, you

know you can't walk away from it and sit it out while your . . . while your friends risk

their lives."

"Luke . . ." Mara's tone was reproachful, with that slightly nasal edge that said she

wanted Luke to stop. "Is this really the time for all that?"

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He ignored her. "I understand, Ben. I do. But the GAG isn't the place you should

be."

be.

"Isn't it?"

"It's not the way the government should deal with dissent."

"Then that's why I should stay in," Ben said quietly. "If it's a bad organization,

then it needs good people to stay in it and change it from the inside, and not abandon it

to the bad guys. And if it's a good organization, then all you're really upset about is my

safety, and I can handle that better than you think. You wanted me to be a Jedi. I'm

beings Jedi."

Ben's logic and moral reasoning were impeccable. "You have a point."

"So am I a good person, Dad? Or do you think I've gone

bad like you think the

GAG has?"

It was a question Luke had never wanted to consider.
What was a bad person?

Most people who did evil things were neither good nor
bad, just fallible mortals; the

only truly irredeemable being he'd ever known was
Palpatine. And presumably even

Palpatine had once been a little boy, never dreaming he
would be responsible for the

deaths of billions and savoring his power.

Luke realized he wasn't sure he knew what a good
person was when he saw one,

or at which point they turned bad. He was painfully
aware of Mara's gaze boring into

him, green and icy like a river frozen in its flood

thin, green and icy like a river frozen in its flood.

"You're a good person, Ben." If he doing anything I didn't? "You think about what you do."

"Thanks. And I'm not leaving the GAG, Dad. You'll have to make me, either

physically or through the courts, and none of us wants that. Leave me where I can do

some good."

Fights could be had without raised voices or angry words. Ben had fought and

given his parents an ultimatum. Luke knew he would have to tackle this another way.

And blast it, Ben was actually right. The GAG couldn't be abandoned to the

bullyboys.

"Just look out for Lumiya," Luke said. "You told him, Mara?"

"I told him."

"So are you going to stay for something to eat, son?" he asked, feeling Mara's

gaze thaw a little.

"I'd like that," said Ben, fourteen going on forty.

It was hard to have a family conversation over a meal without mentioning the war.

Ben wanted to know how Han and Leia were doing. Mara shunted vegetables around

her plate as if trying to sweep them under a carpet.

"Things aren't too good between Jacen and your aunt and uncle at the moment,

sweetheart." she said. "But whatever he tells you, they

still care about him and want

him to be okay."

"It's not personal," Ben said. "Hey, I tried to arrest Uncle Han because it was my

job. I didn't mean him any harm."

Luke thought about Jacen's haste to abandon his parents during the attack on the

resort satellite. He couldn't see Ben doing the same thing. If he could, he didn't want to

see it.

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"Dad, was the Empire really a reign of terror?"

"Just a bit . . ."

"I know you and Uncle Han and Aunt Leia had a rough time of it, but what about

time of it, but what about

ordinary people?"

Mara chewed with slow deliberation, her gaze in slight defocus on a point in the

mid-distance. "You might want to ask Alderaan. No, wait-it's gone, isn't it? Oops.

That's what happened to ordinary people, and I know better than most."

Because you did some of it. Luke faced up to the fact that he couldn't expect Ben

to believe a word either of them said to him. They'd both done things that they were

telling him he couldn't do now.

"But most people didn't really notice, did they?" Ben seemed to be fixed on

course. "Their lives went on as before. Maybe a few

people who were political got a

midnight visit from a few stormies, but most folks got on with their lives, right?"

"Right," Mara conceded. "But living in fear isn't living at all."

"It's better than dead."

"You think the Empire was okay, Ben?" Luke asked.

"I don't know. It just seems that a handful of people can think they have the

duty-the right-to change things for everybody else. It's a big decision, rebellion, isn't

it? But most decisions that affect trillions of beings get made by a few people."

Luke and Mara looked at each other discreetly and then at Ben. He'd acquired

political curiosity somewhere along the line. Whatever

political curiosity somewhere along the line. Whatever mission Jacen had sent him

on-and he had, Luke was certain-it had made the boy think.

Or maybe Luke was just losing touch with the fact that his kid was a young man

now, and changing fast. When he left, though, Mara still helped him on with his jacket.

Luke almost expected her to ask him if he was brushing his teeth every day. But, being

Mara, she did her maternal fretting in more pragmatic ways and pressed a matte-gray

object into Ben's hand.

"Humor me," she said, and kissed his forehead. "Carry this. You never know."

Ben stared into his palm. "Wow."

"That," she said, "was the best vibroblade the Empire could buy. It saved me more

than once. A lightsaber is great, but a lightsaber and a vibroblade is even better."

"Plus a blaster," Ben said. He grinned. "That's better still. The triple whammy."

"That's my boy."

After Ben had left, Mara cleared the plates. "When did we produce a communally

minded political analyst?"

"Too many Gorog buddies, maybe."

"Does that look like an out-of-control, screwed-up boy to you?"

"No," Luke said, "but it's not Jacen's influence that's making a man of him, even if

he's the only one who seems to be able to handle Ben "

He's the only one who seems to be able to handle Ben.

"Luke, we still have to do something."

"Oh, now we have to do something? What happened to
'Leave him with Jacen,

he's good for the boy . . .'?" Luke almost had to bite his
lip to avoid saying that he'd told

her so, which he'd always thought was the mark of
someone who wasn't looking for a

solution to the problem, just points to score. "Besides, he
doesn't seem to be getting

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corrupted by what's happening. Maybe he is that good
man on the inside. Maybe you

were right to make me let our kid join the secret police-"

"I meant about Lumiya." Mara had a way of bracing her
shoulders that said she

knew she'd made a big mistake but he didn't have to rub her nose in it. "Okay, I've

changed my mind. Jacen's gone bad. My fault we've wasted a few months placating

Ben. Satisfied? Now what about the root cause of this?"

"We haven't picked up her trail again."

"And then what happens when we do?" Mara smacked the plates down on the

counter so hard they rattled. "What are you going to do, hold her hand again?" He

should never have told her that Lumiya had offered him her hand when they were

fighting. It was eating away at her. "Because the poor old girl doesn't mean any harm?"

Lumiya? Queen of the stanging Sith?"

"There really was no ill intent in her."

Mara rolled her eyes. "Of course there wasn't. She doesn't want to kill you. She

wants to kill our son." She grabbed Luke's face in both hands and made him look into

her eyes. "Luke, you could have killed her. Cut her in two. Finished the job. But you

didn't."

Luke felt inexplicably ashamed. "I couldn't."

"I know. We come from different schools of justice, don't we?"

"Sweetheart-

"She's not your father, Luke. There's nothing good left in her to redeem. She's a

threat that needs to be taken out, and that's what I'm

trained to do, and you're not.

Forget this take her alive if possible garbage. The only way anyone's taking her is dead."

Luke had had a feeling Mara might say that. He knew when she was building up

to something. She might have thought she could keep things from him, but he knew her

well enough by now to see the cogs grinding and the plan forming.

He'd missed his chance with Lumiya. He wouldn't get another.

"You're telling me you're going after her."

"You might tag along if you could be trusted not to go soft on her." Mara let him

go and looked embarrassed. Her cheeks were flushed.

"You can have Alema. She needs

a serious attitude readjustment with a lightsaber, too. It's not as if we haven't got

enough kill-crazy stalkers to go around."

No matter what happened, Luke knew he didn't have that assassin's ability to kill

someone who wasn't trying to kill him right there and then. If he had . . .

So Ben wasn't the only one navigating a moral maze. Luke had been doing it for

decades, but the maze was only acquiring more twists and turns each year.

"Let's see how much Jacen perks up with Lumiya gone," he said. Wait, did I just

bless an assassination? "And with Alema out of the way, then Leia and Han can come

back into the fold, and we can face this war as a family again."

Mara patted his cheek with a regretful smile and set a droid on cleaning the

dishes. She spent the rest of the afternoon assembling and checking an array of

weapons that definitely didn't come from a civilized age.

"I never knew you had one of those," he said, pointing to a blaster that had the

widemouthed muzzle of a grenade launcher. "How are you planning to use it?"

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"With a flechette cartridge. Let's see her try a lightwhip on that."

"Do you want to take my shot?"

"You offering?"

"Good-luck token, maybe."

"Under-the-rib-cage token, more like. Unless that's all durasteel, too."

This was his wife. Sometimes he caught a glimpse of the woman she once had

been, and she was a stranger for a second or two.

"How are you going to track her? She hides very-well."

"I can hunt very well." Mara took the shoto hilt and spun it like a blade. "A little

bait, a little investigation, and a little Force help." She ignited the energy beam. "Plus,

if Alema is trailing after her, as seems to be the case, then one of them is going to slip

up and show herself."

"Lumiya doesn't slip up."

"Well, she's not running the galaxy right now, so I guess she does sometimes . . ."

Mara spun the shoto into the air and caught it by the hilt as it fell. "And she keeps

showing up lately, so I'll be ready."

"Just keep me informed where you are, okay?"

"You'll know." Mara gave him her best I-know-what-I'm-doing grin. "And who

better to go after a former Emperor's Hand than another one?"

"You did that before . . ."

"And that was before I had a son to worry about." The grin faded. "I'm much more

dangerous now I have a cub to protect."

Luke had no doubt about that. But it was the first time in his life that he regretted

not killing someone when he'd had the chance.

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chapter four

To: Chief of Defense Logistics

From: Supreme Commander, Galactic Alliance Defense Force

CC: Chief of State; OC GAG; Head of Defense Procurement

Re: Fleet supply and procurement concerns

The shortfall in supplies in theater and the failure of equipment to meet standards

are intolerable. You are to give Colonel Solo, OC GAG, every cooperation in resolving

they cooperated in resolving
this situation as rapidly as possible. This is to be your top
priority, and Colonel Solo is

authorized to use any means necessary to achieve it.

Admiral Cha Niathal, SC GADF

DEFENSE PROCUREMENT AND SUPPLY
AGENCY, CORUSCANT

"Are you sure?" Jacen had no reason to disbelieve a
legal-analyst droid. Metal

lawyers were even more meticulous than flesh-and-blood
ones. HM-3 clunked along

beside him as they ambled up the apparently interminable
corridor to the offices of the

head of procurement, explaining the hurriedly assembled
data as they went. Jacen

believed in understanding the enemy, and that meant

grinding through the tedium of

small print. He was set on taking a lightsaber to a planet-sized ball of red tape.

"Yes, sir, this is routine." HM-3 reminded him a little of C-3PO-humanoid in

shape, with a necessarily pedantic personality-but he was a sober dark gray and had a

reassuring air of solid professional authority. "A piece of legislation that's overdue for

reform. Would you like the full explanation, or a simplified lay-being's version?"

"Consider me as lay as they come."

"As the legislation stands, it takes the agreement of the Defense Council to change

the regulations on procurement. It's designed to stop civil servants from bending the

rules to line their pockets. Or to stop anyone from commissioning an entire army and

its accompanying fleet and weapons without the Senate's knowledge, which I do

believe happened not so long ago . . . you might want to look back at the final years of

the Republic, sir."

Jacen mulled that over and tried to strip it down to basics. "So Senators have to

vote on what flimsi to purchase and what flavor dry rations to serve to the troops.

Monumental waste of time and expense, if you ask me."

"I admit it involves top-level decision makers in very low-level decisions, sir. But

it's the law. Every time you want to change something about supplies, or any other

minor administrative issue, you need Chief Omas or Admiral Niathal or someone else

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equally senior to rubber-stamp it. It's the same for other departments-health, education, all of them."

HM-3 seemed apologetic. Jacen had little patience with people who found

comfort in impenetrable rules and ritual: He wanted things done.

"I don't want to take every complaint about hydrospanners and fuel inductors

through committees." How did I ever become the procurement go-to guy? Is Niathal

sidelining me? Never mind. I'll learn a lot. "Is there a way around this?"

"Actually, there is."

"Go on."

"It's a simple matter of giving appropriate officers of the GA-in the most

general sense-the power to change regulations. To remove the requirement for every

cough and spit to be dealt with by Senators."

"How do we do that?"

"By removing the requirement for approval by Defense Council members. Shall I

draft an amendment, sir?"

"How does that work?"

"I draft a request for a change in the existing law to relieve regulatory burdens, so

that order-making powers can be devolved to appropriate persons such as senior

military officers and ministers of state without the need to refer the issue to

committees, councils, or even the full Senate." HM-3 shuddered. It was a very human

touch. "Give them something to debate, and the more trivial it is, the more hours they'll

spend on it, because they can grasp the small concepts better, you see."

"Yes, but what happens to the amendment? And how long is that going to take?"

"If I table it today, then it goes before the weekly Policy and Resources Council in

two days' time, and, as an appropriate person who already has the Chief of State's

sanction, you can start changing what you need the next day."

Jacen clasped his hands behind his back and thought about it. This was making a

new law to allow him to change laws.

Bizarre.

"I wonder how much the Defense Department spends on carpeting," HM-3 said

peevisly, scanning the floor. Droids preferred smooth surfaces. "Here's one area where

they could economize."

As he walked, Jacen was calculating how many simple decisions were mired in

approvals, but he had the sensation of someone trying to get his attention. It was wholly

in his head; he wondered if it was the voice again, and

in his head: he wondered if it was the voice again, and then realized it was his common

sense screaming to be heard.

You're changing laws about changing laws. Think about that.

Jacen only had a vague idea about what use he might make of that beyond getting

supplies moving, but it struck him as a promising area to address.

"What would I be limited to?" he asked.

"Well, there has to be a fail-safe in the wording or you'll never get P and R to

agree to it, but if I were to cap the scope of this, say that the existing budget can't be

exceeded, then that would satisfy them."

Legislation was terminally boring. No, it should have

been. But something in it

was forming a hard ball of an idea in Jacen's mind.
"Would it be possible to word it so

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that if I come across any more stupid red tape in the process, I can change that, too?

Even if I don't know where I'm likely to find it? I don't want some jobsworth holding

up vital supplies because I didn't specify the right subsection of some obscure

regulation."

"That would make it somewhat . . . open-ended."

"But it's just administration. It's not the constitution or a common charter."

HM-3 ground his gears quietly. "I'll word it genetically so that you can change

that you can change

any administrative procedure you need to. The other fail-safe is that only authorized

individuals can make use of this, and that can be limited to whomever the Chief of

State decides. So there'll be no spending sprees on secret armies, and only a few very

visible, accountable people can make use of it. That will reassure the P and R

members." HM-3 went silent for a moment, consulting his agenda link. "I do believe

the day after tomorrow is a very, very busy day for P and R, sir. I think the amendment

will get through rather more quickly than usual."

It was a good day to bury the Legislative and Regulations Statute Amendment.

Jacen smiled.

"You'll have to tell me more about how this fits in with the emergency measures

legislation that Chief Omas already enacted."

"Full explanation, or-

"-the lay-being's executive summary, please."

"The three of you can do anything you need to for the duration of the war. With

Admiral Niathal, you are effectively a triumvirate. I have yet to hear Senator G'vli G'Sil

take note of that, despite his position as head of the Security Council. The Defense

Council is simply nodding everything through-when it actually meets, of course."

The thought took Jacen aback. He had his own plans for unending the galaxy, but

upending the galaxy, but

they were large-scale, strategic, and focused on order, justice, and the benign

application of military might. The petty minutiae of bureaucracy had never crossed his

mind as a weapon in the battle for order.

He'd spent five years learning the most arcane Force techniques in the galaxy,

but-again-he didn't have to use a single Force skill to gain power this time. It was

simply a matter of using psychology to manipulate people around him.

This is what makes Jedi weaker and lazier. They instantly resort to Force

techniques, without thinking.

HM-3 didn't have to remind him to look at the fall of the

Republic. In his desire to

understand the environment that had turned his grandfather from Anakin Skywalker

into Darth Vader, he'd examined that final decade. Palpatine seemed to have grabbed

most of his power by brilliant manipulation and understanding of people's weaknesses,

not simply by channeling the power of the dark side.

Jacen and the droid reached the mighty carved doors of the procurement center.

They were almost as fine as the doors to Chief Omas's office. No—they were actually

more opulent. Jacen turned to his infallible legal adviser.

"Do you think it's wrong that we're effectively a triumvirate, Aitch-Em?" Jacen

asked. "Undemocratic?"

asked. "Circumlocution."

"I'm not programmed for right and wrong, sir." HM-3 sounded a little

disappointed, as if Jacen hadn't fully understood the complexity of his art. "I can tell

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you only what's legal and illegal, because they have definitions. Right has no

parameters. Justice doesn't, either, nor good. Flesh has to make those decisions."

"Flesh makes a different decision on those every day, my friend." Jacen put his

hand on the controls, and the splendid relief of an ancient Coruscanti cityscape split

into two to admit him into the procurement offices.

I can change a law to let me change laws.

But can I use the law that lets me change laws to change that law itself?

He thought for a moment that he was enjoying a few childish seconds of playing

at circular logic. Then it struck him he'd just had an insight of significant proportions.

"Colonel Solo," said the head of the procurement agency. Tav Velio was an edgy

human male who looked in need of a good meal. "I've tasked one of my assistants to

investigate the shortages. It might simply be a case of delays in the process."

"Is there anyone ahead of the fleet or the GAG in this line?" Jacen asked.

"Our suppliers do have other clients."

"I hope they're on our side."

I hope they're on our side.

"We source our equipment from allies."

"Are your people moving as fast as they can?"

"Of course they are, Colonel Solo. We're also looking for ways to streamline the

process."

Jacen smiled. "So am I." He looked around the office. It wasn't gold-plated, but he

was expecting to see some evidence of lack of frugality.

"Now, about the cannon

service packs. The parts that need swapping out frequently. I asked for an explanation

of why there have been so many misfires."

Velio consulted his datapad with the air of a man with a very good defense, or at

least a robust excuse. "We ran random sampling on those packs yesterday for all the

main cannon specs, and the service packs we buy are adequate."

"But we don't want adequate. We want best."

"We do have budget constraints, sir."

"Is this decision made by a department?"

"There's a senior purchasing officer, yes."

Jacen knew there was only one way to focus people who didn't quite understand

what adequate meant in the field. He turned to the droid.

"Aitch, under the current

powers, is there a mechanism by which I can co-opt civilian staff to carry out

research?"

HM-3 hummed on the threshold of Jacen's normal hearing for a few seconds.

"Yes, sir."

"Is there any restriction on location and conditions?"

"No, sir."

"That's what I like to hear." Jacen was starting to enjoy the rich

scope for inventiveness that regulations gave him. They didn't limit his options at

all: they created new ones. He started to see the joy of the letter of the law. "I'd like to

meet the chief purchasing officer who signed off on the cannon packs."

Velio looked slightly bemused. "I take responsibility for what my staff do, sir."

"That's very commendable, but I really want to understand the process, and that

means getting to know the people. Understanding of the other person's situation is the

key to this, I think."

Velio, still looking bewildered, went to summon the purchasing officer via his

desk comm.

"No, that's quite all right," Jacen said. "I'll go to his office."

HM-3 made an inscrutable clicking sound as the three of them took the turbolift to

the purchasing floor. They stepped out of the cab into an open-plan office that could

have accommodated wandering herds without trouble.

Good. Jacen wanted an audience. Hearts and minds.

"Let me introduce you to Biris Te Gaf," said Velio. "He's our senior purchasing officer for engineering support."

Te Gaf was visibly nervous, and his staff and co-workers-mainly humans, but

Nimbanese, Gossams, and Sy Myrthian, too-feigned work while watching discreetly.

Jacen could feel the pervading anxiety throughout the floor. Gaf offered a damp hand

for shaking, and Jacen turned on his full charm. Te Gaf had a lot of data about why the

cannon pack was fit for the job. It was a very good price, he told Jacen.

"But we have misfires and various problems to iron out "

But we have misfires and various problems to iron out," said Jacen. He checked

that everyone could hear him, judging their attention by the close-range ripples in the

Force and their body language. "I'd really like your help on this. I'm asking you to do

some evaluation of the cannon pack."

"Of course, Colonel Solo. Anything I can do to help."

HM-3 leaned in close and whispered to Jacen. "Article five, subsection C-twentyseven."

"I'm glad to hear that." Jacen smiled at the purchasing officer. "That's why, under

article five, subsection C-twenty-seven of the Emergency Measures Act, I'm assigning

you to the front-line ship that's had the most cannon misfires in the fleet, because

there's no better place to gather facts than from the people who have to use this kit, and

in the place where they have to use it." Jacen glanced around. Even with Force-

enhanced hearing, he could detect very little breathing and no swallowing. "I'm more

than happy to extend this field deployment to anyone who wants to better understand

the end users' experience of procurement. Just say the word. We're always happy to

accommodate you. In fact, I can guarantee you a ringside seat for the action."

Jacen smiled with all the diplomatic sweetness he'd learned from his mother and

looked around the room, knowing he wouldn't be mown down by volunteers. Te Gaf

looked stricken. Jacen felt he'd focused everyone on the

looked stricken. Jacen felt he'd focused everyone on the significance of their job more

effectively, and that they now knew what would happen if they thought adequate was

good enough.

If you think it's good enough, then it's good enough for you to use personally-on

the front line.

HM-3 followed Jacen out of the building, and they took an air taxi back to the

GAG headquarters. It took a little while because the traffic was heavier than usual, and

by the time Jacen got back to his office, the arrangements to transfer one civilian-Te

Gaf, Biris J.-to the Ocean were already being discussed by GAG personnel. Corporal

Lekauf and two of the other 967 Commando troopers greeted him like a hero in the briefing room.

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"That was a good clean thing you did there, sir," said one trooper, grinning. "My rifle parts feel more efficient already."

Lekauf gave him a thumbs-up. "Your grandfather would have done the same, sir.

Nice move."

In these barracks, that was an honest compliment and not a warning of the

temptations of the dark side. Jacen preferred the judgment of ordinary soldiers to the

arcane philosophical debate of the Jedi Council.

It's all going to change.

No more wars flaring up in each generation.

No more career politicians wringing what they can out of the system.

No more talk of freedom that just means a handful can do as they please while the

rest struggle for survival.

No wonder the old guard feared the Sith, if that was what they threatened-the

end of chaos that served only the few.

Jacen returned the thumbs-up to Lekauf. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

HM-3 plucked out a datapad. "I'll keep you apprised of the progress of the

amendment, Colonel Solo. Is that all for today?"

"I may consult you again. You make all this easier to understand."

"That's my job."

Jacen just wanted to check. He had the germ of an idea.

"Funny thing, laws and

regulations, aren't they? That amendment gives me-and others, of course-the ability

to change the amended law itself, doesn't it? It's quite circular."

HM-3 didn't care about right and wrong: just legal and illegal. If Jacen had

designs on manipulating the amendment for uses beyond speeding up the dispatch of

medical supplies, then the droid didn't regard it as part of his remit.

"Yes." HM-3 said. "It is."

Jacen tackled the pile of intelligence reports that had stacked up on his desk with

renewed enthusiasm. The air was alive with imminence, of things about to happen. The

endless thoughts of whom he would have to kill to achieve his sacrifice had gone away

for a while, but they'd be back. In the meantime, he had a new tool with which to effect

change.

I can change the law that lets me change laws.

If I use that wisely, I can bypass the Senate when I need to.

The power of simple human reason was as effective as the Force some days.

TEKSHAR FALLS CASINO, KUAT CITY, KUAT

What happened to the clones?" Mirta asked.

Kuat City stank of credits. Fett had never been able to understand how an

industrial society whose wealth was built on heavy engineering still had an ancient

aristocracy. Funny place. Anachronistic. Ahead of him, the smarter part of Kuat City

glittered, elegant towers and spires that seemed a refined echo of the industrial skyline

of cranes in the orbital shipyards.

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He knew Kuat well. He'd once saved its shipyards from an attempt to destroy

them. He hoped the place was going to show him some gratitude.

"Cannon fodder," he said, answering Mirta at last. He brought the speeder bike to

a halt by an arcade of smart shops. "They died."

"Not the one I saw. He said some left the army."

"The only way out," said Fett, "was death or desertion."

"None of them retired?"

"Depends what you mean by retired. I heard a few ended up in care homes run by

well-meaning peace campaigners, though."

Mirta seemed to be working out what retire meant for men who were trained to

kill, who'd been kept apart from regular society, and who had an artificially shortened

life span. The slight jut of her chin-a sure sign she was annoyed-communicated

itself through the helmet. There was only so much she could hide.

"Did you ever hunt deserters?"

"No." He'd seen plenty, though. "Didn't pay enough."

"Did you care about them, Ba'buir?"

Okay, she finds comfort in playing Mando. But I'll never get used to that name.

"Not really."

"They were your brothers."

"No, they weren't." He motioned her to get off the speeder. "Blood isn't

everything. You know that's the Mando way."

"But I bet you'll be shooting that clone a different line," she said. "How else are

you going to get him to help you? Beat it out of him? He looks as tough as you are."

"Maybe I'll just ask nicely," said Fett. "Right now I need to walk into the Tekshar

and have a chat with Fraig. That might be a little inconvenient for him."

The Tekshar Falls was one of those feats of architectural near impossibility at

which the Kuati excelled. Other establishments in the galaxy had impressive water

features, but the Tekshar was a waterfall, a raging, hammering torrent from a river

diverted at vast expense into the entertainment center of the city. It provided its own

hydroelectric

power, which was just as well given the ferocious array of lights that pierced the

curtains of water. The casino was set within the waterfall itself, part construction, part

natural stone, with turrets jutting through the water like tree fungi. To get to the

entrance, gamblers had to walk through water plummeting five hundred meters.

"Pity, I've just had my hair done," Mirta said, solidly encased in armor from head

to toe. "Is this how they stop the riffraff from coming in?"

"We are the riffraff," said Fett. "And we're going in."

He paused to hack into the Kuat police database from his HUD system. They

wouldn't mind. He was just contributing to law and order around here. Images of

scumbags, petty villains, and serious bad boys-and girls-

scrolled down the display

inside his helmet. He waited, and shortly FRAIG, L., appeared. For gangland vermin,

Fraig looked remarkably respectable: fresh-faced and framed with gold curls that

would have made a mother weep. Fett suspected that if Fraig still had a mother, he'd

have sold her to a Hutt by now.

"So you're just going to stroll in," said Mirta.

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"I only want to ask him a question."

"It's never that easy, is it?"

"We'll see." Fett strode down the tree-lined boulevard that led to the foot of the

falls and forked around it. Only the stupidly wealthy had

the time to gamble this early.

It said a lot for Fraig's business acumen. "There's no reason for him to get upset. Just

check that your jet pack's primed."

"We might be leaving rapidly, then . . . ," Mirta said, keeping up with him without

apparent effort, a reminder that he was slowing down. "Will they make a fuss about

letting us in dressed like this?"

"It's all about making an entrance." Fett wiped the windborne spray from his

visor. "People usually find my dress acceptable. Sooner or later."

He walked straight across the bridge at the wall of roaring water and churning

white foam. The falls roared like a curtain to create a

white loam. The rails parted like a curtain to create a wide portal. Behind, the casino

was a vividly lit-and completely dry-haven.

"Very impressive," said Mirta.

It was a nice trick played by automated force fields triggered by a

motion sensor. But it was, as he often thought, all about presentation. A little

theater. It always helped.

"Keep up," he said.

The lobby of the casino was a study in opulence, as if someone had taken a bet on

how many credits they could spend on each square meter. It was everything Fett didn't

care for: flocked wall coverings, gilding, mirrors, and low-level lighting, all the

trappings of illusion, and hard to clean, too. The lobby parted into two sections, one

leading to the restaurant and the other to the gaming tables. Fett consulted his

investment portfolio via his HUD. He noted TIRUAL CONSTRUCTION HOLDINGS.

"Let's not do too much damage," he said. "I think I have shares in this place."

There was a steward at the front desk and a few very large assistants-humans,

Trandoshans, and Gran-walking in slow, considered circles around the thick purple

carpet that dragged at Fett's boots like tar. He'd never seen a Trandoshan in a formal

suit before, and wondered what poor old Bossk would have made of that. It was also

unusual to see a Gran in this line of work. It was clear none of them was there to help

diners make informed choices from the wine list.

The steward was scanning a screen in his desk, probably matching Fett's image to

the database of guests he needed to recognize for one reason or another. Judging by his

sudden flinch, he'd found FETT.

"Do you have proof of identity, sir?"

Fett touched his blaster. "This used to do nicely."

The steward-human, male, utterly ugly-was doing a very good job of not

wetting his pants. Fett had to hand it to him. "Ah . . . haven't seen you here in a long

time, sir."

"I've come to visit someone." Fett indicated Mirta with a thumb gesture. "With my associate."

"Will that seeing require repairs afterward?"

Fett flicked a very large-denomination credit chip onto the desk. "Keep the change in case it does. Where's Fraig?"

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Credits talked. Blasters talked, too, but credits could whisper menacingly every bit as well.

"He's hosting a private sabacc game in his suite on the thirtieth floor, sir." The steward smiled valiantly and snapped his fingers at the hired help. "I'll let him know

you're on the way up."

The nattily attired Trandoshan rushed to his summons, looking like he'd picked

the wrong outfit for a costume party.

"Take . . . the . . . er . . . President of Mandalore up to Master Fraig's suite. All

drinks on the house."

So they didn't quite grasp what being Mandalore meant. That was okay, because

Fett didn't, either. Mirta stifled laughter, but only Fett heard it. He switched to the

helmet comlink with a blink.

"So you do have shares here, Ba'buir," she said.

"Depending on how many guests Fraig's got, I might

need your help. Try not to
kill them unless they ask for it."

"Yessir, Mister President!"

"I liked you better without a sense of humor."

He didn't dislike Mirta. She'd tried to kill him, but that
was a couple of months

ago, and things had moved on. She worked hard and she
wasn't mired in fluffy trivia

like fashion and holovids. She was strong in every sense.
Beviin-and Fett listened to

Beviin-said she was a real Mando'ad, a solid
Mandalorian woman, because she could

shoot straight, cook passably well, and had the shoulders
of an armor-smith.

Mando'ade valued the frontier kind of female, not
decorative trophies who couldn't

even dig a defensive entrenchment.

She's just like Sintas. Not as pretty, but she's so much like her.

He hadn't known Ailyn long enough to tell if Mirta took after her mother. Sin. I

used to call her Sin, and she called me Bo. Did Mirta have a nickname? What had

Sintas told Ailyn about him, and what had Ailyn told Mirta, to breed such hatred

toward him?

Fett pulled his attention back to the present and followed the Trandoshan, aware

of a full 360-degree vista around him, the dulled pain in his guts, and the fact that the

closer he got to death, the more he thought about people who hadn't been on his mind

who hadn't been on his mind

in a long, long time.

The turbolift doors opened onto a floor of the same thick purple carpet as the

lobby, with small salons leading off it. Gaming tables rattled, clicked, and flashed with

lives ruined and fortunes lost. Even through his helmet's filter, he could smell the

cloying amalgam of a hundred different perfumes distilled from plants facing

extinction and parts of animals he didn't even want to think about.

The Trandoshan led them along a corridor to an imposing set of gilded doors, then

beat a lumbering retreat. The doors parted and Fett found himself visor-to-nose with a

Hamadryas who didn't seem to know how to blink.
Behind him, a group of six

splendidly dressed gamblers

-three human males, two females, and a Weequay-sat

around a gilt-framed sabacc table with Fraig. There were
two more heavies standing by

the kitchen doors, probably on drinks patrol.

"Master Fett," said Fraig, not looking up from the table.
"How good to meet you."

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Fraig had a great hand. Fett could see it embedded in the
table's display as he

loomed over him. It was a pity to interrupt. His guests
were trying to concentrate on the

sabacc game, but it was hard to give the cards full
attention when there were two

attention when there were two

bounty hunters paying an unexpected visit. They all found reasons to go to the kitchen

to top up their drinks while the Hamadryas watched silently, one hand now on his

holster.

"Got a few questions for you," Fett said. "About your predecessor."

"Depends on what you want to know." Fraig was as well spoken as his hair was

coiffed. His gangster dad must have sent him to a very exclusive school. But he hadn't

been tutored in the subtle art of putting his hand under the table to check his hold-out

blaster discreetly. Fett hoped he didn't have to shoot the man before he got some

answers. "I do hope you haven't been sent by Cherit's associates to express their displeasure."

"I'm not going to kill you," Fett said. "If I did that, then you wouldn't be able to

tell me things. And I want you to tell me things. I'm a curious man."

The Hamadryas on the door already had his blaster visible on his belt, but Mirta

had him covered. Fett could see from their HUD corn-link connection that she was

watching him, the helmet sensors responding to her eye movements.

Fraig shrugged. "What exactly do you want me to tell you?"

"The Mandalorian who killed Cherit. I need to find him."

Fraig had the kind of smile that spread like a crack in ice.
"I've been asked some

subtle questions, but that's a good one. I assure you I didn't order Cherit's death."

"I don't care if you sent a wreath and took care of his widow. Do you know where

I can find the man who killed him?"

"Shall we step outside onto the balcony?" Fraig gestured and picked up his drink.

"It's a sensitive matter to discuss in front of my guests."

"Suit yourself," said Fett, and decided instantly where he was prepared to be

maneuvered. Step outside. Right. Mirta stood guard at the open doors, but the

Hamadryas bodyguard tried to move her out of the way. He made the mistake of

putting his hand on her back, and a little too low at that. She simply raised her clenched

fist to shoulder height and ejected her gauntlet vibroblade.

"Touch me again, chakaar, and I'll ram this into your carotid artery."

"I haven't got one."

"Then I'll have to keep stabbing you until I find somewhere else that bleeds

copiously."

Fraig intervened. "Serku, let's not upset the lady, shall we? Let her wait wherever

she wishes."

Fraig was making a lot of mistakes tonight for a crime boss. It was just as well

Fett always assumed the worst. Fraig might have thought that a balcony reduced Fett's

options, but it didn't represent much of a problem for a man with a jet pack. Fraig didn't

have one. He also lacked a fiber cord line.

This wouldn't take long.

Amateurs.

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Fett had to fight an urge to explain to Fraig how to do it right. Out on the balcony,

Kuat City's lights shimmered through a veil of rushing water in the dusk. An overhang

diverted the water a couple of meters from the face of the building.

Fett leaned one hand on the rail, feigning casual

disinterest but actually testing the

strength of the metal. He cast an eye over Fraig to estimate his weight. "Let me repeat

that simple question. Tell me anything you know about the Mandalorian who whacked

your predecessor."

"I had nothing to do with it. Cherit upset a lot of folks. Occupational hazard."

"Question still stands. I'll bet your organization was keen to find out, too."

"We didn't know who he was. All we knew was that he had a grudge about a

certain Twi'lek clan. We do business with Twi'leks in the entertainment industry."

"I'll bet." Fraig meant Twi'lek girls. "What land of grudge?"

"He didn't think we were treating them properly. We lost a couple of very popular

entertainers thanks to him."

Fraig was lying scum. And the clone in Mandalorian armor was settling a score

for some Twi'leks, but he wasn't a bounty hunter. Another link, then: personal, not

professional.

Time. He didn't have time for this.

"Seen him since?"

"No."

"Want to tell me who the Twi'leks were?"

"Why do you want this man so badly? It has to be something big for you to be

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100

hunting him." Fraig examined his manicured nails. "Or perhaps some of my associates

regret Cherit's passing, so they've hired you to come after me."

"Not for hire right now." Fett could never understand why they didn't listen. They

never heard what he said. He played it straight, and they always looked for a second

meaning. "I want the Mando in one piece. I need him to do something for me."

Fraig had missed his chance. Fett switched to the helmet corn-link and got Mirta's

attention, which was fixed on him-and the Hamadryas-anyway. "I'm just going to

help our friend remember a few things."

Useful stuff, fibercord.

Fett shot out the line in a loop from his backpack and whipped it around Fraig,

jammed the grappling hook between the bars, and shoved him over the railing. It took

two seconds. Fraig screamed, clinging to the top rail, but a good hard whack on the

knuckles with the butt of the blaster made the scumbag let go. Fraig plummeted and

Fett braced for the inevitable thump into the rail when the rope ran out. It nearly

winded him. Fraig bounced and twisted in the line's

strangling grip, still shrieking. Fett kept a few meters of line secured in reserve in

the winch assembly.

Mirta was taking good care of the Hamadryas. She'd half closed the transparisteel

doors on him, but the bodyguard wedged his body in the gap and tried to get a blaster

shot through the opening. His arm was trapped. Fett watched, impressed, as Mirta

head-butted the guard a second time, shoved the vibroblade into his thigh, and forced

him-shrieking in pain, nice touch-back through the doors so that they crashed shut.

Then she fired a few rounds into the controls.

63

"Make it quick, Ba'buir?" She flexed her shoulders as if easing torn neck muscles.

"The doors might be blasterproof, but they'll get them open sooner or later."

Fett peered over the side. Fraig was twisting helplessly like a deeve hooked on a

fishing line, making gasping sounds. The line was tight around his waist and chest. He

was dangling fifteen meters below the rail.

"Don't struggle, and think calm thoughts," Fett called. "It helps you remember.

And it'll stop you from slipping out of the loop."

"You're crazy-I'll have your throat cut for this-"

"You're on the end of a line. I'm on solid ground. Think about it."

"You're a dead man."

"Perceptive to the last. Give me names, vermin."

"I tell you I didn't pay the Mando. I'm glad he whacked Cherit, but I never paid

him to do it-"

"Try again."

Fraig's voice was almost drowned out by the roar of the waterfall behind him.

"The Twi'leks were from some family called Himar."

"Good start." Fett paid out another meter of line with a jolt. Fraig shrieked as he

slipped farther toward the permacrete, stone, and raging water a hundred meters below.

"Is that helping? Memory often needs a trigger."

Himar. Any Mando who pitched in hard to play the hero for a couple of dancers

would be known in the Twi'lek community. It didn't happen that often; nobody else

cared what happened to Twi'lek girls. Fett had his lead. He'd have a contact

somewhere-and if he didn't, Beviin would. Beviin wouldn't press him to find out why.

"Anything else you want to get off your chest?"

"I don't know the guy, Fett. But I know you're going to regret this."

Fett could hear the dull rhythmic thuds of Fraig's bodyguards trying to smash the

doors apart. "If I find you've given me a load of garbage, I'll be back to finish the job."

He braced his boot on the bottom rail and began winching in the gangster. Mirta

stood next to him with her blaster trained on the doors.

"You're going soft. Why are you reeling him back in?"

"I want the fibercord back. It's my favorite Ultra-fine."

"When you get him on the balcony, I'll tranquilize him . . .
"

"Then back to Slave I. Scenic route."

"You're lucky we've got jets."

"I wouldn't have come up here if I hadn't." Fett felt the sweat breaking out and

running down his spine. This would have been an easier task a few years ago. "And I

wouldn't have gone much above thirty floors anyway."

"Why?"

"Hundred-meter line. In case I had to rappel down."

Fraig's face was two meters away now. He'd stopped yelling and settled for

labored breathing.

"I haven't got a hundred-meter line," Mirta said.

"I wish you'd get jets, then." He heaved Fraig over the

Lucky you've got jets, then. He heaved Fraig over the rail in a tangled heap, and

Mirta delivered a roundhouse punch that laid the man out. If that was her tranquilizer

treatment, she was a born medic. "Time to go."

64

Mirta shot off at an awkward angle and crashed through the sheet of water ahead

of him; there was no force field up here to part the falls. When Fett looked down, he

could see speeders crisscrossing the plaza on either side of the boulevard. He needed to

land and find the speeder bike: jets were great for fast exits, but the flame made both of

them conspicuous targets in the night sky.

The speeder was still where he'd left it, primed with a

detonator and hidden in

bushes on the edge of a park. Both the painkiller and the adrenaline were wearing off at

the same time, and Fett had never been

more conscious of the reason for his search. He set off for the landing strip at top

speed down freight lanes that had the lightest traffic, noting that Mirra was happily

fixing a grenade launcher attachment to her blaster with both hands and gripping the

saddle of the speeder with her knees. She looked like she was used to fast getaways.

"You're doing okay for a dead man, Ba'buir."

"Your dad trained you well, too."

"Most of that I learned from Mama."

"Well . . . she did a good job of it."

Fett took one hand off the bars and activated Slave Ps remote controls. Her drives

would be primed: he could drop the speeder into the cargo hold and get off this planet

inside a minute. In his HUD display, he was already scanning databases for that

Twi'lek family name.

This was the one time he felt truly, thrillingly alive: when he was winning, being

the best, surviving. Is that it? Is that all I can do? He almost envied the Beviins and

Carids of this world, who delighted in simple things like good food and family. But

there was a clean, uncomplicated satisfaction in danger. It erased worries and fears and

memories. There was only the moment, and surviving it.

Fett concentrated on feeling good and ignoring the pain right up to the time his

rearview caught speeder headlights closing fast and Mirta turned to level her blaster.

"They must be calling in our course," she said. "You think it's Fraig's grunts, or

security?"

"We won't get the police's attention until you fire that blaster." His motion sensors

showed two speeders in pursuit, and two coming at them from the right on the

crossroads ahead. Another single speeder was approaching from the left. They might

have been ordinary citizens unlucky enough to be on the same route, or they might

same route, or they might

have been rushing to intercept him. If he timed it right, he could slip between them and

give Mirta a clean shot at the speeders behind. He gunned the drive.

Fett counted down the seconds. He was almost at the crossroads, but he wasn't

going to make it. From the right, one shot in front of him, and he raised his arm to give

it a burst of flamethrower, but the rider suddenly fell sideways and crashed to the

ground without a shot being fired. Two speeders heading the other way soared to avoid

it.

Fett watched the speeder approaching from the left cut across him without even slowing down.

He heard a loud crash, but no ba-dapp of a discharging blaster: had they collided?

Had they hit someone who happened to be on the wrong road at the wrong time?

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Mirta fired a grenade. "Gotcha!" A ball of flame lit up the night. "One down, one

to go. Reloading."

"Can't see the third speeder."

"Maybe they crashed."

"We've got a couple of minutes before the police join in," Fett said.

"Hey, where did he-"

There was a massive whoomp of a white-hot explosion behind them. Fett saw the

debris falling hot and red in the rearview of his HUD.
"Good shot."

"Not me. Didn't fire."

"What is this, a crash epidemic?"

"I think we have help."

"I hate help I didn't ask for."

But help it was, so he took the breathing space with grudgingly grateful caution.

Maybe their invisible benefactor was saving them for himself. Slave /was standing

between two battered freighters, looking nothing special to anyone who didn't know the

ship, just an old Fire-spray idling her drives.

Fett grounded the speeder bike and ran for the ship. Who would pick off Fraig's

morons for him? Generosity like that came with a price. Fett left Mirta to dock the

speeder in the hold and climbed up into the cockpit.

"Come on, girl, what's keeping you?" He tapped the console switches and Slave I

whined up to full power, a faint tremor passing through her airframe. It said safe. It said

home. It was the most reassuring sound he knew. "You've got twenty seconds before I

close the cargo hatch."

There was no answer, and just as that fact registered, Slave I's entry warning light

flashed. There was someone else on board. The systems didn't recognize them.

"Mirta? Mirta!"

The internal security cams showed nothing but the speeder. Fett grabbed his

blaster and went aft to check. Even through the helmet filter, he could smell a strong,

oily stench that he hadn't smelled in years.

He couldn't quite place it, but he knew it.

The speeder was stowed. The hatch was open. He raised the blaster and wondered

whether to just seal the hatch and launch Slave I, and hate himself for the rest of his

life - what was left of it

me, what was left of it.

Dad wouldn't have left you stranded. He'd have risked anything for you.

Fett had abandoned quite a few people over the years. He'd even left Sintas

wounded the last time he'd seen her-the very last time. It had seemed the right

decision then.

And you wonder why your daughter and granddaughter tried to kill you.

Fett stood to one side of the hatch. His sensors showed him two shapes on the

ramp, one humanoid and one animal whose form wasn't clearly defined. He counted to

three and came out, blaster and flamethrower aimed.

Mirta, minus helmet, was in the tight headlock of a

Mandalorian in gray armor,

and a large gold-furred animal had its huge jaws locked around her leg, trailing a

curtain of drool. It wasn't attacking: it was frozen, pinning her down-and stinking.

And she didn't look scared. Just embarrassed.

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Fett stared down the barrel of a custom Verpine rifle aimed one-handed, and

understood why he'd heard no blasterfire when the speeder bikes dropped from the air.

Verpines were silent.

"Well, well . . . ," said the Mandalorian in gray armor. He really did have a very

fine pair of gray leather gloves. "It's little Bob'ika. Last time we met my brother was

and we met, my brother was

shoving your head down the 'freshers to teach you some manners. What do you want

me for, ner vod?"

GALACTIC ALLIANCE GUARD BRIEFING
ROOM, GAG HQ,

CORUSCANT

Ben was glad to be back among people he trusted. The sea of black uniforms

might have been a sinister sight to

some people, but to him they felt like a brotherhood-like family. He was in that

rare position of being young enough to be treated like one of the troopers despite his

officer status, and he liked that. The sense of camaraderie and the knowledge that

everyone watched everyone else's back was both comforting and thrilling.

He settled into a seat on the end of a row in the briefing room. A trooper called

Almak nudged him.

"Nice vacation? Glad you could fit us into your busy schedule, sir."

"Couldn't wait to get back."

"You didn't miss much," Almak said. "Been a bit quieter. I think we've broken the

back of the Corellian networks."

"I always miss the good stuff."

A couple of the other troopers in the row in front turned in their seats and joined

in. "We'll find some excitement for you."

"Or some filing . . ."

"Freshers need a good clean. Here's a toothbrush."

Ben grinned and lobbed a pellet of flimsi at them. It was good to be part of a team.

It was good to have friends. They didn't see him as Son of Skywalker, Jedi to be feared.

He was just Ben, and they looked out for him as they always seemed to for young

officers they liked.

And they never asked him where he'd been. Everything was on a need-to-know

basis.

But the spate of bombings seemed to be over for the time being. It was just a case

of working out who to keep an eye on and round up

of working out who to keep an eye on and round up next. Corellians, Bothans . . . and

now Fondorians.

Captain Lon Shevu strode onto the dais at the front of the room, looking as

committed as ever, but Ben felt the reluctance and misgivings in him. He could sense it

in a few of the other troopers, too, generally the ones who'd been in the CSF. Jacen

followed Shevu and got instant undivided attention. Jacen could do that: Ben wasn't

sure if he envied him or not. It was interesting that he seemed to enjoy being the focus

for ordinary beings but chose to hide himself from Force-sensitives. It was as if he only

wanted to be seen by the mundane world.

I have to learn how to do that. Mom says I did it as a little kid, but that was by

instinct, like babies swimming. I want to learn how to do it like Jacen does.

"Brief for the next forty-eight hours, ladies and gentlemen," said Jacen. "We're

moving into a different phase. The priority now is to look for professionals-

Confederation intelligence agents. Now, normally we'd leave that to our colleagues in

Alliance Intel, but seeing as we've got all their best operatives-" Applause and

laughter interrupted him. He paused with a big grin and picked up again. "-seeing as

we got the pick of the litter, we'll be helping them out. We'll also be providing close

we'll also be providing close

protection for Chief Omas and key ministers, to relieve CSF, and monitoring for them.

Results of interrogation suggest we might be looking at more targeted and professional

assassination attempts-as in government agents, not just disgruntled amateurs and

bounty hunters."

A hand was raised at the front. Ben couldn't see who it was. "What's monitoring in

this context, sir?"

Jacen flashed a holoimage onto the screen behind him. It showed a diagram of the

various routes by which GA ministers could be reached, physically or virtually: offices,

home addresses, private clubs, routes to the Senate,

comlinks. "Like this," he said.

"Are we Mowed to tap Senators' comlinks, sir?" asked Shevu.

"Under the Emergency Measures Act, we're authorized to carry out any

surveillance to prevent acts of violence against ministers of state and visiting allies."

Shevu's face was unreadable, but Ben felt the sharp unhappiness in him. Now,

there was a guy who knew how to conceal what he was thinking. Ben wondered if that

was a more useful skill than hiding in the Force.

Tapping Senators' comlinks didn't seem to bother anyone else at the briefing. Ben

couldn't see the problem, either. It made sense, for their own protection. Jacen tasked

squads to their roles, and there was discussion about supplies.

"Draw up a wish list," Jacen said, beaming. "I think we've eased the supply

situation. Or we will have, by the end of this week."

There was a ripple of laughter. "Did you persuade them to see things your way,

sir?"

"Oh, I just made sure the flimsi was in order . . ."

There was more laughter and a ripple of applause. For a moment, Ben felt a

conspiratorial closeness between Jacen and the troopers. It was genuine: Jacen wasn't

doing his charisma act to persuade people to do what he wanted, although he was very

good at that. He enjoyed the company of his troops, and they enjoyed his. There was a

sense of shared danger and that the rest of the world wasn't part of all this. Ben took

mental notes about the art of effortless leadership.

The briefing broke up. Ben hung back to talk to Jacen, getting a few joking

comments about his recent absence as the troopers filed out, and giving as good as he

got. He felt a sudden pressure at the back of his head, and when he looked around,

Jacen was watching him from the side of the dais, smiling slightly.

"They like you," he said. "That's good for an officer, as long as you're liked for the

right reasons."

"Isn't it important to be respected instead?"

"What's respect, Ben?"

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Ben pondered the question, hearing a subtle test in it.

"Thinking that a person does

something right, and that they do it better than you, and so you feel positive toward

them."

"Excellent."

"That's not the same as being liked, though, is it?"

"Not at all. We can respect those we dislike," Jacen said.

"The way to be liked by

your men is this-that they believe that you would never spend their lives cheaply, that

their welfare comes first, and that you wouldn't ask them to do anything that you

wouldn't do yourself. To share their trials and triumphs without being one of them, and

they know that's how it has to be-because they know an officer has to make decisions

that cost lives, and that's something you can only do if you remain sufficiently

separate."

Ben hadn't lost a trooper from 967 Commando yet. In fact, they'd had no fatalities

or even serious injuries. They led charmed lives as far as the rest of the military were

concerned. He had no idea how he'd feel if he had to put them in a position where

deaths were inevitable.

Jacen seemed to read his mind again. "Until you can make those decisions, you're not safe to lead."

"But it's easier if you're prepared to die yourself, right?" Ben suddenly felt much

better about Lumiya's attempt on his life. He knew it was her now, piecing together

what had happened on Zios and what Mom had told him. But it was okay. He could

look all the 967 in the eye now. "Because if you're willing to make the same sacrifice,

that's the one thing that matters."

Jacen leaned close to him. "It inspires. It's the ultimate act of honesty with your

troops."

Ben knew that was how Jacen led, and why everyone was so loyal to him. He led

from the front, and he loved being in the thick of the fighting. The fact that as a Jedi he

had survival advantages they didn't have rarely seemed to cross their minds.

"I don't know which way I'll jump when the time comes," Ben said. "Nobody

does. But I'll try to do what's right for the majority."

Jacen's smile was utterly luminous for a moment, but then it faded as if he'd

recalled something awful. His Force presence vanished for a few seconds and then

returned. That was weird, Ben thought: Jacen was standing right next to him, so what

was he hiding from?

"Can you teach me to do that?" Ben asked. "Hide in the Force?"

Jacen seemed shaken. "Why?"

"Because Lumiya is trying to kill me. I thought it might come in handy." And for

avoiding Mom and Dad sometimes. Yes, it would be handy. "Mom says she's got

evidence that I killed-that Lumiya thinks I killed her daughter. I don't remember a

thing about what happened on that asteroid, Jacen, but maybe it doesn't matter, because

Lumiya believes it, and I bet she was behind what happened on Ziost."

Jacen's face was carefully blank. Ben couldn't tell what he was thinking now, not

even from the Force.

"Yes, why not?" Jacen said. His voice was softer, almost hesitant. "Don't you

worry about Lumiya. She's not up to killing you."

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"When can we start?"

"It's very simple."

"Yeah," Ben said dubiously.

"No, it is. The principle is simple-it's the practice that's hard. It might take you

years to master it." Jacen motioned him to sit down on the floor. "Come on. Meditation

position."

Ben sat down cross-legged and closed his eyes automatically, taking deeper and

slower breaths until he reached the stage where the world beyond him seemed distant

and he was hyperaware of his own body, even the movement of blood in his veins.

Jacen's voice seemed to be coming from another time and place. "You're

contained. The world can't touch you."

"Yes."

"Now break the shell. Break the container." Jacen's tone was even and soothing.

"See the world in its component atoms. See yourself as atoms, too. Find the line where

you end and the world begins."

Ben visualized the room around him and the air in it. It became a frozen snowfall

of varying density, some particles clustered, some

of varying density, some particles clustered, some scattered; then he looked into

himself, and saw the microscopic unevenness of the surface of his skin, and the

overlapping plates of keratin in his hair, and then beyond that to where he was just like

the room around him-a snowstorm of molecules. Some of the room was within him as

oxygen and dust, and some of him was in the room as fragments of skin and droplets of

water.

There was no line. There was no edge that divided Ben Skywalker from the room,

or from Coruscant, or from the galaxy. He merged with it all, and it merged with him.

There was nothing solid: just a warm, drifting sea of molecules, some of which

assembled loosely and long enough to be Ben Skywalker.

"So you can do it . . ."

Jacen's voice drifted from a long way away. Ben suddenly felt as if he were

dissolving and would never be whole again. Panic gripped him. He jerked his eyes

open with a massive effort like tearing open rock with his bare hands, an effort so

immense that he found himself gasping for air.

"Oh. . .wow.

"Now," Jacen said softly, "you see why practice is necessary. But full marks for

technique."

"How does that hide me?"

HOW DOES THAT FEEL TO YOU?

"You blend with the universe. Think of it as Force camouflage. The trick is to

become so comfortable with it that you can slip into this state of being . . . dissolved,

yet still carry on functioning, fully aware."

Ben couldn't even manage another wow. He was absolutely determined to master

the technique, and at the same time scared by it because it felt like a seductive,

comfortable death. He was afraid he might sink so deeply into it that he'd never get out

again.

It was as close as he'd ever come to both knowing and feeling what the Force was.

He felt he'd never be the same again, or see the world in

quite the same way.

Wow.

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If only all his Force knowledge had manifested itself that fast and that vividly.

"You need to practice regularly," said Jacen.

Ben nodded, worried about looking too enthusiastic. It was more than just a useful

way to evade his father now. It was worth pursuing in its own right, for the sheer

sensation of it.

"I will," he said. The moment of ecstatic revelation had passed, and he felt oddly

chilled. "Any orders for me? Or am I just going to be listening to comlinks now?"

"Oh, I have a mission for you."

"Like the Amulet?" Maybe he shouldn't have said it, but he felt bad about the

whole thing, as if it had been not only a waste of a man's life but also nowhere near as

important as he'd been led to believe. He hated being humored. "I can handle the truth,

Jacen. You'd be surprised."

Jacen was all serene composure. "I've got a job that only you can do, and it's

critical. You might not want to accept the mission."

"If it's an order, it's an order."

"Better hear it first." Jacen reached into his jacket and pulled out a datapad. "Read

this. It's the original sources of the intelligence I received,

so you can judge for

yourself."

Ben took the datapad and studied the screen. There were transcripts of comlink

conversations, and even grainy images of a meeting taken from such an odd angle that

it must have been captured by a spy droid in a very awkward location, probably on the

top of a cupboard. Men in expensive suits and tunics, sipping caf and talking in hushed

tones: a man with well-cut dark hair, younger than Jacen. Ben recognized him as Dur

Gejjen.

"That's the Corellian Prime Minister," he said.

"That's all intel gathered from our contacts inside the Corellian government

offices. Read on."

There was discussion of driving a wedge between Hapes and the Galactic

Alliance. It sounded like the usual political maneuvering that always bored Ben until he

started to read recurring phrases, like Queen Mother and seeing the disadvantages of

siding with the Alliance.

And then there were references to removing obstacles. It all fell into place when

he flicked to the next holomage and saw discussion of appropriate bounty hunters and

who might be willing to operate in the Hapan royal house.

Ben might have been bored by politics, but he

understood better than he imagined,

and he knew he had to if he wanted to survive.

"This is about Tenel Ka."

"Correct."

"Gejjen really did plan the attack on her, then."

"Correct. We finally have hard evidence, and so we can act."

Ben should have felt outrage, he knew, but what filled him then was despair that

people found it so easy and so necessary to plot to kill each other. It was happening to

his own family, and to him, and it was happening between heads of state.

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They were all crazy. They'd lost all reason. Or was this

the way the adult world

really worked, doing all the stupid, cruel, destructive, impulsive things that they swore

they'd grown out of?

"What do you want me to do?" Ben asked, pretty sure what the answer would be.

"Assassinate Gejjen." Jacen rubbed his forehead wearily. "He's a piece of work,

and he'll destabilize our allies. There's no negotiating with a man who routinely resorts

to state-sponsored assassination like that. The Corellians need to know we can reach

out and take them, too. Sober them up a bit. Way too cocky."

"Isn't that what we're doing, though? How is our assassination different from

theirs? Won't it just lead to more killings?"

"You want to do this by the book? Okay, call Corellian Security and report Gejjen

for conspiracy to murder. Oh, and for having Thrackan Sal-Solo assassinated, too, even

if we can't call my father in court to testify to that. Let's see how fast they arrest him."

"I know

"You don't have to do it." Jacen had that slightly wounded tone that said quite the

opposite. "But you proved you were competent at covert ops when we hit Centerpoint,

and you can get close to Gejjen a lot more easily than some big hairy commando like

Duvil. You can look like a harmless teenager."

I am a teenager . . . and I'm usually pretty harmless. But Jacen had a point. If

anyone was going to do it-and the fact that Jacen had mentioned it meant he'd already

made up his mind-then Ben had the best chance of getting close enough to Gejjen

without being spotted.

Jacen stared at him, head slightly on one side, with that almost-smile that said he

was sure Ben was going to say yes.

"I can't exactly ask Boba Fett to do this, can I?" Jacen said quietly.

"They're taking bets on how and when he's going to try to kill you." An officer

shouldn't ask his troops to do anything he wouldn't do himself. I can't leave this to one

of the 967. "Okay. I agree Gejjen's rotten to the core. And once we can go public on

this stuff . . then the warrant on Uncle Han and Aunt Leia is dropped, right?"

"I can't, Ben." Jacen sighed. "Everyone knows they had nothing to do with the

attack. But they're still working for Corellia, and I can't suspend arrest warrants just

because they're family. That's how corruption starts. Besides, what example does that

set the troops? Will they ever trust us again if officers bend the rules for family?"

Ben was reminded once more that he didn't take after his father, who would have

insisted on arresting Gejjen.

It was dirty work, but he should have realized that by

now. He couldn't hand it on

to someone else if he wanted to think of himself as a man-or an officer.

"I'll send you with good backup," Jacen said. "Shevu and Lekauf. Our contacts on

Corellia are working out a time and place. You'll have to be ready to go at a moment's

notice."

Ben wondered how he was meant to kill Gejjen. It seemed a sacrilege to use a

lightsaber. He concentrated on the practicalities and logistics, pondering briefly on

where the hit would take place, how close he could get, and what would work best-

blaster, projectile, or something more exotic.

There was his mother's vibroblade, but Ben wasn't sure he had the stomach to use

it in cold blood. He only knew how to defend himself and others, not how to hunt for

the sole purpose of killing.

"You can do it," said Jacen, who always seemed to know his thoughts. "Same

techniques you use already-just a different mindset. Go talk to the sniper team."

The best person he could have consulted on the finer points of assassination was

his mother, once the Emperor's Hands, the best assassin of her day. Hey, Mom, is a

head shot best? Double tap or triple? Do you think a silenced blaster is a better option

than a lightsaber?

Ben knew that was a conversation he could never have.

Jacen watched Ben leave the briefing room and took a deep breath. It was all he

could do to keep the breath steady and not let it become a sob.

I can't do this.

I can't kill him.

If the Force had made things clearer, explained explicitly what he had to do-go

here, kill this, recite that-then it might have been easier. It was not knowing that was

unbearable; not knowing if he was reading too much into the uncertain interpretations

of knotted tassels, into Lumiya's vague pronouncements, into parallels with his

into paradoxes with his

grandfather that might not even have been there. He knew his destiny was to be a Sith

Lord more surely than he knew anything, but it was this final test that left him in

agonized turmoil.

What if I'm wrong? What if Lumiya's wrong? What if I don't have to kill anyone at

all, and I kill Ben because I couldn't translate a stupid prophecy straight?

The prophecy said: He will immortalize his love.

It said a lot of other things, too, like he'd make a pet. He still didn't have anything

fluffy, scaly, or feathered to his name, and it was stretching it to apply that to the

faithful Corporal Lekauf who served him as selflessly as

his grandfather had served

Vader.

Immortalize doesn't have to mean kill.

But he had no idea what else it might mean. This-this was the worst thing about

Sith teaching. There weren't just two possible interpretations of anything, but three,

four, five . . .

So only the Sith deal in absolutes, do they, Obi-Wan? You told Vader that, or so

Lumiya says. You liar. The Sith deal in anything but absolutes, because-

Because life itself was like that. A million choices to be freely made, all of them

to be lived with, and requiring the courage of conviction.

Just a clue. How will I know? What will the sign be?

Lumiya didn't know, either, or if she did-he wasn't going to listen. Enough

games; enough guessing. This all rested on his judgment.

I'm looking for signs and portents like a Ryn fortune-teller. It has to be more

rational than this.

It was.

Ben's comment from the conversation they'd only just finished leapt into his mind.

An officer has to make decisions that cost lives.

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It was for the good of the majority, he said. And if Ben could think it, then Jacen

had to as well.

had to, as well.

He thought it, activated the security locks on the briefing room doors, sat down in

a corner with his head resting on his knees.

When he put his hand to his face, he found it wet with tears.

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chapter five

The main barrier to getting the Galactic Alliance to talk sense is Jacen Solo. He

leads Chief Omas by the nose and he makes Admiral Niathal worse by encouraging her

short-sharp-shock tendencies. Get him out of the way, and things would calm down

enough for us to maneuver around Omas. I think I'll have a statesman-to-statesman chat

with him . . . privately.

-Dur Gejjen, Corellian Prime Minister, in private discussion

GALACTIC ALLIANCE XJ7, IN NEUTRAL SPACE
BETWEEN CORELLIA

AND CORUSCANT

Mara wondered if she'd bother to spin Jacen a line about why she needed to take

an XJ7. Look, Jacen, it's like this. You've turned into a thug since Lumiya came on the

scene, and the witch is trying to kill my son, so how's about I do what I do best, and kill

her for all our sakes?

She would have loved to tell him that. But she still didn't know who Lumiya's

accomplices were inside the GAG, and Jacen didn't take kindly to doubts about his

precious secret police. He wasn't being helpful. He didn't even seem to believe that

Mara and Luke had found convincing evidence of Lumiya's GAG connections.

Jacen might have been a gifted Jedi, but he could also be a very human idiot, too.

Or at least she'd thought in those more benign terms before the debacle of Gilatter VIII.

She'd never imagined that Jacen would leave his parents to die.

Mara tried Leia's comlink again, hopping from frequency to frequency in case she

was being tracked. Old habits died hard, and she didn't want Crazy Woman Two,

Alema, to get a fix on her-or Leia.

Or . . . maybe she did.

"We can't go on meeting like this," said Leia's voice. She laughed, and that was

pretty remarkable under the circumstances. She didn't have much to laugh about. "Do I

have to give you a password?"

"I'll trust you." Mara checked her cockpit display, watching the frequency shift on

the monitor in multicolored bars of light. "You okay?"

"For a woman on the run, I'm doing great."

"I don't know where to start."

"Try, Hey, did your son really abandon you to suck vacuum? Because that'd be my

first question . . ."

"I'm so sorry, Leia, I really am. But I'm going to put a stop to this. Take Lumiya

out of the equation, and I think you'll see a major improvement in Jacen's attitude."

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"Is that where you are now?"

"I'm trying to work out how Lumiya moves around. Forget all this lightwhip

garbage. I'm going to find her ship and finish what Luke started. They're always

vulnerable in transit."

Leia's end of the link went quiet for a few moments.

"Want me to play bait?"

"Don't you think you've been through enough lately?"

"I am convinced that Ahsoka would show me if I asked

"I can guarantee that Aienma would show up if I asked nicely," Leia said. "And

maybe Lumiya wouldn't be far behind."

"Tell you what, why don't I lob in Ben and make certain of it?"

"Mara . . ."

"Sorry. I don't want to expose you to any more risk. But if I can devise a safer

way of exploiting the fact that neither of those crazies can keep away from us, I'll do

it."

"We're going to need to break this link soon," Leia said.

"Okay. Look, I have to see Jacen sooner or later. Do you want me to put it to him

straight? Ask him why he ran when you'd come to save him?"

Mara couldn't think of a single thing Jacen might say that would sound plausible,

but she didn't want to make Leia feel any worse than she did. My fault anyway. I

defended him when Luke was telling me he was going dark. If I'd seen what was in

front of me and acted then, things might be different now.

She had thought that about Palpatine, too. She was spending too much time

looking back, and not enough getting on with the here and now. The past couldn't be

changed, just the future.

"What if he tells you," said Leia, "and it's a reason I won't enjoy hearing?"

"Your call." How much worse has it got to get before you accept help treating you

you accept his treating you

worse than dirt? Mara tried to imagine how she'd feel if Ben issued a warrant for her

arrest or left her on a space station venting atmosphere. It would devastate her-but

she'd take him back in a heartbeat. No, there was no advice she could give Leia about

her wayward son. "But I want to know anyway, seeing as Luke and I were there to help

him, too, and wasted our time."

"All I can say is do whatever you feel you must to get Lumiya. Then we'll see

about bringing Jacen back into the fold."

"If I find Alema, I'll save her for you."

"I'd like that."

"Thought you might."

"You take care, Mara."

Leia's link went dead. Mara had to assume she and Han were on Corellia, and that

meant Alema couldn't get at her so easily.

Take care. Oh, I will. I've got one advantage you haven't, Leia, and that's

darkness. I've been that dark. I was trained by a Sith Lord. I can think like them.

At least Leia hadn't made any cracks about Luke not taking the opportunity to

finish off Lumiya. Sometimes, when she considered her sister-in-law, Mara regretted

her own temper and wished she could learn a little of that steely diplomacy.

Mara turned the XI7 and checked Ben's transponder

again. Still on Coruscant.

That didn't guarantee his safety, but at least she could pinpoint him. She zoomed her

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screen in on the trace, and the coordinates resolved into a grid, and then into

neighborhoods and skylanes. Ben was at GAG HQ. She could locate him accurately to

within three meters.

He liked the vibroblade she'd given him. She felt bad not telling him it housed a

long-range passive transponder, and that it had saved her more than once because she'd

used it as a homing beacon, but that was just detail. It was a superb weapon, so it wasn't

a lie.

The tagged vibroblade ensured she knew exactly where Ben was at all times now.

He'd never spot it. The GAG thought they had all the best kit, but she had a few

devices that could get past them, using older technology, frequencies, and relays they'd

never spot. A surveillance system using the most sophisticated technology wasn't

looking for devices almost as basic as a code flashed with a piece of broken mirror.

Tech could be blind. If they scanned Ben, they'd only find his comlink code, not the

signal hiding within it, because they didn't have the active end of the transponder link.

She did.

She had one more transponder left, and she was saving that for a rainy day.

Sorry, sweetheart. Had to do it.

She turned her attention back to Lumiya. Now Lumiya was showing up at

confrontations with the Confederation. Perhaps everyone was looking in the wrong

direction, and Lumiya was working for Corellia.

The last time she'd seen her on the resort satellite, Ben wasn't even around-but

Jacen was. Who was Lumiya going after, Ben or Jacen? If Lumiya's presence was

making Jacen forget what being a Jedi was all about, then maybe Mara needed to keep

tabs on Jacen, too.

That was easier said than done. She needed to try a more direct approach there,

maybe talk to him for once. Nobody else had managed to. It was hard to get Jacen to

listen, and even harder to get hold of him these days. He took the secret in secret police

literally.

Then something vanished from the Force.

Ben-

It was like a shape flashing past her peripheral vision, and a familiar background

noise stopping abruptly, leaving a dead, soundless ringing in the ears.

Ben's gone-

Ben had disappeared from the Force.

Mara's hand was on the controls to jump to hyperspace and head back to

Coruscant at top speed when the sense of her son flooded back as if the sound had been

turned on again. Her stomach rolled.

Maybe it's me.

He'd done it before as a little boy, scared by the last war, the one against the

Yuuzhan Vong. It was uncontrolled and instinctive. But what Mara had just

experienced felt like something more deliberate. When she concentrated on him, he felt

fine-no, more than fine. He felt elated.

It still bothered her. She set a course for home and before she jumped, she felt him

vanish and return again.

vanish and return again.

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He seemed . . . delighted. She could feel the profound wonder in him. So he was

doing it deliberately. No son of hers was going to pull that stunt on her: she'd had

enough of Jacen doing it without Ben learning to hide in the Force as well. She'd go

back and check on him, but pick her time to confront him about his new skill.

Maybe he won't get any farther than short bursts.

But he was Ben, and Ben had proved capable of astounding feats. He'd master it,

all right. She just knew it.

Suddenly she didn't feel quite so guilty about giving him a tagged vibroblade. A

mother had to keep ahead of the game somehow.

SOUTH SIDE LANDING STRIP, KUAT CITY

So," said the clone. He hauled Mirta to her feet and dusted her down, and she

tolerated it. His animal watched her with red-rimmed yellow eyes, and she grabbed her

helmet from where he'd dropped it, expecting the creature to spring at her. "What part

of stay out of my way didn't you understand?"

Mirta opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind but Fett cut in. "Nice of

you to drop in, but can we continue this discussion elsewhere?"

"Ah, the almighty Mand'alor. Hanging a gang boss over a balcony in the center of

town. Yeah, that's subtle." The clone motioned the animal into the cargo bay, where it

lay rumbling ominously like a distant storm. It was the ugliest thing Mirta had ever

seen: loose gold fur that made it look like its skin was several sizes too big for it, six

legs, and a truly ghastly mouthful of fangs. "Thanks for getting everyone's attention."

"I was looking for you," Fett said. He closed the hatch. "We have to go. Shut up

and secure yourself for takeoff."

"You abducting me?"

"Would you rather have a chat and a cup of caf while we wait for the Kuat police

and all of Fraig's scumbags to show up?"

"Okay, I borrowed the speeder anyway. Sort of. Tell you what, drop us off on

Coruscant and we'll be on our way." The clone grabbed his helmet with both hands and

lifted it off. He didn't look any less intimidating, but after a couple of seconds he broke

into an unexpected grin that completely transformed, him. He looked more like Fett's

brother than his twin, not identical at all. "They say there's some family resemblance,

but I don't see it myself. . ."

Fett paused for a telling moment and then stalked off to the cockpit. Mirta wasn't

certain whether to land a punch on the clone or thank him for showing up.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Jaing Skirata. You?"

"Mirta Gev." Then she realized it didn't have the required impact. "Fett's

granddaughter."

Jaing raised his eyebrows and burst out laughing. The animal lifted its head and

whined. Mirta went forward to the cockpit to strap herself in for takeoff, unhappy at the

laughter still ringing behind her.

"You let him ambush you," said Fett.

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Mirta seethed. "I didn't pick him up on my sensors and I didn't even see him

coming at me. He flattened me before I could kalik him."

"Geez, Fett!"

Stab!

"You're learning."

"And you're not." Fett punched the controls, and Kuat dwindled to a disk beneath

them. "You didn't check visually. Don't rely on the helmet tech all the time."

"Hey, you didn't spot him, either. That's got to be stealth armor."

"He's a Null." There was some history there, she could see that. "They were black

ops clones. The Kaminoans' attempt to improve on my dad's genome for cloning. You

can see it didn't work."

"He says his name's Jaing. And did they really shove your head down-"

Fett just turned his head. He still had his helmet on, and

even though few things

scared Mirta these days, he had a way of being glacially slow and silent that was

unsettling. She was just trying to get him to talk, looking for the long-buried man

within. It was a forlorn hope. She gripped the console in front of her as Fett tapped in

the coordinates for Coruscant, 000-and Slave I jumped to hyperspace.

"Jaing's not as bad as I thought," Mirta said.

"They were all psychiatric cases." Considering he probably hadn't seen them since

he was a kid, Fett's recollection seemed painfully vivid. "They say Jaing tracked

Grievous in the war. Master assassin, sniper, general pain in the backside. Don't

underestimate him."

"The war before last, you mean."

"It's all one long war to me."

It was time to shut up, she decided. Fett was braced against the pilot's seat,

looking uncomfortable; it could be folded down so the pilot could stand at the controls,

or raised to form a ledge. He usually opted for the latter. She had a feeling that he was

in too much pain to sit down.

"Course laid in," he said. "Let's go talk to him."

Mirta pulled out another painkiller, grabbed his hand, and slapped the capsule into

his palm. "And when we drop him off on Coruscant, you see Doctor Beluine. Okay?"

Fett grunted. That was as near as she'd get to agreement. She could see his dread

of mortal weakness.

"I'm not relying completely on drugs yet," he said. "All the time I hurt, I know

how far it's progressed."

Jaing was sitting cross-legged on the deck of the cargo bay, face-to-face with the

animal, which was gazing into his eyes and making little whining, grumbling sounds as

if trying to get him to understand something. He seemed oblivious to its smell. They

both looked around when Fett and Mirta came through the hatch.

"What is he?" Mirta asked.

"You asking me or Lord Mirdalan?" Jaing held his gloved fingers up in front of

the animal's face, some land of signal that produced instant attention and made it lie flat

on the deck. Jaing got to his feet. "He's an it. Strills are hermaphrodites. I promised

Mird's last owner I'd look after it when he passed to the manda. Strills live a lot longer

than we do."

"Heard of them, but never seen one."

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"They're nearly extinct on Mandalore. Mird-well, you might say it's a black ops

strill. Saw a lot of commando action in a few wars."

Fett shoved his thumbs into his belt in that Pm-fed-up-

with-waiting pose. "When

you two finish the nature lesson . . ."

Jaing had more lines, fewer gray hairs, and a heavier build than Fett. Mirta could

see the cords of muscle in his neck. And he had no scars. He looked like a man who'd

spent a lot of time in the sun without a helmet, and who'd laughed a lot. Genetically,

this was Fett, but they couldn't have been more different.

"Ain't I gorgeous?" He grinned, and she realized she was staring at him.

"A vision," Fett said sourly, and removed his helmet.

"I think I aged better, Bob'ika."

"It's the fact that you reached this age at all that interests me."

"So why do you want me? Need a loan? You've been looking for me for weeks,

'cos I've been hearing all kinds of people putting out the word for me-"

"I'm dying," Fett said.

Jaing chewed over the news, head slightly to one side. "Sorry to hear that. You're

not the only clone who met a premature end."

Fett usually cut to the chase. Now he stood silent for a while, jaw muscles

twitching. Mirta wondered if he was hurt by the rebuff. She guessed that he was

working up to the hardest thing he ever had to say.

He was. "I want your help, Jaing."

Jaing just stared at him. The staring went on for a long time. Mirta wondered what

time. Mirra wondered who

would give in first. Then it went on a little too long.

"Oh, for fierfek's sake," she sighed. "It's the cloning. His tissues are breaking

down and he's got tumors. He needs to know what stopped you aging at double the rate,

because his doctor can't help him and neither can the Kaminoans, not even Taun We."

Fett pursed his lips slightly. "What she said."

"So Taun We's still going strong, too, the old aiwha bait. Well, well." Jaing

looked Fett up and down. "You had trouble with your leg, I heard. Had to have a

transplant. Yes?"

"You're very well informed."

"I'm still a Tipoca boy at heart. I stay in touch with events in the old country."

"What have I got to pay you to quit gloating and give me what I need?"

"No offense, but you can shove your credits where your armor don't reach,

Mand'alor."

"You don't know what I need yet."

"I can guess."

"Ko Sai's research." Fett gave Jaing's gloves a pointed glance. "Because I know

you found it. You certainly found her."

"You get more with honey than with sour-sap, Boba. Didn't getting your head

shoved down the 'freshers teach you anything?"

Fett had no idea how to ask for help. Mirta wasn't sure if it was some male

bravado thing or just that he'd never learned, but he wasn't getting far with Jaing, who

seemed equally hard and obstinate.

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"Can you help him?" she said. "Gedet'ye? Mandalore needs him alive, and so do

I."

The clone was still staring into Fett's face. "Remember leading an Imperial force

against clone troops on Kamino?"

Fett nodded, utterly impassive. "Yes."

"You didn't feel that we were family then."

"Didn't see any of you defending your brothers, either."

Didn't see any of you defending your brothers, either.

"And you deposed Shysa, you hut'uun. The man who put us back on our feet as a

people. Where were you when the Empire was bleeding us dry?"

Hut'uun was the worst insult any Mando could throw at another, but Fett didn't

seem to notice or care. Mirta found out more about her grandfather's murky past every

day. So there was no reason to feel her mother and grandmother had been singled out

for his total disregard, then: he didn't give a stuff about anyone, except his father, who

seemed to have been elevated to an icon of perfection since his death. So Ba'buir

fought against Ms own brothers. Maybe he hadn't seen the irony. If he had, she

suspected he'd made a point of looking the other way.

"I'm not proud of anything I've done," Fett said, no hint of emotion in his voice.

"But I'm not ashamed of anything, either. I just do what I have to. You don't know what

went on between me and Shysa, and maybe you never will."

"He was there when we needed him," said Jaing. "And you weren't. That's all I

need to know."

Fett didn't so much as blink. "I take it you won't be handing over Ko Sai's data,

then."

Jaing glanced at Mirta as if he felt sorry for her. She wondered how different her

life might have been if Jaing had met Sintas Vel instead of Boba Fett.

"There isn't any data," he said at last. He was still looking at her, not Fett. "Sorry,

kid."

Fett didn't even blink. "You must have taken all your vitamins, then, because you

should be dead by now."

"I didn't say the research didn't exist. I'm saying that we destroyed it after we took

what we needed."

Fett absorbed that slowly. Mirta's heart sank in that conflicting way it had now,

part of her desperate to find a reason to love her ba'buir, and half of her wishing Leia

Solo hadn't blocked her shot when she'd tried to kill him.

Do something to make me forgive you. Please. Anything.

"You could have made a fortune from it," Fett said.

"We didn't want it used again. Ever."

"You can't stop cloning. You never will."

"No, but we put a dent in the Kaminoans. That's better than nothing. I don't like

Kaminoans."

"I can tell." Fett glanced at Jaing's fine gray gloves. "But I've worked for worse."

"They paid you. They bred us like animals." Jaing looked as if he'd remembered

something satisfying. "So Taun We's still alive. I always wondered."

"Leave her alone. Jaing. She's old now."

"So am I, no thanks to her. So how long have you got to live?"

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"A year. Maybe two, if my luck holds."

"How long before you have to hand over command?"

"I don't know."

"The last thing Mandalore needs at the moment is a power vacuum."

Mirta saw a glimmer of hope. "So help him, Jaing."

"Best I can do is a blood sample," he said. "But I think you'll hand it over to the

Kaminoans, Boba, or your doctors will, and we really wouldn't be very happy about

that. Not at all."

"We?" Mirta felt she was getting on better with Jaing. She'd use her advantage as

the harmless, tragic granddaughter. If Jaing wouldn't cooperate, she might find one of

his brothers who would. "How many of you are there left?"

"You don't need to know that. Look, I've got grandchildren, too, Boba, and great-

grandchildren. I've got family on Mandalore. So I care what happens when you're

gone." As soon as he said it, it took on a terrible reality for her, and she wondered if it

had the same impact on her grandfather. The great Boba Fett's on the way out. "Much

as it pains me, your bu'ad here is right-Mandalore needs you for the foreseeable

future."

Fett made a very good job of looking bored. Maybe he was. Mirta doubted it. He

was negotiating for his life, and if Fett was anything, he was a survivor. He didn't know

how to die gracefully like everyone else.

"So I get the blood if I keep the Kaminoans out of it."

"Not that simple," said Jaing.

"It never is."

"You give me blood and tissue samples, and I'll get something made up for you. If

I can."

"And I'm supposed to trust you."

"As much as I'm supposed to trust you. And don't even think about taking a

sample from me the hard way."

"Okay." Fett's jaw twitched again. "Thank you."

He made it sound like a foreign language, awkward and unfamiliar in his mouth.

Mirta resisted the urge to react. Well done, Ba'buir. Was that so hard?

Jaing wasn't done, though. "There's a condition, of course."

"There always is." Fett crossed his arms. "What?"

"Get your shebs back to Mandalore, listen to Kad'ika's advice, and build a strong,

united, stable state. Prove you're even half the man that Jaster Mereel and Fenn Shysa

were. All you want to do is emulate your old man, Boba. But you're too scared to

exceed him, aren't you? You can't be better than Jango. That would never do."

Mirta flinched. Mentioning his father without due reverence seemed to be the one

thing that really got Fett riled. His voice didn't change, but he unfolded his arms with

slow care.

"My father," said Fett, "finally destroyed the Death Watch. That's his legacy to

Mandalore."

"Sectarian feud. Irrelevant to most Mando'ade's lives. Now, are you going to give

me a sample?"

"What kind of scientists have you got access to that I haven't?"

"Some things," Jaing said softly, "can't be bought. I have my resources, believe

me. Got a medpac with a sharp in it?"

"Yes."

"Draw some blood, then."

"I'll do it," said Mirta.

With Fett, it wasn't a case of simply rolling up sleeves. He had so much

equipment on his forearms that Jaing ended up holding the flamethrower attachment,

whip assembly, and assorted projectiles. Fett was an armory on legs. Mirta didn't

expect him to flinch when she finally found a vein, and he didn't. The few moments

while she applied pressure to the blood vessel with her thumb to stop the bleeding

afterward were the longest of her life, because he wouldn't meet her eyes, and it

reminded her that she could touch him and still not reach him.

Jaing held the vial of red-black blood up to the light and admired it. "That'll do

nicely. Give him some candy for being a brave boy, Mirta."

"What now?" Fett asked, unmoved.

"You drop me off, and I'll let you know what we get."

"How?"

"I'll deliver it personally to Keldabe."

"Better make it snappy, then. Or you might be in time for

my funeral."

"Oh, I'll be back, and so will plenty of other Mando'ade. You asked us,

remember? You asked us to come home." He turned to Mirta. "When the old chakaar

dies and they divvy up his armor, make sure you get the flamethrower. Because his

plates are duse. Not even proper beskar. "

So Jaing wasn't out of touch with events on Mandalore, and he thought Fett's

durasteel armor was garbage. The strill padded closer to Jaing and yawned

extravagantly with an expression that said it was totally underwhelmed by the

discussion. Mirta could smell its breath, which-oddly-wasn't unpleasant at all.

"How does that thing hunt if it's got such a strong scent?" Fett asked.

Jaing bent and ruffled Mird's neck folds. "Only humanoids can smell it. And don't

be too hard on Mirta for getting ambushed, Bob'ika. Few people can deal with a full-

grown strill swooping down on them. These things fly, you know."

"I don't keep pets." Fett seemed on the edge of a concession. "If you want

something to eat, the galley's through that hatch."

Jaing opened a pouch on his belt and took out something dried and dark that

looked like leather straps. He threw a strip to Mird and chewed on one himself. "We're

fine, thanks."

It took a few seconds for Mirta to work out what was going on. He doesn't want to

leave any DNA. He's even more cunning than you, Ba'buir.

Fett turned and swung back through the hatch. Mirta had hoped the two men

would find something else to talk about, but the fact they shared a genome clearly

meant nothing. Still . . . this was a relative. This was her relative, a great-uncle, even if

Mandos didn't care about bloodline half as much as most species. The Kiffar half of her

cared about it a lot.

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"I feel bad for you, kid," Jaing said. "I feel bad for him, too. I suppose. But apart

too, I suppose. But apart

from some admiration for his skills, I think he's the worst excuse for a Mando'ad this

side of the Core. On the other hand,

he wins, and we need winners. And my dad would have expected me to help him,

no questions asked."

Jaing spoke as if he came from a totally different family, not a vat that contained

the duplicated chromosomes of Jango Fett. He slipped a three-sided knife from his

forearm plate and trimmed the dried meat into smaller chunks, utterly at ease.

"Jango's not who you mean by 'dad,' is he?" Mirta said.

"No." Jaing smiled wistfully to himself for a moment. "Genes don't count. You

ought to know that by now. The man who adopted me was my training sergeant. Finest

man who ever lived."

Jaing sounded like he'd come from a far happier family, a strange thing for a clone

soldier. "I seem to be bucking the trend of devoted kids," Mirta said. "I tried to kill my

grandfather."

"So did your mother, I hear. Boba's obviously got this magic touch with the

ladies."

"You seem to know everything about me, but I don't know much about you."

Jaing just grinned. "That's my job, sweetheart."

"So why did you get involved with Cherit's gang over the

"So why did you get involved with Ciriak's gang over the Twi'leks?"

"Another promise I made a long time ago." He chewed, looking slightly past her

in recollection. "I tend to keep them."

He went on chewing, occasionally throwing chunks to Mird. And that was it.

Silence descended. She thought he might talk about his family on Mandalore, all the

undiscovered relatives she now found she had, but he didn't.

Mirta realized she wasn't going to get anything more out of him, and she didn't

want to look needy. She returned to the cockpit, settled into the copilot's seat, and

clutched the heart-of-fire against her chest plate. Even if it told her nothing, it was still

a connection to her mother and grandmother.

"You fed up with him already?" Fett asked.

She wanted to think Jaing had given Fett some hope and raised his spirits, but it

was hard to tell. "Is your armor really rubbish? Why don't you use proper Mandalorian

iron, like Beviin says-"

"Don't push your luck. I let you stick a needle in me. That's your fun for the day."

It had cheered him up. Mirta could tell. She hoped that not only would Jaing's

unspecified "resources" come through, but that Boba Fett would redeem himself so that

her only kin wasn't someone that she wished were someone else.

GAG HQ, CORUSCANT

Jacen didn't want to look too interested in the Policy and Resources Council

proceedings. If he showed up for the meeting and sat in the gallery reserved for those

hardy citizens who actually cared about the minutiae of government, he might cause

questions to be asked.

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On the other hand, he might just have been seen as a micromanaging, interfering

colonel who put his troops' welfare above schools, health, and transport.

That was fine by him. He did.

But a low profile was called for, so he stayed at GAG

HQ and switched to the

HoloNet channel that broadcast Senate proceedings. Lumiya should have been there by

now. He waited for the holocam to pan to the public gallery and saw, as he expected, a

woman in a sober business suit and veiled headdress. She wasn't the only one, either.

Veils were considered very chic this year. She drew no attention at all.

HM-3's amendment to the procurement regulations was Item 357 on an agenda of

563 mind-bogglingly boring tweaks and changes to laws Jacen didn't even know were

on the statute books.

I'm going to have to do a lot of delegating when I'm . . . in charge. A handpicked

team of administrators. Led by HM-3, I think.

The session had already started, and Senators who were happy to do the small

routine work-and not be noticed-were on Item 24, having a particularly arcane piece

of hazardous waste legislation explained to them. Jacen turned off the audio feed and

set the monitor to alert him when Item 357 was up. Then he got on with reading more

intelligence reports, with the doors to his office wide open.

He almost always kept the doors open. It reassured the troops. It told them that he

was an accessible officer, always willing to listen.

But Jori Lekauf peered in, boots still firmly on the corridor side of the doors as if

there were a barrier marked OFFICER TERRITORY-
DO NOT PASS.

"Lady at the security gate asking to see you, sir."

Jacen, distracted, felt in the Force to see who it might be.
"Mara Skywalker."

Lekauf grinned. "It's great the way you can do that, sir."

"I don't get many women coming to see me, so I could
have guessed . . ." Jaina

wouldn't be visiting, not without him feeling her
resentment and mistrust marching

ahead of her like a vanguard. And it wouldn't have been
Tenel Ka. He missed her, and

he missed Allana even more. I don't have to kill them. I'd
know if I had to, wouldn't I?

"Bring her in."

"Yes, sir." Lekauf turned to go.

"Lekauf. . ."

"Sir?"

"Have you ever considered a commission?"

"Not sure if I'm officer material, sir."

"I think you could be. I'm not forcing you, but we need good officers coming

through the ranks, because we'll have a challenging role in the years to come."

Lekauf seemed dubious. "I'm willing to give it a go, sir."

"Excellent. I'll get the adjutant to fix the paperwork. We'll probably have to delay

staff college until the security situation is more stable, but I'm sure Shevu or Girdun

will be happy to guide you. And you'll be able to keep on

will be happy to guide you. And you'll be able to keep an eye on Ben. He really trusts you."

Lekauf blinked, but there was no expression on his face. "Captain Shevu looks after me very well. I'll learn a lot from him."

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Non sequiturs said a lot. Lekauf wasn't naive, for all his cheerful schoolboy

appearance. His careful avoidance of Captain Girdun's name confirmed Jacen's

observations that the ex-Intel man wasn't a popular officer with troops from the military

and CSF side. Spies had that effect. Shevu had come from the CSF-familiar, visible,

reliable folks you were happy to see in a crisis.

Jacen couldn't afford divisions. "You might do Captain Girdun good, too. It's

interesting how a good apprentice creates a better teacher."

"Thank you, sir." Lekauf showed not a flicker of reaction. "I'll show your guest

in."

Jacen kept one eye on the silent holoscreen while he looked through the reports,

one of which he forwarded for Niathal's immediate attention-the Bothans had a new

class of frigate coming into service in a matter of days. The P&R meeting had reached

Item 102. A busy day: a lot of rubber-stamping was going on. He opened his com-link

and switched the signal to the small head deep in his ear

and switched the signal to the small bead deep in his ear. Lumiya had a concealed

receiver in her cybernetic implants and would hear it in the depths of her skull, silent as a thought.

He used her cover name, the one he'd used in front of Ben. It was common enough. It also helped avoid accidental slips. "Are you helping them make decisions, Shira?"

"Giving them a sense of urgency, that's all. Not that they don't have fancy lunches on their minds anyway."

"Does it look as if anyone troublesome has read the agenda sheets in advance?"

"Not as far as I can see. But don't worry. I can deal with

that."

Jacen felt Mara approaching down the corridor, a little tornado of determination.

Unlike Lekauf, she walked straight in. Jacen projected a veneer of weary good humor

in the Force and smiled at her.

She glanced at the holoscreen. "That looks thrilling."

"Just making sure we get our supply issues worked out." Hiding in plain sight was

always the best option, Jacen found. "An amendment so that we can cut the red tape

and get our people the right kit. It's been an issue with the troops."

"I'm all for that." Mara sat down in the rickety chair across from his desk-Jacen

believed in being seen not to spend budget on himself.

convinced in being seen not to spend budget on himben
and crossed her legs. She'd

taken to wearing a gray jacket that looked more like
battledress, an indication of her

state of mind lately. "I've come about Ben."

"He's doing well. He's doing very well, in fact."

"You've certainly focused him. Quite the responsible
young man now." Mara

glanced at the open doors as if they troubled her. "Let's
get to the point. I know

Lumiya's trying to kill him. Whatever he did or didn't do,
Lumiya thinks he killed her

daughter. Now, seeing as we also found evidence that
Lumiya has a mole in the GAG,

that concerns me somewhat. A lot of somewhat. If
anything happened to my boy from

inside the GAG, I'd take it pretty badly, I think."

Ah. Has she worked it out? Has Mara actually seen what's coming? Jacen felt a

moment of sinking dismay as he wondered if this last mystery about his path was

transparent to everyone. She was Palpatine's Hand. If anyone on the Jedi Council can

see it, she will.

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Jacen managed to project genuine concern. His link was still open: Lumiya could

hear all this. "I've investigated that, and I can assure you I found nothing to support it."

"Is Ben around? I don't see much of him these days."

Ben was out on patrol, on routine weapons searches. Mara didn't need to know

that. "He's doing some research for me."

"Okay," Mara said. "Just asking you to bear in mind that it's not the Confederation

that's most likely to threaten his life, and even if you don't think Lumiya has an insider

in your ranks, then I'm assuming she has until I'm convinced otherwise." She stood up

slowly, and Jacen was on the edge of believing that she could see what was happening.

"Just ask yourself which member of the GAG would ally with Lumiya. I'm not sure

you'd see it, being so close to it."

Jacen expected to hear some sigh or other reaction from Lumiya, but either she

was more concerned with the passage of the amendment

or she couldn't hear after all.

"I'll certainly ask that question, Aunt Mara," he said. "Just bear in mind that Ben's

learning to take care of himself."

"And are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if nobody else is going to say it to your face, I will. What's happening to

you, Jacen? Why did you run out on your parents like that? Okay, there's a warrant out

on them, but-

Jacen wondered why it had taken so long for anyone to confront him. He'd

expected Jaina to be the first, given her perpetual sulk with him, but Mara probably felt

her defense of him had now made her look stupid.

"My fault," he said. "I assumed they were okay and could get to safety, so I

decided to get to where I could make a difference to the battle-my ship."

"Right," said Mara. "Just a lapse in judgment."

"I'm human."

"We all have times when our judgment lets us down. I certainly do." Mara gave

him an unconvincing smile, turning for the doors. "Thanks for your time."

She knows.

She knows because it's inevitable, and that proves it has to be Ben.

It wasn't his parents, or Tenel Ka, or Allana. It was Ben. He wondered how long

He wondered how long

he could go on facing the boy, knowing that. How would it happen? Would he have to

kill him in cold blood? Or would they end up in some violent confrontation, where

death was so much easier to deal out?

Lumiya's voice was a breath in his ear. If anyone overheard her, she sounded like

any bureaucrat having a discreet comlink conversation, not a Sith planning the greatest

coup of all time. "I think my former colleague will be looking for me now, with

maximum disapproval."

Jacen closed the doors with his remote control. "It was you who engineered the

attack on Ben on Zios, wasn't it?"

"He'll never be your successor. He hasn't got what it takes to be your apprentice.

It's my duty to retire the unsuitable."

"Stay away from him from now on. You've gone too far, and I think Mara

suspects what's happening."

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"My former colleague can't touch you if-wait, they're taking your amendment

out of sequence. Someone has asked to speak on it."

"Who?"

"Someone in the public gallery-they've invoked the right to address the council,

and they've identified themselves as Citizen Watch."

It was interesting to note how fast things could come unraveled. The civil rights

lobby was largely drowned out by events, but he still didn't want them to point out what

nobody seemed to have spotted hidden in his amendment. "You know what you have to

do."

"Indeed." Lumiya went very quiet, her voice almost inaudible. "I think . . . that

they're going to decide . . . that they wish to ask if this is going to be retroactive

legislation . . . yes, they have. How vigilant."

If she thought she'd redeemed herself in his eyes, she was wrong. She was

becoming a risk. But that was always the Sith way, always this struggle between two.

He turned the audio back on while the amendment was discussed.

HM-3 was right. Senators chewed over the sums involved and satisfied

themselves that the budget wouldn't be exceeded without authorization from the

Treasury. Nobody seemed to see that the finely tuned wording by HM-3 would enable

Jacen to change other legislation, too.

He'd think of things that needed changing.

Once I kill Ben Skywalker, once Mara and Luke find out that it's me-and that

day will have to come-then they'll hunt me down. I'll bring down the whole Jedi order

on my head.

Who would be his apprentice then?

It'll finish the Jedi.

He just wanted things to become clear when the time came. He had to trust his

destiny. He was too far along the path to stop now.

"Item three fifty-seven, carried. Next item, variance of regulations regarding the

licensing of air taxis . . ."

And that was it.

The amendment had been passed, and when the revised statute came into effect at

midnight, Colonel Jacen Solo-and Admiral Cha Niathal, because it applied equally to

her-would be able to order whatever the defense forces needed, and get it fast.

And change any other administrative legislation within existing budgets, without

recourse to the Senate.

They'd handed him an extraordinary power, and one that he'd use to change the

way the galaxy was governed. He'd use it to take down Chief of State Omas: he wasn't

sure of the details yet, but he could do it, and soon. The Galactic Alliance would fall,

not with a clash of lightsaber blades, or ion cannons fired, or troops surrounding the

Senate, but with a sheet of flimsi and a nod of heads.

"Well done," he said softly. "Nicely influenced."

"Not me," Lumiya said. He could hear the smile in her voice. "They reached the

decision themselves, without any help from me. I just redirected a little opposition from the gallery."

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The irony was too delicious sometimes. Jacen didn't know whether to be satisfied at the outcome, or angry that Senators were so stupid that they let him get away with this.

They deserved to be ruled by the Sith.

They needed to be.

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chapter six

Reports are coming in of a major battle between Sikan forces and invading

Chekut troops on the Sika homeworld. The Sikan administration has called for Galactic

Alliance forces to intervene in what it calls "an act of opportunist aggression," and

share prices have tumbled over fears that the invasion will draw more planets in the

Expansion Region into the conflict.

-HNE newsflash

GALACTIC ALLIANCE WARSHIP BOUNTY.

ON STATION WITH ALLIANCE FRIGATE DARING.

BOTHAN SECTOR

It was a tidy-looking vessel, she had to admit that. The new Bothan frigate wasn't

even in their database. Admiral Nialhol watched it on

even in their database. Admiral Niathal watched it on Bounty's bridge screen, curving

out of Bothawui orbit trailed by five small unarmed tenders. The profile and signature

were immediately logged in the ship's recognition systems.

"Looks like the Bothans have been shopping after all," she said. "At least the intel

was right on that."

"Seems they're still doing work-ups, too," said Captain Piris. The warship was

being assisted by the tenders, or maybe it was simply feigning helplessness: Niathal

never took Bothans at face value. "Let's see what specs we can collate on them before

we scratch the paintwork. I hope they kept their receipts . . ."

"KDY construction, do you think?"

"Tallaan," Piris said. "We'd know if Kuat was building them."

"Well, they're not going to level Coruscant with those, but they certainly will

spread us thin if they've got as many as Intelligence estimates."

Admiral Niathal shared a number of military philosophies with Jacen Solo, and

being seen on the front line was one of them. She also liked to see things for herself,

especially if Galactic Alliance Intelligence was involved. The current overstretch gave

her cause to wonder what Cal Omas was playing at—an anxiety that might have been

visible to the bridge crew as she paced up and down, glancing over shoulders to check screens and readouts.

"We need every hull we can hang on to, Admiral." Bounty's commanding officer,

Piris, had been on the bridge far too long. He was a Quarren, evolved for an

amphibious existence, and the atmosphere on board was too dry to keep pulling double

watches; his uniform was sealed tightly at the cuffs and neck, but he kept wiping his

face with a moist cloth. He needed a rest in his humid cabin. "If the Bothan fleet is

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growing as fast now as Intelligence suggests, then I fail to see how we're going to

contain it if we have to support Sika and every other local skirmish, too."

"Looks like the Kem Stor Ai dispute will be the next to boil over." Niathal had a

brief moment of wishing that she could target one world, reduce its surface to slag from

orbit just to make her point, and then ask who else wanted some of the same. But it

passed. It always did. "Every backworld with a grievance is resurrecting old fights in

the guise of Alliance loyalty and asking us to help out. And Omas thinks he can hold

the Alliance together by placating every call for a backup fleet across the galaxy."

"When is he going to admit he can't?"

"When I give him no other option, I think."

Maybe the Bothans were ahead of the curve. Instead of commissioning more

capital ships-juicy, high-value targets in battle-they'd opted for a big fleet of

smaller, more agile warships that could be stockpiled without anyone panicking about

the escalation in arms.

"It's a different kind of war. Flexibility and rapid response, that's the name of the

game now." Piri's put his hand on the ship's comm control. "Let's see what they're made

of. Mothma Squadron, launch when ready. Qaresi Squadron, remain on alert five.

Confine them to their own space, but attack if fired upon."

Niathal still wondered who'd assassinated the Bothans

and kicked off this

escalation. Could have been our assets, if we'd played the Bothans right. Some Intel

moron, she decided. She'd get to the bottom of that sooner or later. If she was going to

be Chief of State one day, she'd weed out the loose cannons first.

"If you can get our furry friends to give us a ship's tour, in one piece . . .," she

suggested. But intercepting and boarding the new frigate in these circumstances was

next to impossible. The best break they'd get would be to retrieve debris for inspection.

"I'd love to know their top speed."

Niathal quite liked Bothans, even if she didn't trust them as far as she could spit,

which was a lot farther than anyone might have believed.

She didn't dislike Quarren, either, even if it was almost expected of Mon

Calamari. Quarren were a rare sight on ships; she knew Mon Cal officers who made

every effort to avoid being assigned Quarren crew, and few Quarren wanted to serve

alongside Mon Cals even now. But when they were good, they were very, very good.

Piris was outstanding. If she caught any Mon Cal referring to him as Squid Head,

they'd answer to her, and she didn't care how many whispered that she was an

apologist.

Did we have the right to take their kids for some social engineering experiment- for

engineering experiment for

our benefit?

She asked herself that question more often these days, and the answer always

came up negative. Jacen Solo would think she was a hopeless wet liberal.

She wondered how she was going to wipe him off her boots when the time came.

It wouldn't be easy.

"Bounty, Daring, stand by."

Twelve fighters shot out of the Bounty's hangar bay, spiraling away from the

warship and streaking off in pursuit of the Bothan frigate. Then the three flights

separated. Observation cams in each cockpit gave Bounty's combined bridge and

combat information center a composite view of the engagement. Daring sat off

Bounty's starboard bow, ready to divert any Bothan retaliation from her larger charge.

"Did you ever train as a pilot, ma'am?" Piris asked.

"No. You?"

"Indeed I did. At times like this, I miss it."

"If we get any busier, Captain, there'll be a droid running this ship and you'll be

flying sorties. Where that leaves me I have no idea."

"You'll be Chief of State, ma'am," said Piris.

The worst thing about Quarren was that their amusement wasn't as easy to spot as

a human's. With a human, all those teeth on display made life easier. Quarren face-

tentacles could hide a multitude of emotions.

"That'll be the day," she said, hoping to avoid more gossip about her ambitions.

Right then being Chief of State didn't matter at all. She had a battle, and all her training

and instinct kicked in to say this was where she wanted to be, not behind a desk.

The first flight to come within range of the Bothan frigate shadowed it, cutting

back and forth across its path at a thousand meters. The second flight trailed aft of it,

scanning the hull and sending back data.

It took a few seconds for the Bothans to react; perhaps some of their systems were

still offline. The ship picked up speed and began to move out of the Bothawui limits, its

accompanying tenders trailing like escort fish.

So the Bothans thought they had a nice new asset to surprise the Alliance, but the

Alliance had spotted it. Niathal waited for the reaction while the third flight of Mothma

Squadron monitored the situation, weapons trained but not locked. There was no point

blowing it to pieces before they'd taken the measure of the new class.

"Very heavy hull plating for a frigate," said Niathal, looking at the recce scans

coming back from the starfighters. Piris pored over the images and penetrating scans,

too. "At least a dozen turbolasers and twenty cannons."

"Not exceptional."

"Depends how many hulls they have."

They didn't have long to wait to find out how many vessels were out there. The

weapons officer shouted at the same time as the sensor warning Klaxon sounded.

"Sir, enemy contact at-correction, multiple contacts in range. We've got trade."

"Bounty, Daring, close up at battle stations, synchronize command information.

Helm, all ahead. Qaresi Squadron, launch-Bronzium and remainder of air group,

launch when ready."

Nobody said ambush. The cockpit chatter from the pilots broke in. "Copy that. . .

five, six . . . correction, ten-detecting cannons charging, will engage-

"Targeting source."

"I make that nineteen-

"He's got a lock on me."

"Got your six. Deploying chaff."

Piris's face-tentacles were completely still. It gave him a commendable look of

calm. "Cannons, engage all Bothan vessels in range, in your own time, go on . . ."

One moment they'd been watching a single fresh-out-of-the-box frigate, and the

next more were dropping out of hyperspace at regular five-second intervals. Mothma

Squadron picked up images on their cockpit cams: all in the same Bothan livery, all

brand spanking new and unmarked by debris pocks and scrapes.

A flare of red laser blazed on the screens as one XJ cam view winked out and the

fighter broke up into spinning, red-hot debris. Pilots' voices were still audible in the

background, but the focus on the bridge was on "fighting the ship"-attacking the

enemy. Daring moved between Bounty and the Bothan flotilla. Her cannons and lasers

showed up on the synchronized command information screen as blinking icons, fully

charged and acquiring firing solutions.

"Fight contacts not firing sir and no sign of charging

Light cannons not firing, and no sign of charging cannons." Bounty

shuddered from deflected pulsed laserfire. Niathal moved to supervise damage control,

which was already under a competent commander, but there was nothing worse than an

idle visiting admiral on a ship at battle stations. She needed to be occupied.

"Take them out anyway." Piris turned to Niathal. "If they cripple us, at least we

transmitted the data we have. If they don't-that's a whole Bothan flotilla that never

leaves home."

"I don't expect a tactical withdrawal, Captain." Three more XJs were hit: Niathal

noted it as lost assets, not knowing the pilots personally, and disliked her detachment

for a moment. She always did. "We're here. Let's do as much damage as we can."

The Bothans, of course, had the same goal.

Two Bothan frigates were on a ramming course with Bounty. Of the remaining

flotilla, five were firing on the XJs. Daring opened fire. The bridge crew watched as a

frigate's aft section rippled with a sequence of explosions before debris blew away from

it and smashed into an XJ. Five minutes into the engagement, Bounty's air group was

taking a pounding, not all of it from direct hits. The second frigate veered away from

the stream of fire from the XJ, a red-hot rip in its hull.

"Their targeting's not affected by chaff measures, sir."

The pilot's voice was

THE PILOT'S VOICE WAS

breathless with effort. "They're using narrow-range heat seekers. In future we'll need

to--"

And he was gone, his cockpit cam blank and flickering.

"Air group, pull out," Piris barked. "Cannons, solutions on all targets, now."

Species perceived time differently in battle. For humans, it slowed because their

brains took in far more detailed information about the threat, but that also meant they

didn't notice low-priority things. But Mon Cals-and Quarren-saw it all, and factored

in every cough and spit. That was what made them good commanders. Niathal's instinct

was to fight back, and for a moment she couldn't imagine

why she'd ever had designs

on high office. She saw the tactical displays and heard the comm chatter, and the real-

time three-dimensional image in her mind showed her the whole battlefield-and she

wanted to hit hard.

Nine Bothan frigates were now disabled, either drifting with no sign of power,

reduced to cold debris, or venting brief bursts of flame into the vacuum as they broke

up. Some of the remaining ten returned fire for a further thirty seconds, then powered

down their cannons.

"Surrendering?" asked the officer of the watch.

"They're preparing to jump," said Piris. "Take take take-"

Seven frigates jumped in a tight sequence: three weren't so quick off the mark,

and took a furious barrage of laser and cannons.

Piris gave Niathal a nod of relief and leaned over the command console. "Air

group, anyone too damaged to make an RV point?"

"Mothma Five-zero, sir. Slow hull breach."

"Qarisa Eight, sir."

The bridge crew waited for a few seconds, utterly silent, cannons still trained

while XJs streaked back to the hangar and recovery units passed them outbound to haul

in damaged craft.

"Secure hatches when ready and prepare to jump," Piris

"Secure hatches when ready and prepare to jump," Piris said. "Any sign of the

Bothan cavalry arriving on long-range scans? No? Good." He looked at the chrono

hanging from a fob on his jacket. "Not quite twenty minutes, Admiral. Now, was that a

planned ambush we walked into, or are the Bothans making the best of an

unfortunately timed arrival? The score's twelve-nil to us, not counting star-fighters lost.

But did we win or lose?"

"I'll let you know when our public information colleagues tell me," Niathal said.

"But this confirms my position yet again. If we're stuck with the resources we've got,

then we have to focus everything on Corellia, Commenor, and now Bothawui. If the

Chief of State wants to extend to every bushfire that's starting, he has to give us at least

another fleet, and even if the Alliance had the credits-where would we get the

personnel?"

Piris shrugged. "All empires become too big and collapse under their own

weight."

"Maybe that's what we're seeing."

Her body was telling her that it was all over now. She felt hot as her biochemical

defenses rushed around looking for damage to repair, and found none. The aftermath of

battle was always a restless hour or two for her, so she occupied herself wandering

around the bridge, patting crew members on the back, and telling them what a fine job

they'd done. One young human male was wiping tears away with the back of his hand,

his attention fixed unnaturally on the sensor screen in front of him; he'd lost a friend

today, maybe more than one. There was nothing to say. She simply put her hand on his

shoulder and stood there in silence for a while until the helm crew began their checks

before hyperjumping.

"I'll be in my day cabin," she said, pausing to shake Piris's hand. "Well done,

Captain."

She knew what they'd be saying as soon as the bridge hatches closed behind her.

They'd be expressing surprise that old Iceberg Face could go around patting backs and

showing sympathy. Combat did that to her: she had a brief period of dropping her

guard, and then she was back to normal, a politician who used to be a competent naval

officer and still missed fleet action.

The hyperspace vista from her cabin viewport was soothing. Sometimes she

picked a streak of starlight that was stretched into a line, and tried to think of it as a star

with orbiting planets full of life, and picture what was happening there. She did it now

to clear her mind before deciding what to say to Cal Omas.

She thought she had to give him an ultimatum. And to

She knew she had to give him an ultimatum. And to make it stick, she needed

Jacen Solo to stand by her.

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GAG HEADQUARTERS, CORUSCANT

Captain Heol Girdun smiled and beckoned Ben into a dark office. Somehow the

two elements combined into Ben's least favorite way to spend an afternoon.

"Behold," he said, and Ben's eyes adjusted to the low light. There were no

windows. The only illumination was from banks of holo-screens and monitors. Ben

realized there were GAG troopers sitting at consoles, with that glaze of defocused

concentration that looked like blank boredom. "The eyes

and ears of the Guard.

Welcome to the monitoring center. The ultimate in scrutiny."

"Sir," whispered one of the lieutenants, "keep the noise down, will you?"

Girdun's grin was picked out in blue by the light from a frequency analyzer.

"They're all such artists." He steered Ben by his shoulder, taking him to an alcove away

from the active consoles. Girdun probably didn't realize how well a Jedi could navigate

in darkness, but Ben humored him. "This is where we keep an eye on Senators and

other social misfits for their own good."

"Whose calls do you tap?" Ben felt uneasy about it. "I bet it's not even exciting."

"All government staff, our special list of probable and proven scumbags, and

politicians," said Girdun. "And given the number of Senators and the volume of hot air

they emit, we get automated voice recognition systems to do it, or we'd be here for the

next thousand years. If the droid picks up any keywords of interest, it tags the

conversation and alerts us. Then we have to sit and actually listen to it."

One of the troopers-Zavirk-was ladling sweetener into a cup of caf. He sipped

it gingerly, looking slightly comical with an audio buffer lead dangling from his ear. "I

joined the army to see the galaxy," he whispered, "but all I got was eight-hour watches

of listening to weird politicians making appointments to-

"Ben's fourteen," Girdun said.

"Well, if you want him to do monitoring, he's going to hear stuff that'll make his

hair curl, sir."

Ben had never considered what tapping comlinks of suspects and people in

sensitive posts actually entailed. "I won't faint," he said. "And if I'm old enough to get

shot at, I'm old enough to hear . . . stuff."

"Can't argue with that logic." Girdun sat him down at a console and gave him an

earpiece. "Okay, the screen here shows you the sound files the droid's lined up as worth

listening to, as well as holocam footage. You just work

through it and make notes if

anything seems worth following up. You're looking for anyone who might be

contacting Senators and seems a bit odd, any conversations about Senators or

government staff. . . look, you're a Jedi. You've probably got a sixth sense about this

stuff just like you have about hidden explosives."

"So do nek battle dogs," said Zavirk, "but Lieutenant Skywalker smells better, and

he can do tricks."

Ben decided he might like it here for a while. It didn't feel like spy HQ at all: just

a bunch of troopers he knew well, doing a routine wartime surveillance job. Ben

realized he'd partitioned his feelings so that he didn't have

to think about Dur Gejjen as

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a person. The man had a wife and child. Tenel Ka had a child, too, though, and Gejjen

had been happy to hire someone to assassinate her. Ben had been weighing the morality

of his mission and wasn't sure if he was only telling himself what he wanted to hear.

And there was nobody he could talk it over with.

He settled in his seat to begin checking recordings, and tried not to think about

Gejjen. The conversations-mostly boring, some bizarre, a few incomprehensible-

almost lulled him into meditation. It was an effort not to try hiding in the Force again,

something he now practiced whenever he could.

The monitoring center smelled strongly of caf. Ben felt in need of some, too, after

a few hours, and he lost himself in a conversation between two government staff about

the regular route that a certain Senator took from the Senate to her apartment. But he

was jerked out of his concentration by a rustle of fabric and quiet, intense activity at

another console. Zavirk had summoned Girdun, and they both looked grim. Ben paused

to listen.

"You sure?" Girdun asked.

"Run a voice profile if you don't believe me," Zavirk said.

"That's the Corellian

PM."

There were ten people in the room, and they'd all stopped to listen. Gejjen's

soothingly persuasive voice with its faint accent was telling someone that there was no

point doing this through the usual channels, because nobody else was in a negotiating

mood.

". . . you and I know that this could be solved by the removal of a few hotheads. . .

some of our military need slapping down, and so do some of yours. I'd call an

immediate cease-fire if I could be assured of a few things."

"Such as?" said the unmistakable voice of Chief of State Omas. They were

turning the Chief of State's secure comm line. Devereault

tapping the Chief of State's secure comm line. Ben wasn't sure they had authorization to do that.

"We'll agree that Corellia pools its military assets with the GA as long as we

have an opt-out clause that says we have the right to withdraw it if our own needs are

more urgent. Niathal has to go. Jacen Solo has to go. Once that's out of the way, we're

back to normal and you've got what you want. "

"Centerpoint. "

"Well, we're having problems repairing it anyway."

"Centerpoint has to be made inoperative."

A pause: too brief even for most people to notice, but Ben did. "It already is. But

if you want a multiplanetary force or observers there, fine."

"What about the Bothans, and the other planets fighting their own wars'?"

"I can bring the Commenorians into line, and the Bothans . . . well, once we're all

back in the GA then Bothawui's got to toe the line. The little people-if the fighting gets

out of hand, we'll commit troops to put a stop to that. "

"The Senate won't agree to this."

"Take Niathal and Solo out of the equation first and they'll calm down. What's left

of the Senate, anyway. . ."

"Take out. . . they won't go quietly . . . they might split the Senate. G'Sil's totally in

their camp and he's out weight "

their camp, and he's got weight.

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"Well, there's take out, and take out. "

Omas swallowed but didn't respond.

Geijen filled the silence. "You know we have a job to do before this draws in the

whole galaxy."

"Okay. Okay."

"We need to meet. Can you get to Vulpter?"

Long pause. "I'll find an excuse. Send me the details. . ."

Girdun stood looking at the screen as if he could get some sense out of it if he

stared long enough. Zavirk sat with his chin propped on his hand, gazing up at the

ceiling for orders

captain for orders.

"Get a transcription of that to Colonel Solo right away."

Ben still wasn't clear what was happening, even though he thought Omas should

have mentioned the approach to the Security Council. "Can't the Chief of State talk to

the Corellian Prime Minister?"

"Depends what he's talking about," said Girdun. "And what he has in mind for

Colonel Solo and Admiral Niathal."

If Gejjen could plot the assassination of the Queen Mother of Hapes and have

Thrackan Sal-Solo killed, then making Jacen and Niathal disappear was just another

routine job for him. Ben knew he had his answer about the necessity of his mission.

Girdun leaned over Zavirk and tapped the console. "That conversation was four

hours ago. Better check on the Chief of State's travel

arrangements, because he hasn't informed us he's going offworld and needs a

close protection squad."

"You think he needs one?" asked Ben.

"With Gejjen? He needs two*

Ben didn't know if he could mention Tenel Ka. It was always hard knowing who

knew what inside the GAG. "Would he really try something with Chief Omas?"

"I think he does it out of habit, just like I chew nervesticks."

Ben now had no idea if Cal Omas was bypassing the

Senate illicitly to do a

personal deal with the enemy, or walking into a trap like the one Gejjen had set for

Tenel Ka-and Uncle Han's late, unlamented cousin Thrackan.

Jacen was right, as ever. Gejjen had to be stopped.

SUPREME COMMANDER'S OFFICE, SENATE
BUILDING, CORUSCANT

Jacen read the transcript a third time and laid his datapad down on Niathal's desk.

She had a hologram of Mon Cal on the wall behind her, all shimmering blue

ocean and sinuous buildings emerging from the waves in floating cities. He wondered

if she was homesick. Right now she was fresh back from a battle that hadn't gone as

planned, and impatient to see Cal Omas about it.

That meant she was receptive to ideas. He made a conscious effort not to

influence her, because she wasn't the kind to fall for Jedi tricks. And it would only

provoke her.

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"Nothing like a united front in wartime." He leaned back in the chair, fingers

meshed behind his head. "So we're not the flavor of the month. Our glorious leader

didn't exactly spring to our defense."

Niathal's white uniform didn't look crumpled, even though she'd just disembarked

from a warship fresh from a battle. "Smacks of

ingratitude, I'd say."

She wasn't one for humor. Jacen knew enough about Mon Cal body language now

to know she was angry. She kept rolling her head slightly, as if she was getting hot and

her collar was pinching her neck.

Her nostrils flared. That meant she was ripe for a few radical suggestions about

Omas.

He laid the bait. "You realize that when Gejjen says someone has to go, he doesn't

mean a golden handshake and a framed certificate thanking them for loyal service."

"Spit it out, Jacen."

"He was behind Sal-Solo's premature death-

She narrowed her eyes, heavy with sarcasm. "I'm shocked, I tell you. Shocked."

"-and the attempt on the Hapan Queen Mother's life."
My lover. Mother of my

daughter, my little darling. I wish I could see them
"We're next."

Niathal's nostrils closed tight for a second. It was a
giveaway with Mon Cals, a

little sign that said they were surprised, and not in a good
way.

"He wouldn't be stupid enough to try that."

"Right now I don't know what he'd try."

"Omas isn't a fool," she said. "He must have a good idea
of what he's dealing

with."

"What do you think he's he up to?"

"All he wants to do is hold the Alliance together. He always thinks a few raps

over the knuckles can bring naughty governments into line. Well, it didn't work with

Corellia, and now he's watching the Alliance shrink a planet at a time." She kept

looking at the chrono on her desk. "My rules say we should notify the chair of the

Security Council about the meeting. He's beginning to feel sidelined as it is. I'm not

sure what outcome that will have, though."

Jacen kept G'Sil sweet by delivering results on terrorism and not telling him

anything he would have to deny knowing later. If he had serious designs on Omas's job,

he hadn't shown any sign of it-yet.

"Senator G'Sil would simply task me to take care of it," Jacen said. "I'm saving

him the trouble of knowing. Plausible deniability."

"Do you enjoy the irony?"

"What?"

"Bypassing the Senate about our head of state bypassing the Senate. Nice job with

the procurement amendment, by the way. Slipped through like an oiled eel." Niathal

got up and wandered around her office, long, webbed, bony fingers clasped behind her

back. She had that upright bearing all the GA military had, regardless of species or

spinal arrangement. "Now that we both have the ability to

vary statutes-any statutes-

within budgetary limits, I imagine you've given its potential plenty of thought."

Jacen wanted her to stand still and look at him, but she continued her slow amble

around the office.

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She plays these games beautifully. I'll have to be careful not to cross her.

"It's an emergency kit," he said. "If we need to, we can change any minor law, and

we can also change any big one if we play this smart." We. Not I. He thought it

important to emphasize that they were partners. "For example, if Aitch-Em-Three were

to amend the Emergency Measures Act to include in its

to amend the Emergency Measures Act to include in its scope the GAG's powers to

detain heads of state, politicians, and any other individuals believed to be presenting a

genuine risk to the security of the Galactic Alliance, and to seize their assets via the

Treasury Orders Act, then I suspect people would look at Prime Minister Gejjen and

nod approvingly."

"You even talk like a legislator now . . ."

"But am I right?"

Niathal turned. She couldn't smile like a human, but the amusement was written

all over her face in a slight compression of the lips. Jacen felt her shift from her

perpetual wariness and impatience to a satisfied warmth-

even triumph-for a brief

moment.

"That nobody will think of asking if the Chief of State of the GA is covered by

that amendment? Yes, Jacen, you're right." She made a gesture, holding her hand like a

blade and weaving it through imaginary water. "That eel of yours will slip through

again."

"If I feel we have to . . . act to restore stability and security, will you be standing

with me?"

Will you stage a coup with me? Did I really say that?

Niathal did pause. But it wasn't the taken-aback pause of someone shocked by an

outrageous proposal; just a moment of sizing up Jacen Solo.

"You might have the GAG behind you, Jacen, but you need the fleet, too, don't

you? And the rest of the army."

"Is that a yes?"

"It's an 'If things get worse, I put my allegiance to the GA before my allegiance to

an individual.' "

"I'm . . . interested to see that the military will cross the line from carrying out the

government's will into deciding policy."

"In case you forget," said Niathal softly, "the office of Supreme Commander

effectively combines the role of defense secretary and the

chair of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff. I am a politician. I also happen to be the most senior military officer."

She was his equal in maneuvering, but she didn't have Force powers. He hoped he

would never have to point that out to her.

"It's time we had a chat with Omas, then." Jacen stood up and brushed down his

black GAG fatigues with his hands. "Just to be certain. For all we know, he might be

meeting Gejjen to whip out a blaster himself and effect another Corellian regime

change."

Niathal followed him into the corridor that led to the Chief of State's suite, elegant

blue and gold marble and niche-studded walls with fine

statues from across the galaxy.

Jacen found his heart pounding. Although he could control it, he let it race because it

made him feel alive and human. These were momentous times, and if he cut himself off

completely from normality he might forget the magnitude of his task-and the stakes.

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How can I forget Ben has to die?

When Jacen thought in words, when he heard himself in his mind, he realized how

his language was shifting. He was distancing himself from the reality. Ben has to die. It

felt very different from I have to kill him. Perhaps the Force was telling him it wouldn't

be a simple betrayal of Ben's trust delivered with a lightsaber, but death by another route.

If it has to happen . . . perhaps not by my hand.

The doors to the Chief of State's suite slid open, and he walked into the quiet,

thickly carpeted reception room with Niathal at his side; not behind, not ahead, but

exactly level with him. Omas was leaning over his aide's desk, talking in hushed tones.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," he said, looking up. "Do come in."

Jacen moved his chair so he wasn't forced to squint at Omas against the light from

the window. So did Niathal. It was an eloquent, silent statement of who would have the

upper hand, and they hadn't rehearsed it. Omas, a man finely attuned to the subtleties of

body language and psychological advantage, radiated wariness in the Force. He knew

he was dealing with a united front.

"You've seen the battle report, I take it," Niathal said.

"Yes." Omas reached for a datapad as if to reassure her that he had. "Whether it

was lucky timing on the Bothans' part or a smart trap, the real issue now is how we deal

with a Bothawui that's becoming even better armed and aggressive."

"Actually, it does matter if it was lucky or not," said Jacen. "Because it goes to the

heart of the quality of our intelligence. I'm not happy with the quality of GA Intel,

which, if you recall, is why I wanted to form the GAG from selected personnel. Intel

isn't up to the task we face now."

Omas looked weary. "Okay, you've both got a complaint. Who's first?"

Niathal inclined her head politely, but Jacen could feel her resolution forming a

box around her almost like durasteel. It was tangible. "I'll keep it brief," she said. "We

can't get involved in every little skirmish to keep obscure Senators and tin-pot heads of

state in the Alliance. We're at overstretch. We couldn't maintain the Corellian blockade,

and now we have the Bothans ramping up. Pick your battles, Chief of State. I can't fight

them all."

Omas did his displacement act and poured himself a cup of caf from the jug on his

desk. There was just one cup, and he didn't offer more.

"If we fail to show support to Alliance member worlds, then we lose them," he

said. "This is basic numbers. We've been through all this. If more secede, then we've

lost. The issue of how we maintain a joint defense force for the Alliance-which is

what started this, in case we forget-then becomes academic."

"If we don't concentrate our forces on the worlds that present the most immediate

and serious threat, then we'll be ground down a ship at a time, and we might not even

be able to defend Coruscant if it comes to the worst."

"You think it might come to that?" Omas didn't appear convinced. He glanced at

Jacen, but Jacen kept his counsel. "Is this about Coruscant in the end?"

"Of course it is," Niathal said. "It always is. The Alliance and Coruscant are

indivisible, and that's half the problem for all the other worlds."

Omas turned to Jacen. "Your turn, Colonel."

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"I share the admiral's fears about overstretch." Now Jacen slipped in his challenge,

subtle and multilayered, to give Omas a chance to come clean. He found himself

hoping Omas didn't take it. "Corellia is still the heart of

this. I say we devote all our

resources in the immediate term to an all-out assault on Corellia-invasion, in fact.

Destroy their industrial base, and remove Gejjen and his cronies. The man's already had

his predecessor killed and made an attempt on the Hapan Queen Mother." Jacen paused

a beat, because timing was everything. "I've no doubt you'll be next."

Jacen felt Niathal's reaction although her expression was set in neutral:

amusement, plus a little anxious excitement like preparing for battle. Omas felt

suddenly more wary-but Jacen couldn't tell if that was aimed at him, or at the idea

that Gejjen might be setting Omas up.

"You have intelligence to suggest that?" Omas asked.

Jacen shook his head. "No, and I don't need it or help from the Force to work it

out. It's how Gejjen does business."

"If we launch that kind of assault on Corellia, it's something I should take to the

Security Council. And even if they agree to it-

"We're at war. You have all the legal powers to determine the conduct of the war

with Admiral Niathal, as you see fit."

"Until it costs more credits," said Omas. "And once we're conspicuously focused

on Corellia, what are Bothawui and Commenor going to do? Answers on a small piece

of flimsi, please . . ."

Omas had the perfect excuse now to admit to the meeting with Gejjen. He could

have said that he was going to give peace talks one last try. He could have said

anything to indicate that he was going to talk terms with a state that showed no signs of

understanding the words common good, and whose quietly lethal leader could have

scared a Hutt gang lord.

And, Jacen thought, any smart politician might have suspected that his

Intelligence Service spied on him, just as they spied on all the other Senators. A little

game of words: Omas could have made the suggestion and watched Jacen's reaction,

brazening it out to test if his clandestine call had been picked up.

But he didn't. And his future--and his fate--were sealed.

"So where are we going with this?" Niathal asked. "Same strategy? Keep dividing

up the fleet until we have one ship per theater?"

"I think a full assault on Corellia is madness," said Omas. "We might well have to

consider it-but much later. In the meantime, my priority is to stop secessions from the

Alliance from reaching the tipping point."

Jacen sat feigning suppressed anger and disappointment. It had to be subtle,

because Omas knew Jacen's capacity for smiling self-control. But Omas needed to pick

up the faintest whiff of dissent and savor it for a few

moments; his suspicions would be aroused if Jacen caved in too readily.

Jacen placed his hands squarely on the arms of the apocia wood chair and eased himself to his feet.

"For the record, I think this is a big mistake, sir," he said. "And I would be happier

if GAG could support our intelligence community in their efforts beyond Coruscant."

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"I note your views, Colonel Solo, and I'm grateful for your strategic input so far."

Omas meshed his fingers and leaned on the desk, a gesture that said defensive more

than it said resolute. "The GAG's remit is domestic, though I appreciate your concerns

though. I appreciate your concern

for the quality of our intelligence."

Jacen didn't catch Niathal's eye. He walked out, followed closely by her, and said

nothing until they were back in her office.

"Well?"

"Not good," she said. She wandered up to the window to watch the traffic

streaming in orderly lines in the skylaners around the Senate District. "Not exactly open

with us, is he?"

"I never told him we have GAG personnel operating on Corellia, so we're even."

"We can't sustain the current strategy. Perhaps I should talk to Senator G'Sil and

get it referred to the Security Council."

"And then we divert our energies into an internal power struggle with Omas while

we have a war to fight. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that if you take a shot at

someone, you keep firing until they can no longer return fire. Wound them, and you

have an angry enemy who knows your position."

"I know where you're heading with this, Jacen."

"You know I'm right."

"That doesn't make it any easier."

"If he does a deal with Gejjen, we're not just back to square one: the Alliance is in

a worse position than when it started."

"And we'll be out of the game."

"That's academic." Jacen almost asked Niathal if she had children, and then

realized he had almost done the most stupid thing imaginable: reveal his constant fears

for the future of his own daughter, a child whose paternity had to stay hidden. He

recovered fast, astonished at his weakness. "Because the game will be recurring wars."

"Or Omas might end up with a vibroblade in his throat."

"He's insane to meet Gejjen face-to-face without close protection anyway. He

hasn't asked for it from us. He hasn't asked CSF, either."

"GA Intel?"

"No. We tap their comms, too."

"You're a source of constant revelation. Jacen Solo." "

You're a source of constant revelation, Jacen Solo . . .

"Are you in?"

"Say it."

Jacen looked around the room, trying to look as if he was simply thinking, but

suspicious that someone else might be doing to him what he did to them-eavesdrop

electronically. Was Niathal setting him up? No, he was sure he could sense bugs in a

room. There were none. "You know what I'm proposing."

"I don't, actually. Not in detail. Say it."

"Regime change." Too late. But he couldn't sense any risk. His logical brain was

the paranoid, whispering voice, not his Force-senses. He realized he'd become less

instinct-driven and more rational, and that was the problem. Thinking too much, feeling

too little, just like Lumiya says. "We remove him from office long enough to get this

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war won, and then hand it back to Senator G'Sil when the situation is stable so that new

elections can take place."

His words emerged like uninvited strangers, and he didn't even

believe himself. Niathal made a little splutter that could have been laughter.

"I get the removal. It's the gap in the middle between remove and elections that

fascinates me."

"We run the GA during the interim as a duumvirate. No dictatorship. Joint control."

Niathal indicated her uniform and then reached out to jab a bony finger into the

rank tab on his shoulder. "Military coup. That's what it's called. Let's not prevaricate."

"Okay, I remove him and you take over, alone."

"I don't think so. Duumvirate sounds best to me."

Jacen liked two; two was the Sith way. Knowing Niathal's ambition for the Chief's

office, he'd have the same circling, edgy power struggle with her as a Sith Master with

an apprentice who was expected and encouraged to plot to overthrow him.

But he would rule as Sith Lord in due course, when the GA and elections were

academic, and she would administer the state. That would satisfy her.

"I'll take care of Gejjen, by the way," he said. "He's a massively destabilizing

influence, and removing him will throw Corellia into disarray."

"How will you take care of Omas?"

"I'll remove him by house arrest."

"Deposed heads of state tend to become martyrs and hostages."

"We can't be seen to kill our own, and framing Gejjen for it did occur to me, but

it's not necessary. We need to show ourselves as civilized people working within the

law."

"With a coup."

"Under the law, as the law will stand, it won't be."

"Ahhhh. I forgot." No, she hadn't, he knew that. "Your amendment to the law."

"I'm tabling it for next week, through Aitch-Em-Three."

"And in the meantime?"

"Leave that to me. I'll have someone there when Omas meets Gejjen." Jacen

checked his datapad. "He needs only a day to do his business with Gejjen, no more,

so-my people have him under surveillance, ready to move. Then we have evidence to

present to G'Sil."

"And then you expect him "

"And then you arrest him."

"I was thinking I might arrest him at the same time you present the evidence to

G'Sil. When we move, we have to move fast. No room to be outmaneuvered."

Niathal let out a long breath. Jacen waited.

"I'll be ready to move on your signal. Make sure you keep me up to speed with all

this, won't you?"

It was done. Jacen's takeover was in place. He had the GAG at his back, and

Niathal would deliver the fleet as well as the army. With the right presentation of Omas

selling out to the Corellians, it would be a very orderly coup.

There was no need for unnecessary bloodshed. That was

what this was all about:

an end to violence, chaos, and instability.

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That was worth everything he was risking.

Jacen took an air taxi back to a plaza a few minutes' walk from the GAG HQ: just

another citizen, no sleek black GA transport, no privilege. Either the driver didn't

recognize the uniform, or he hesitated to say, Here, you're the chief of the secret police,

aren't you? It was a silent, contemplative journey.

It was time to make sure nothing went wrong, if manifest destiny could go wrong.

He opened his comlink and called Lumiya.

"Shira " he said aware of the pilot up front "I need you

Sima, he said, aware of the pilot up front. "I need you to do a job for me."

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chapter seven

Goran, in Fett's absence, I think you really ought to see this. I don't think it can

wait. Sometimes the vongese do you a favor.

-Site foreman Herik Vorad, on examination of excavated rock from land north of

Enceri, Mandalore

SAFE HOUSE, CORUSCANT

So you're going to do it before you achieve your full Sith powers," said Lumiya.

She lit the candles and closed the blinds. Jacen needed to shut out the world and feel

what was happening; he was running increasingly on a mundane agenda, the agenda of

the lesser beings he worked with. "Why?"

"If I do it afterward, when might afterward be?" Jacen watched the flames

shimmering and settled down cross-legged on a floor cushion, but his eyes kept

wandering away from the focus of concentration, and Lumiya felt obliged to rap him

sharply on the top of his head and point at the candle. "Omas is doing a deal with

Gejjen. The deal excludes me, and Niathal, possibly in a rather terminal way."

Working in the world of those who couldn't use the Force, Jacen was falling into

conniving and manipulating just like them, and while Lumiya didn't think that was a

bad thing-all tools were valid to achieve the outcome-he was letting himself be

bound by their rules. He was talking about timing. He had full mastery of the Force, but

he seemed to enjoy using the limited tricks of ordinary people.

The admiral was irrelevant in the long term. He had to be aware of that. "Niathal

is afraid of you, Jacen. Or at least wary."

"Don't you think I know that? She'd be an idiot if she trusted anyone at this level

of government."

"You waste too much energy playing mundanes' games instead of using the

Force."

"I'll use it when I need to. Most of the time now, it's overkill."

Jacen always seemed to want to prove how much smarter, how much more skilled

he was than his adversaries, how he could beat them on their own terms. Vanity wasn't

always a bad thing in a Sith-as long as it didn't control him. It was just a matter of

getting him to pause and refocus.

"Meditate," said Lumiya.

Jacen stared through her for a moment, and then stared unblinking at the candle

until he eventually closed his eyes. He opened one eye slowly, looking as if he might

be about to make a joke. Lumiya didn't feel in a humorous mood.

"Actually, I called you for a reason," he said.

"I know. But I'd like to approach this like Force-users, not like some tedious little

committee in the Senate." It was time to remind him he still had one more step to take

before he could begin to teach her anything. "Calm yourself and put the world to one

side."

Jacen shut his eyes again, and-for once-seemed to relax enough to allow a little

of his state of mind to filter through the barrier that he now kept in place most of the

time. Lumiya sensed the solid confidence and focus that typified him. But there was

still the faintest hint of the old Jacen, wounded by bereavement and pain, scared of

doing necessary things. That was the last tinge of doubt and reluctance that

his final step would erase. It would enable him to cross the line into his full Sith

legacy.

She didn't know when afterward might be, either, or even who. She only knew it

was soon.

"You don't need to play their games, Jacen," she said softly. "Even now your

powers put you far beyond their reach. Omas can't touch you. Neither can Gejjen.

When you achieve your destiny, they'll be less than irrelevant."

"Powers or not, I can't control a galaxy on my own. I need to persuade, to carry

people with me. The Force can't affect the minds of millions."

Ah, you enjoy the power you can wield with simple mind games. Don't make

Palpatine's mistakes. That's an indulgence. It's not worthy of you.

"Jacen," she said. "I want you to take stock and feel. Stop overanalyzing. It won't

reveal any truths to you. Just facts. Facts only show you what you want to see."

Jacen opened his eyes again. "But it's so fleeting. The line between a crazy

impulse and guidance from the Force is getting harder to draw."

"Because you think about it too much."

The impenetrable wall went up again. Lumiya felt it as he lapsed into silence.

"It's Ben," he said at last. "It has to be Ben."

Now she understood. "You're fond of the boy. Perhaps he's the child you don't

have. This will be hard, and that's probably why it has to be him."

For a moment, Jacen's gaze flickered-too brief, too insignificant for any ordinary

observer to spot-and she knew she'd hit a nerve. That was it: conscious of his own

mortality, he wanted a son, and there was a little subconscious desire to possess what

was Luke's as part of the overthrow of the Jedi dynasty. Now that he had it and Ben

looked to him as a heroic father figure, he had to throw away that prize.

It was an odd sort of love, but if it was powerful enough, it would do fine.

"That's probably it," Jacen said, and looked down at his clasped hands. "And it's

hard to kill someone who doesn't deserve it."

"But you don't know how it'll happen."

"Exactly."

"You can't see yourself taking a lightsaber to a fourteen-year-old boy."

"Maybe it won't be so literal. I'm sending him to assassinate Dur Gejjen when he

meets Omas to do his deal. It's a job that needs doing, it tests Ben's skills and

commitment, it's far easier for a teenage boy to get past Gejjen's security, and . . .

perhaps it will put him in real mortal danger." Jacen reached out to the low table

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nearby, leaning on one hand to stretch and pick up one of the candles in its transparent

blue holder. "Now, is that a consequence of the task, or is that why I'm sending him?

Am I sending him to his death?"

"Let it play out," Lumiya said. "Stop rationalizing and let it happen."

She stood up to take the candle from him. She could see he wanted to play that

brinkmanship game again of how long he could hold his hand in the flame. Some men

would do it out of bravado after too many drinks, but Jacen was testing himself, a

private struggle rooted in his experience of pain at Vergere's hands and his lingering

doubts that he could stay the course and make himself do something he wanted to run

from.

"I need your help," he said. "I need you to distract Mara for a while."

"Whatever you wish."

"She's taken the Brisha story to heart. Nothing like killing someone's child to

guarantee a blood feud, is there?"

"I thought that story might tie her up and explain my presence. In an ideal world, I

would have avoided all contact with the Skywalkers."

"So . . . why did you offer your hand to Luke instead of taking his head off?"

Lumiya was still considering that. She might not have meant Luke any harm, but

she didn't have to hate someone to kill him in the line of duty. Did it matter that he still

thought all her actions were dictated by an old romance, and by a trauma that had been

her destiny anyway? Why did she feel the need to show him they weren't?

"It certainly had its shock value in the fight," she said. "And killing him would

have changed the course of events for all of us."

"And you wanted to put him in his place. Show him he had no leverage . . . that

you were over him?"

Jacen sometimes seemed to understand and then he'd say something banal like

that, which made her think he had missed the point of passing through powerful

emotions to become stronger.

"The Skywalkers are too mired in their domesticity to be effective Jedi, Jacen,"

she said. "It's a warning to us all. Luke can't see what's in front of him because he

thinks my motive is lost love and revenge, because that's the level he thinks at

-family

and friends. It would never occur to him that I want to see a Sith-controlled galaxy and

that the personal issues we had are trivial by comparison."

"You taught me that anger and passion are what make Sith strong."

"There's anger, and then there's being controlled by it-not seeing the forest for

the trees." Lumiya had a moment of self-doubt and decided to meditate on it later. "So

what about Mara?"

"She's hanging on to that GAG connection she found to track you. Keep her

occupied elsewhere."

"I'll let her find me. That should do the trick. Can you give me a possession of

Ben's, something that would prove to Mara that I could get at him easily, without being

traceable to you?"

"I'll get you a pair of his boots. He keeps several pairs in his locker, and Mara

already suspects a GAG connection." He gave her a little frown of concern, but she felt

nothing emanating from him. "What if she actually catches you?"

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"I might win, and anyway-it'll buy you time." Lumiya was still testing herself to

see if she resented Jacen for leaving her to die, too. "I'm expendable, as you've proven.

My life's purpose is to enable you to become a Sith Lord, because that secures the

stability of the galaxy. The ambition of most beings is just

to stay alive, overeat, spend

too much, and avoid hard work. I'm happy that I can achieve much more than that. . .

and we all die sooner or later. A death in service of a great ideal is a fine thing."

Jacen gave her a long, blank stare, and she wondered if the idea of an eternal

principle being more important than the short confines of his own mortal life was alien

to him. He had to pass beyond that. He would.

"When you think of Ben's fate," she said, "think of the legacy you'll leave in years

to come, and ask who'll be able to name the Sky-walkers, or even the Solos. This is

about the fate of trillions upon trillions for millennia to come-not one small family

over a few decades."

Jacen got to his feet, but Lumiya could tell he was looking at her without seeing

her now.

"I'll keep telling myself that," he said. "The boots will get Mara's attention, for

sure."

"I think I'll play up the maternal grief and do something emotional, too. What are

you going to do when Mara and Luke come after you-when they find out about Ben

in due course?"

"I'll deal with that when I have to."

"It might be sooner than you think. I suggest you make sure you're properly

armed."

"I have quite an armory," said Jacen. "And I'll be ready when the time comes."

"Think laterally," Lumiya said gently. "Luke can still take you in a lightsaber

fight."

"I'm already a few steps ahead of him. Trust me."

She had to. The future of the galaxy depended on Jacen. He was the end of chaos

and the beginning of order, and-like all forces of change-he would not be hailed by

everyone as a savior. Some wouldn't see how necessary he was. Some would try to stop

him.

She would do whatever it took to clear his path-even if

the price was her own

life.

SURVEILLANCE CENTER, GAG HQ,
CORUSCANT

Captain Girdun loomed in the doorway, backlit by the light from the corridor.

"Showtime," he said. "Niathal's just been designated as acting Chief of State as of

midnight."

The troopers on duty in the listening post looked up. Ben detached the bead

amplifier in his ear and tried to make sense of that news. "What's happened to Omas?"

"He's going to be out of the office for a day."

"Oh, I thought-

"He has to give a little notice to hand over the reins of state to Niathal when he's

out of contact-you know, command codes, that kind of stuff. So we have a window

for his trip to Vulpter. Tomorrow."

It was all moving too fast. Ben could recall feeling excited by the turmoil of

events, but now that he was part of them, they were too fast for his comfort. They

brought him closer to his mission. He wasn't relishing the prospect; he knew how he'd

felt after killing a suspect he thought was armed, so he could work out that he wouldn't

be any happier after dispatching Gejjen.

I'm an assassin. And everyone else my age who isn't a Jedi is in school.

"What cover story has he given?" Ben asked.

"Private medical matter."

"Yeah, saving his backside," said Zavirk.

"I think this is the opportunity you've been waiting for, Ben." Girdun beckoned to

him. "Come on. Briefing room." He turned to Zavirk. "I want to know his itinerary to

Vulpter. He won't be taking us along, but he'll still need transport, a minder, and a pilot,

so let's keep an eye on the logistics."

"Bet he takes an Intel zombie or two with him for company."

"Well, we're keeping an eye on them, too, so that'll help us triangulate, won't it?"

Get to it, Trooper."

The captain strode off down the corridor whistling, which was unlike him. Ben

hadn't realized Girdun disliked Omas so much. Maybe he just enjoyed a really major

hunt. It couldn't get much bigger than tailing the Chief of State to an illicit meeting

with the enemy. There was no hate in Girdun, just a wonderful sense of focus and

excitement. Ben wondered if darkness was as easy to spot as Jedi seemed to think.

But what's darkness? Killing Gejjen?

The worst thing about growing up was that there were fewer right-or-wrong

answers every day. It wasn't a math test.

When they reached the briefing room, Shevu and Lekauf were already there,

poring over a wall full of illuminated holodisplays. Lekauf, looking far from

comfortable in his brand-new lieutenant's rank insignia, gave Ben a nervous grin.

"Our source in Coronet confirms that Gejjen's rescheduled all his engagements for

tomorrow," said Shevu. "It's on for sure."

"Timetable?"

"No outbound timings, but he expects to be back in time for a meeting by oh

eight-hundred the next day."

The displays on the walls showed two sets of charts and data: one was Coruscant,

the other Corellia. Ben checked off the list of surveillance points-Omas's private

residence, the security cams from the Senate offices, the handful of private landing

pads nearest to both, and a tally of flight plans filed for Vulpter. The Corellian status

board also showed recent flight plans logged with that planet as a destination.

"What if Omas breaks his journey somewhere, and doesn't fly straight to

Vulpter?" Ben asked.

"That's where marrying it up with arrivals and flight plans for Vulpter helps."

Lekauf pointed to a datapad on the table. "Check that out. Even if the flight doesn't

originate from Coruscant, we can run checks to see what's arriving with Coruscant as

its point of departure within that time window."

"The boring number-crunching stuff," said Girdun. "Don't worry, a computer's

narrowing down the choices. Once we spot Omas moving-or even Gejjen-then we

put a tail on them. Easier to tail Omas, but we might get a break from Gejjen."

"How?"

"We have an informant in the Corellian government building. This is the thing

about information, Ben. It's not a case of finding a big X on a chart labeled the secret

meeting is here. It's actually about assembling a lot of apparently routine stuff that's not

secret at all and looking for the patterns."

Ben watched the flight plans from Coronet appearing on the screen. Any neutral

pilot entering Corellian airspace could get access to this. Anybody could get

information from ATC on Vulptar. And Coruscant ATC was an open book, available

from any dataport. There was a daunting amount of data, but a computer or a droid

could sift through it just as they sifted through the thousands of comlink calls to flag

those that were worth the scrutiny of flesh and blood. It was just a matter of setting the

parameters right.

Ben wasn't sure why he was here other than to learn the tedious and painstaking

icious and painstaking

side of the job. Shevu and Lekauf seemed to be planning an interception.

"They're just working out how we get you close enough to Gejjen." Girdun

seemed to assume Ben knew what he was talking about. "And that has to be after he's

finished his meeting with Omas, because the boss wants the evidence of the meeting

for the Security Council."

Revelation dawned. Ben had hoped he'd have more preparation time, but this was

it. "We're doing the hit at the same time as the meeting? Not when he's on the way

back, or-"

"We might not get another chance to take a crack at

Gejjen away from his home

turf."

Lekauf beckoned to Ben and made him look inside a fabric holdall leaning against

the wall. "Like it?"

Ben couldn't work out what it was at first, but when he took it from the bag, it

turned out to be a rifle with a folding stock. He unfolded it and snapped the stock into

place, staring at it in numb realization.

"It's a modified Karpaki Fifty," Lekauf said, totally misreading Ben's reaction to

the weapon. "Can't leave lightsaber marks all over Gejjen, can we? Bit of a giveaway.

You're now going to make a very fast acquaint of a ballistic sniper rifle. V'lknow

projectiles."

"If you're trying to get me close to Gejjen, why do I need a sniper weapon?"

"In case we can't. Come on, let's get in a few hours on the indoor range."

Ben wondered if it was his last chance to refuse, but he knew he couldn't. If Shevu

was taking part in this-and Shevu was dead straight, a man the other officers

described as an old-fashioned land of cop-then it had to be the right thing to do.

Girdun responded to his chirping comlink. It was Zavirk, judging by the side of

the conversation that Ben could hear. Girdun slid the comlink back in his pocket, a big

grin on his face.

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"Intelligence is sending a couple of handlers with Omas," he said. "Just overheard

their arrangements. Oh-five-hundred start, leaving from his private landing pad and

transferring to an unmarked Intelligence cutter in Coruscant orbit. Sneaky, eh? But it

helps when you know their code names for various VIPs." He checked his chrono. "If I

ever end up back in Intelligence, remind me to make them better. Got to go."

Shevu raised an eyebrow. "He loves his work."

"Are you okay with this?" Ben asked.

"Okay with what?"

"Gejjen."

"I'm not a spook," Shevu said. "Never was. But if Gejjen has Omas killed, it'll

destabilize the whole GA. So I'm okay with it."

"Do you think he will?"

"I'd want proof that he wouldn't. Personally, I think we should blow our cover and

stop Omas from going, but that just compromises our whole operation. So we're riding

along with you to make sure Omas gets home in one piece."

Shevu never made any comments on whether he thought Omas was a traitor

betraying the GA, or a visionary taking a massive risk for peace. He didn't get involved

with politics and opinions. He just stuck to the law as best he could. And that wasn't

easy in the GAG.

"What are you waiting for?" Shevu asked.

"I just wondered if you think I'm right to do this."

"That's not my call." Shevu busied himself with holocharts of Vulpter, opening

three-D images of the spaceports and public buildings. "You've got your orders."

Lekauf gave Ben a nudge in the back. "Come on, I've got to turn you into a

passable sniper by tomorrow morning."

The indoor range had that ozonic discharged-blaster smell with a tinge of burned

plastoid. Something in the air made Ben's eyes sting. It was an expensive facility that

Lekauf said had been cobbled together from equipment originally intended for

Intelligence: hologram simulations, regular targets, and even something he called "dead

meat."

"I'm not sure I'm going to be much use with a rifle," Ben said.

"Aw, come on." Lekauf was unconvinced. "You're a Jedi. You're not like the rest

of us. You've got this visuospatial ability we haven't-my granddad used to tell my dad

amazing things about Lord Vader. Really uncanny accuracy in three dimensions,

whether he was flying a ship or using a weapon. I used to think Dad was making it up

until I saw real Jedi doing that stuff."

"Why not a blaster?"

"Loads of reasons. We need overkill. We need something that doesn't light the

place up like fireworks. And we want something that can be silenced. Believe it or not,

that thing is quite discreet."

Ben steadied the Karpaki against his shoulder, sighted up a few times, and took

his firing position. He was quite pleased to get that far without making a fool of

himself. "You seem to have a good opinion of Vader."

"My granddad thought the world of him. When he got badly burned on a mission

and had to be discharged from the Imperial Army, Lord Vader made sure he was taken

care of for the rest of his life. Whatever some people say about Vader, monsters don't

look out for lieutenants."

"That's good to know," said Ben. He liked the idea of his grandfather having his

kind moments, and that some people still thought well of him. Not everyone had been

sympathetic to the Rebellion. Ben imagined Vader doing the difficult things that Jacen

was facing now.

And that I'm facing.

At the end of the range, a shadowy man walked quickly across Ben's field of view

and vanished. Ben's instinctive reaction was that this

and vanished. Ben's instinctive reaction was that this person was real, and breaking

safety regulations, so he lowered his weapon and called a warning. Lekauf burst out

laughing.

"Ben, that's your target."

"That wasn't a hologram. It was solid."

"Uh, yeah . . ." Lekauf put his hand on the control console and the "man" walked

back into view again to sit on a chair in the target zone. "It's a gel-form. It's an

adjustable droid made of gel and plastoid to mimic flesh and bone. So you . . . well, so

you get used to a target moving like a real person. That one's been adjusted to match

Gejjen's build and gait based on holonews footage, so

you get used to what he'll look

like and how he'll probably fall."

Ben was transfixed. It was just a dummy, just a clever piece of training

technology. He checked it in the Force-yes, it was just a machine-but he still felt

awful about it.

"That's pretty yucky."

"You know how much those things cost?"

"What happens when I shoot . . . it?"

"It gets up and repairs itself."

"Okay." Ben found it disturbing to watch the figure walking around in the small

bay at the end of the range. Through the rifle's optics, it was clearly a featureless.

translucent gel figure with the shadowy framework of artificial bone within. "You sure

it doesn't feel anything?"

"It just moves, Ben. It doesn't think. It's not even a proper droid. More like a

puppet." He looked at the chrono display on the wall. "You've got less than nineteen

hours to get up to speed."

"No pressure, then . . ."

"In your own time, fire when ready."

Ben recalled his recent training. "Why not center mass?"

"That's the army way-kill or wound, you've still put the target out of action.

Police snipers have to worry about hostages and stuff, so they've trained to incapacitate

they're trained to incapacitate

instantly-head shot. Assassination doesn't have to be as instant, just dead. But a head

shot's still best." Lekauf crooked his forefingers and thumbs five centimeters apart and

made a gesture as if he were putting on a blindfold. "That's the zone you're aiming at. A

five-centimeter band around the head at eye level. Put one in there and you've got a

kill. But with the kind of frangible round you'll be using, as long as you hit the head or

neck at all, the result's the same."

"What if I can only get a shot at center mass?"

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"He won't respond to cardiopulmonary resuscitation after a round hits him,

believe me." When Lekauf was getting technical, Ben knew he was enjoying his

subject. "Optimum is still the head shot, though."

"But there's wind speed and everything."

"This Karpaki has smart sensor optics. Senses the windage and allows for it.

They've improved a bit in recent years."

"If it's that clever, then why do I have to train?"

"To get used to shooting someone who's not trying to kill you. Who doesn't even

know you're there. Not the Jedi way, is it?"

It was just a dummy. But it moved like Gejjen.

Ben aimed.

It was just like using a lightsaber, really. Letting the Force

guide the hand, the eye

...

He squeezed the trigger as the gel-form sat down on the chair, and the round

caught the point of its right temple. Gel and fragments plumed in the air, and the

dummy slumped forward.

Lekauf, arms folded, considered the inert form with the eye of a connoisseur. Ben

was taken aback by how uncomfortable it made him feel, especially when the gel-form

suddenly sat upright, then stood.

He was sure he couldn't shoot it a second time.

"And again," said Lekauf.

Ben spent the next hour getting used to anticipating

Ben spent the next hour getting used to anticipating movement, waiting for the

gel-form to settle for just long enough to take the shot. It was harder than he thought:

the dummy made no impression in the Force, which limited Ben's senses. And it kept

getting up and walking around each time, a distressing gel ghost of a man he was going

to kill.

There was no emotion in it. That made it hard. But he was getting good single

shots. He tried to see it as a technical exercise, like light-saber drill, an action totally

separate from the nasty business of taking off heads, and imagined the gel-form with

the short dark hair of Dur Gejjen.

"Ben," Lekauf said quietly, "I'll be there and so will Shevu. You've got backup if

anything goes wrong. If you can't get at him, or you don't get a clean shot, we'll make

sure he drops and stays down. Don't sweat it."

"But that'll expose you two."

"Like I said, it's just in case things don't go according to plan. Makes sense to

build in some contingency in case we don't get another chance-because it'll be easier

than hitting him on Corellia."

Ben pondered. "We don't even know the location. I could be doing this in the

middle of a field or a crowded restaurant."

"You sabotaged Centerpoint. This is going to be a lot easier."

"When I did that, I still thought it was fun."

"Come on, you can do it."

There was something about Lekauf's faith and admiration that galvanized Ben. He

concentrated on the dummy and tried to see himself not as shooting a helpless

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automaton or even a corrupt politician, but as solving a problem. A couple of hours

later, he was hitting the five-centimeter zone 95 percent of the time.

"Better have a break now," Lekauf said.

Ben checked to make sure the adjacent lanes were clear and walked up the range

to look at the gel-form. The more times he'd hit it, the slower the self-repair became. Its

internal power supply needed recharging. It was struggling to get up, and Ben found

himself increasingly disturbed as he watched the pathetic, anonymous figure

scrambling to roll onto its chest and get on all fours. He forced himself to stop looking

at it.

It was all the worse for there being none of the real aftermath of injury that he'd

seen once too often.

"Lunch," Lekauf called, more insistently this time.

Ben wasn't certain he was that hungry.

BEVIIN-VASUR FARM, TEN KILOMETERS
OUTSIDE KELDABE.

MANDALORE

Goran Beviin looked up from the trench, a pitchfork in one hand and a muddy

grin on his face. It was beginning to rain and he was up to his ankles in animal dung,

but it seemed to make him perfectly happy.

"And they said being acting Mandalore would go to my head," he said, rubbing

his nose on his sleeve. "So you came home fast, then."

Fett kept his distance. "Found what I was looking for. You didn't expect me

back."

"I did. Some of the clan chieftains didn't. You have a habit of wandering off for a

few years at a time." Beviin looked himself out of the

few years at a time." Beviin heaved himself out of the trench and wiped his palms on

the seat of his pants. He looked very, very pleased with himself. "If you'd been away

any longer, I'd have called you, but since you're back . . . Want to see something

amazing?"

Fett wondered if now was a good time to tell Beviin the truth about his illness.

The man had to know sooner or later. He could have formally declared himself

Mandalore while Fett was gone, and probably found a lot of support among the clans,

but he hadn't; he'd gone on shoveling dung and running his farm. He was happy with

his life as it was. The galaxy would have worked better with a few more Beviins

around.

"Okay," Fett said. "Amaze me."

Beviin beckoned and trudged through the mud toward the farm buildings. The

fine drizzle was turning into rain, and the land looked bare-not in the ruined sense of

the postwar devastation that blighted so much of the planet, but as if it had settled down

to sleep for the coming winter. Despite the derivation of the Fett surname-derived

from the word for "farmer"-and his father's childhood on his parents' Concord Dawn

farm, Fett knew nothing about agriculture. He wished he could learn, sometimes, to

better understand who his father had once been.

"Mirta behaving herself?" Beviin didn't look back over his shoulder. "Well, at

least she hasn't tried to kill you again. It's a good sign. Kids can be such a handful."

Fett felt the mud suck at his boots. "She's a useful pair of fists in a fight."

"She'll produce wonderfully ferocious great-grandchildren for you, Bob'ika."

Beviin paused a few beats. Fett tried to take in the phrase great-grandchildren, and it

left him stranded. "So whatever it was you went to do ended in a fight, did it?"

"Just had to ask questions emphatically"

"You going to tell me about it?"

It seemed as good a time as any, and Fett didn't see the point of sugarcoating it.

"I'm terminally ill. Two years, tops. Eight, nine months if I carry on like this."

Beviin still didn't turn around. He walked on for a few more meters, head lowered

against the rain, and then stopped in his tracks and finally faced Fett. He looked

genuinely upset. Fett couldn't recall anyone being upset for him before, except his

father. Lack of caring worked both ways.

Maybe Sintas had felt for him. He hadn't noticed.

"You're not going to sit back and let it happen, are you, Bob'ika? We can do

something, surely."

Using the very too-familiar form of his name didn't bother

Using the way-too-lamest form of his name didn't bother Fett at all now. "I

found a clone who survived."

"So they did get a little more out of Ko Sai than revenge and a few souvenirs,

then."

"There's no research data. Just the clone, Jaing Skirata. He wouldn't give me a

blood sample, but he says he's got good medical

resources." Now that Fett was back on Mandalore and Jaing was light-years away,

though, the whole premise struck him as flimsy. The man hadn't even accepted a meal

from him, which would have at least left useful traces of his genetic material on the

utensils. Fett had nothing except time counting down and

a suspicion that his judgment

was failing just like his health. "I'll explain later."

"Why didn't you tell me? I could have tracked some clones for you. Enough of

them deserted and ended up here."

"Ones who'd had the accelerated aging stopped?"

"I don't know, but I could have worked from those leads. Shab, Bob'ika, couldn't

you have squeezed a little sample out of him anyway?"

"It's done now. And there was never a guarantee that Taun We or Beluine could

make anything from it anyway."

Beviin looked disappointed for a moment, as if Fett had let the side down by not

simply grabbing what he needed. But Jaiing had been

right. Fett needed Taun We to

decode whatever it was in that clone's cells that stopped the degeneration, and Taun We

would have turned that research over to her new bosses at Arkanian Micro. That was a

bad deal for the clone, and a bad deal for Fett, because if anyone was going to make

credits out of that data, it was him, and Mandalore needed those-

Well, there's a funny thing. Now I'm thinking long-term.

Beviin turned around and started walking again in silence. Fett's news had

certainly taken the shine off whatever had made him so happy a little earlier.

The farm was a rambling collection of buildings scattered around a stone

farmhouse with impressive dirtworks and defensive walls. The other structures-

including the outbuilding that Fett was staying in-weren't so well defended, just

variations on the traditional circular vheh'yaimé set in deep pits and so thickly thatched

that they were camouflaged. But the farmhouse was the last bastion in the event of an

attack.

At the back of the building, and connected to it by an underground tunnel, stood a

workshop with a smithy. Fett could hear the rhythmic hammering of metal across the

clearing. There was no smoke curling from the roof. It vented many meters away to

vented many meters away to

hide the location, and Fett was sure there was a network of tunnels extending a long

way into the hills to the west of the farm. It was one of the ways the Mandalorians had

fought-and beaten-the Yuuzhan Vong.

Beviin walked down the steps cut into the hard-packed soil and leading down to

the front door. It opened and Dinua, his adopted daughter, stood with hands on hips.

"Boots," she said ominously, pointing at the clods of dung and mud. Two small

children clung to her legs. "You too, Mand'alor. And you can take those coveralls off

as well, Buir."

"Okay, okay" Beviin-spy, fixer, veteran commando-was

driven back by a

resolute woman. But Dinua had fought and lulled Yuuzhan Vong from the age of

fourteen, so making a mess on her clean floor wasn't to be attempted rashly. "We'll go

the long way around."

They tramped around the perimeter of the farmhouse, following the sound of

ringing metal.

"She's a good girl," Beviin said. "Just a bit irritable now that Jin-tar's away

fighting. She's not one for staying at home. But the little ones are too young for both

parents to be away"

So some had already taken mercenary work. Fett didn't think Beviin's farm was

doing that badly, but maybe Jintar was too proud to accept his father-in-law's support.

"But you and Medrit are good with kids."

"Yeah, but this way, one parent stays alive . . ."

That was the harsh reality Fett had grown up with. It bred hard people.

As the door to the workshop swung open, a blast of warm air registered on his

sensors. The interior was bathed in a red glow; sparks flew in arcing showers. How

Beviin stood the noise, Fett would never know. His helmet controls had decided the

volume was above danger level, and buffered the sound.

A mountain of a man in a singlet, burn-scarred leather apron, and ear defenders

was hammering a strip of red-hot metal. Every time he raised his arm, sweat flew from

him and hissed into steam on the hot surfaces. He folded the strip with tongs as he

hammered, layering the metal with a steady rhythm that said he was a master

armorsmith. After a while, he realized Fett and Beviin were standing watching; he

gestured with an impatient jab of his finger to show he was going to finish working the

metal before he'd stop to talk.

It was actually fascinating. Fett could see from the length and emerging form of

the metal bar that he was making a beskad, the traditional saber of the ancient

Mandalorians. Beviin had one. an antique blade

fashioned from Mandalore's unique

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iron-beskar. Fett had watched him swing the weapon so hard into a Yuuzhan Vong

officer that he'd had to stand on him to pull it free.

"There." Medrit Vasur cooled the rough form of the saber in a tub of hissing

liquid and turned it this way and that to check the line. He took off his ear defenders,

and his face cracked into a beatific smile of satisfaction as he wiped the sweat from his

brow with his forearm. "Now, that's going to be a thing of beauty."

"Med'ika, I haven't told him yet," said Beviin.

"Shall I blurt it out, then?"

"You're the metallurgist . . ."

"Mand'alor," Medrit said stiffly, "you're looking at a test forging from a new lode of beskar."

It took Fett a slow second to grasp the importance of what Medrit had said. "But the Empire strip-mined Mandalore. They took all the iron."

"They missed a bit. A big bit."

"How? And how big?"

"This is a big planet with a tiny population, and even the Imperials didn't survey all of it. They stripped the shallow veins. This is a deeper lode, and we'd never have found it if the vongese hadn't left craters you could sink a

small moon in." Medrit

picked up a cloth and wiped his face. Fett couldn't feel the full impact of the

temperature in the workshop, but Beviin had started sweating visibly; he left a mucky

smear across his forehead as he wiped it. "There's a crew a hundred klicks north of

Enceri still doing test drills, but it looks like a big, big lode that was exposed."

Enceri was remote even by Mandalore's standards; no wonder it had taken years

to stumble across it. The Yuuzhan Vong had used singularity ordnance

indiscriminately, smashing huge craters across the planet because they wanted to

annihilate Mandalore, not conquer it.

Fett enjoyed a rare moment of pleasure imagining the look on their vile, arrogant,

disfigured faces if they'd known they were helping Mandalore find a new source of the

metal that had once made it mighty.

Beskar was the toughest metal known to science. Even lightsabers had trouble

with it. There had been a time when every army in the galaxy wanted a supply.

It was still the most valuable metal on the market, and there was a war raging

around them.

"I feel a new economic era coming on," said Fett.

Beviin winked. "Oya manda."

"And it's not on anyone's land." Fett realized the reason

he'd never quite got a

handle on what Mandalorian government actually meant was because it was so

nebulous. "This is a resource for Mandalore as a whole."

"If you say it is, then it is. That's the Mandalore's prerogative."

"Okay, I say it is. Time to gather the chieftains and do a little forward planning."

"Shab," said Medrit, underwhelmed by the Mand'alor's power to requisition

resources. "You're sounding just like a proper head of state."

Fett would normally have found a family meal and a long explanation of the finer

points of metallurgy worse than a spell in the Sarlacc. It was hard enough getting used

to having a granddaughter without being besieged by Beviin's noisy, messy,

demonstrative family. But that evening, he tolerated it.

"It's not just the ore," Medrit said, drawing an imaginary graph in midair with a

nuna drumstick. "It's the processing. Part of the strength of the metal is in what's added

during smelting and how it's worked. What you saw was just a test batch."

"Have we got the facilities to do that anymore?" Fett wasn't used to eating in front

of anyone else. Dinua's son and daughter, Shalk and Briila-seven and five, he

estimated-stared at him, unimpressed, across the table. The scrutiny of small children

was unnerving. "Do we have a windfall we can't exploit?"

"On a small scale-we can do it," Beviin said. "I've done a few rough

calculations. If the lode produces the yield we think it will, we're going to need some

help from mining right through to processing. MandalMotors could process some of it,

if they're willing to shift resources from combat craft. But the rest... we need droids."

"But what are you going to do with it?" Dinua asked.

"What?"

"Sell it for foreign currency, or use it to arm ourselves?"

Dinua, orphaned on the battlefield like Fett, was a savagely smart woman. Beviin

had adopted her the moment her mother was killed, but

had adopted her the moment her mother was killed, but Fett found that ability to turn

strangers into family-that central part of Mandalorian culture-was beyond him. Even

Medrit-impatient, critical, short-tempered-had accepted the unexpected addition to

their household without a murmur. Adoption was what Mandalorians did, and always

had.

If he can do it, why can't I? With my own flesh and blood, too.

"We do both," said Fett, trying to stay on the subject. "Some manufactured goods

for export, some for our own rearmament."

"You'll find a lot of support for that," Beviin said. "Satisfies both camps."

What else can I do with the time I have left to me, except leave Mandalore in

decent shape? "If we've got it, someone will want to take it."

"You think anyone's stupid enough to try invading like the Empire did?" Beviin

said. "After we kicked Vong shebs like that?"

"Ba'buir's cussing," said Shalk gravely. "Can I say shebs, too?"

"No, you can't." Dinua clicked her teeth in annoyance. "Buir, please, not in front

of the kids. Mand'alor, how are you going to announce the find? Other than the old-

fashioned Mando way, by showing up at the border with an invading army?"

"Do we have to announce it?"

"If we want foreign revenue."

"We don't have a finance minister, but the job's yours."

"I'm serious."

"Commission a few starfighters and see who notices," Fett said. "Maybe this

Kad'ika has a point--that we don't have to be on one side or the other. There's a third

side, as . . . Goran says." It was only courtesy to address him by his first name in his

own house. Fett had so little nonhostile interaction with anyone that basic etiquette felt

like a minefield. "Our own."

"I could make sure the aruetiise notice," said Beviin. "But maybe a surprise is

better."

"What kind of surprise?"

"The kind that makes you look up and run for a bomb shelter," Beviin said. "With

a MandalMotors logo on the fuselage."

"We've got no territorial ambitions beyond the sector. We've got at least a dozen

planets here to worry about."

"I know. But take a planet in postwar recovery, an ongoing civil war, and a new

find of beskar, and we might have visitors. If not armed, then at least trying to do

deals."

"Whatever. I don't lose sleep over what . . ."

Beviin filled the gap. "Aruetiise."

". . . aruetiise think of us. I'll talk to Yomaget in the morning. See what

MandalMotors can commit."

Medrit chewed thoughtfully, staring at Fett. "You could have a decent set of

beskar'gam to replace that durasteel osik you're wearing, too. It'll last several lifetimes."

"It only has to last a year, then."

Medrit stared at Fett, got no response, and turned to Beviin. He shook his head:

Later. Dinua took the hint, too. Her kids gazed from face to face, looking for an

explanation of what had plunged the grown-ups into silence. Fett was past caring

whether anyone knew he was dying. Most wouldn't

whether anyone knew he was dying. Most wouldn't believe it anyway. It was hard to

imagine the mortality of someone whose face you couldn't see.

"Plenty more nuna," Beviin said suddenly, pushing the serving plate of glistening,

spice-crusted meat in front of him. "Home-raised, too."

It was never going to be a relaxed family dinner anyway. Just being Fett made

sure of that. The food was spicier than he was used to and the portions were too big, but

he cleared his plate because these were generous people who gave him a refuge here

and who refused payment, even though he could have bought the entire planet twice

over. It was what Mando'ade did for one another when someone was in trouble. The

fact that he was Mand'alor was irrelevant.

He could almost hear Medrit telling Beviin later what a surly shabuir Fett was,

and asking if Beviin really had to invite him around so often.

"You didn't tell me how the lode was found," Fett said. It was his best shot at

small talk, given that they didn't seem to want to talk about his death. "After ten years?

In the middle of nowhere?"

"From orbit." Medrit paused in midslice as he carved a sticky pile of nut-studded,

glistening pastry into six portions and licked his fingers. Little burn scars peppered his

hands. Fett wondered if he'd find metal filings in the cake.

"Some Mandalorians saying

Some Mando'ade coming

home after a few generations in the Outer Rim. A minerals engineer and a geologist ran

a few scans, compared them with the old geological charts, and decided to take a look

on close approach. Result- wayii!"

"Good timing," Fett said.

"We're getting a lot of skilled people coming home, Bob'ika," Beviin said. "You

said you wanted Mando'ade to come back, and some already have."

"Impressive." Fett was surprised at the willingness of people to abandon all they'd

ever known simply at his suggestion. "Let's hope they're all that lucky."

"More resourcefulness than luck."

Fett thought of the last thing that Fenn Shysa had said to him. If you only look

after your own hide, then you're not a man. No, Jaing didn't have any idea what went

on between them in those final moments. People generally believed what they wanted

to.

"Makes me wonder what else is still lying undiscovered on this planet," said Fett.

That night, lying awake far too long on the rickety trestle bed in the outbuilding,

Fett reflected on the fact that Mirta hadn't been in touch since they'd returned, and

wondered what his father would have done had he been Mandalore now.

MANDALORE NOW.

Exhaustion was the best sleeping pill he knew. Before he let it engulf him, his last

thought was that the beskar changed everything, except his own mortality.

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chapter eight

Once Omas pulls his troops back, we'll talk the Bothans into behaving. Give it a

month or two, let everyone calm down and get used to a cease-fire, and we'll use that

lull to regroup with Commenor, Fondor, and Bothawui to give Coruscant a pounding

it'll never forget.

-Corellian Prime Minister Dur Gejjen, discussing longer-term plans with

Confederation defense staff

GAG HQ LOCKER ROOMS, CORUSCANT: 2100 HOURS

Shevu took a long look at Ben and handed him a small container. It was filled

with a dark brown fluid.

"You look dead beat," said Shevu. "But before you turn in for the night, there's a

few loose ends to tie up."

Ben, slumped on a bench with his back resting on his locker door, was ready to

drop. He had to be up at 0300 to prep for the flight to Vulpter, and he still didn't know

his final destination, or the location for the hit.

That wasn't unusual apparently. It was just as well he

that wasn't actually appearing. It was just as if he was used to improvising.

"I'm scoring ninety-seven percent, sir."

Shevu sounded as if he'd stifled a laugh. He exuded a sense of pity. "It's hard to

know what to say."

"I'm ready. Really I am."

"I meant that it's amazing that we can pretty well train a sniper in a day. If he's a

Jedi, of course." Shevu put the bottle in Ben's hand. There was the slow and steady drip

of water somewhere in the locker rooms, and the scent of faintly herbal soap. "You're

being inserted ahead of time with Lekauf, and I'll be shadowing Omas's flight. We'll

RV on Vulpter at Charbi City Spaceport, because he's

meeting Gejjen in one of the

conference rooms there that they hire out for business meetings by the hour. Personally,

I think GA Intel is insane to let him do that. No sterile area, no screening, no security

except for two guys with him for close protection. But it's anonymous, there's no

advance booking to trace, Charbi is a slum-and we can stroll in."

"Won't someone recognize him?"

Shevu pointed to the bottle of brown liquid. "I don't think it'll even take some of

this to let him get through a spaceport unrecognized. How many checks does a business

passenger go through, landing in a private vessel? One, at the Customs and

Immigration desk. And this is Vulpter, for goodness' sake-their security isn't exactly a

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ring of durasteel. He could even use the rooms on the other side of that control, and he

never has to be seen at all. Effectively, it all happens on the landing strip side."

Ben thought it through, seeing the spaceport in his mind's eye, adding permacrete

and passengers to the holochart image of red and blue lines. He was getting used to

thinking like this, and part of him relished solving the puzzle while the other half

wondered what was happening to him.

"In a way, it's better for us if he meets Gejjen in the conference rooms on the

public side of Customs," Ben said. "A bigger crowd out there for us to disappear into."

"I agree. In the end, we'll grab what chance we get."

Ben held the bottle up to the light. "So what's this?"

"Hair dye. Most species tend to recall redheaded humans a bit too well. You're

still a genetic minority. And Omas knows you well enough to look twice if he spots

you."

"Tell me I don't have to wear makeup to cover my freckles . . ." Ben's mind was a

couple of hours ahead, thinking of the few hours' sleep he could get on the flight. He

could study the layout of the spaceport on his datapad. It was all going to go fine, he

told himself. "So the second vessel's for backup in case he diverts?"

"Partly. And partly so we have something incriminating to abandon on Vulpter.

Read the label, dye your hair, and report to the landing strip at twenty-two thirty. I'll

see you there."

Shevu started to walk away. Ben jumped to his feet.

"Sir, what's going to be incriminating?"

The captain always seemed old to Ben, but he was younger than Jacen; twenty-

eight, maybe. He looked at Ben with that mix of sadness and patience that Ben had

seen on his dad's face too often.

"I think anyone would believe Corellians had neutralized

Gejjen, given the right

vessel abandoned at the port. You now . . . Corellian-registered, Corellian trace for

forensics . . . you can do a Corellian accent, can't you? If push comes to shove and you

need to speak, that is. There have to be plenty of Corellians with a grudge against him,

knowing their politics."

Ben thought of Uncle Han's accent, or what was left of it. He sounded more

Coruscanti these days. "Can do. But how do we know we won't fall over real

Corellians trying to stop Gejjen doing a deal with the enemy?"

"That," said Shevu, "would be unbelievably hilarious for all the wrong reasons.

Assuming he has a deal to put on the table anyway."

I'm going to kill someone, and in twenty-four hours I'll be back here as if

nothing's happened.

"Any reason why I can't take my vibroblade?" Ben fished it from his pocket and

held it out to Shevu. "My mom gave it to me and . . . well, you know."

"You can take whatever works for you, as long as you don't leave or carry

evidence that links the hit to us." Shevu examined the blade.

"Yeah, I understand." He pulled down the neck of his shirt a little to reveal a gold

chain. "No ID, of course, but my girlfriend gave it to me, and I never go on patrol

without it."

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It helped to know everyone got edgy before a mission and needed a little reminder

of their loved ones. Shevu got halfway to the doors before he turned around and

seemed to be working up to saying something.

"I realize your father might find it hard to accept what you do, Ben, but I'm proud

of you," he said. "Still, if I had a son, I wouldn't be letting him do this kind of thing

until he was an adult. It's not as if we haven't got enough trained men to do it. But . . .

well, Colonel Solo has his reasons, I'm sure."

Ben sat thinking over that statement for a while, and

realized that Shevu had said

father-not parents. Maybe he thought that his mother would understand a job like

this. Ben felt he was hanging on to the relationship with his family by his fingertips, but

there had been no more fights, and he didn't feel quite so angry about having to

compromise. Maybe that was really what growing up was about-an increasing

distance from parents, knowing that there would always be tomorrow and that he didn't

have to get what he wanted right now, and starting to understand the things they'd been

through when they were younger.

I wouldn't be letting him do this kind of thing until he was an adult.

But his father had done this kind of thing, more or less. He'd just been a little

older, that was all. This was no different from blowing up the Death Star, and plenty of

ordinary people just doing their jobs had died when Luke Skywalker had done that.

Ben was removing a single man-no bystanders.

He'd remind Dad of that if it ever came out and he had to defend his decision. Dad

would probably say Jacen made him do it.

Ben stood in the refresher with the dye worked into lather on his head, and caught

sight of himself in a mirror. He felt ridiculous. The foam looked mauve, and he

wondered if something had gone horribly wrong. When he rinsed it off, though, his hair

was brown, just brown, and he was looking at a stranger.

Good.

He needed to be someone else for all kinds of reasons.

When his hair had dried, he took out the civilian clothes Lekauf had left for him-

all Corellian style, all Corellian labels. This is in case I get caught. The thought chilled

Ben, but it was standard procedure. Nobody had spoken to him about what would

happen if he did get caught, and what interrogation might be like, but he could guess.

They probably didn't know what advice to give a Jedi about resisting interrogation

anyway.

Maybe they thought he could just nudge a mind here and a thought there, and

walk out of the cell.

Maybe he could.

Ben checked himself in the mirror a few times, trying to see himself as a stranger

might, and was satisfied that he looked unlike Ben Skywalker, and disturbingly like a

Corellian boy a little older than he was, but blond-Barit Saiy.

He hadn't seen Saiy since they'd rounded him up with the other Corellians. After

that, Ben had stopped asking what happened, but he still wondered silently.

He squatted down and placed his boots in the locker. Then he counted the various

pieces of kit. Daily pair, battered raid pair for good luck-but no parade-best pair.

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He couldn't imagine where they'd gone. No, actually, he could: Lekauf. Ben

would find them full of something unmentionable just before kit inspection. Or painted

bright pink.

"Jori, I'm going to think up something special for you," he said aloud, and

grinned, wanting the diversion.

It was nice to be one of the boys. Ben slipped his datapad into his pocket,

wondered where he was going to leave it for safekeeping, and went to pick up the

Karpaki and some ammo packs from the armory.

It was just a job, and he had to do it.

THE SKYWALKERS' APARTMENT,
CORUSCANT

Luke woke in a heart-pounding panic and reached out toward a hooded shape at

the foot of the bed, knowing he was dreaming but unable to stop himself from reacting

to the specter that dissolved as he became fully awake.

He hadn't had the dream of the menacing figure in the hooded cloak for a while.

Now it was back. It was four in the morning, and Mara still hadn't come home.

Usually, the Force dream vanished and just left him with that sick jolt in his gut as

if he'd seen a speeder crash. But this was different; as he swung his legs over the side of

the bed, he had a sense of someone still being in the room, and he was sure he wasn't

asleep. He checked the chrono to make certain he wasn't still mired in the nightmare.

0410 hours.

He wasn't.

Luke reached for his lightsaber, which he'd been keeping on the nightstand lately,

and made a cautious inspection of all the rooms. He couldn't sense flesh and blood

anywhere, but he could detect something. The presence was so close now that he could

almost feel breath on the back on his neck.

And then he sensed amusement

And then he sensed . . . amusement.

The presence-now at the door to the apartment, he was sure-was like a cloud of

billowing smoke in his mind. He could almost see it. As he felt it becoming more solid,

more real, more here, it suddenly lit up as if a silent explosion had lifted it in a ball of

soaring flame.

Lumiya.

Lumiya.

Luke rushed to the front doors, at the same time concentrating hard on using the

Force to jam the two sets of doors in the corridor outside that stood between the

apartment and the lifts. He'd trap her. She'd lied. Mara was right. All that nonsense on

the resort satellite, all that I-mean-you-no-harm was just a feint, mocking his

indecision-

The doors parted with a gasp of air and Luke sprang into the corridor with his

lightsaber raised. One set of doors was wedged open with something, trying repeatedly

to close and making little mechanical groans each time the inner edges hit the

obstruction and bounced back a few centimeters. There was no sign of Lumiya.

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But she'd been here seconds before. Luke could almost taste her on the air. It was

as if she'd sprayed perfume too liberally and was leaving a cloud wafting behind her

except it was a scent of darkness, not rare oils. Frustrated and furious, he strode down

the corridor to see what had jammed the doors apart.

It was a pair of black boots, army boots with segmented durasteel plates around

the ankle, the kind that Ben wore. He parted the doors with a Force push and squatted

to recover the boots.

They were Ben's. Not only did Luke recognize them, but he also felt Ben in them

when he picked them up. Luke rarely jumped to conclusions. But he was certain who'd

left them there, and what the message was: If I can take personal items from your son, I

can take him, too.

The thought hit Luke like a hard slap in the face. Maybe she's abducted Ben. He

felt for his son in the Force, and sensed no crisis; in fact, Ben seemed to be leaving a

trace in the Force of someone soundly and safely asleep. How long he'd stay that way,

though, Luke wasn't ready to bet.

He went back into the apartment to grab his jacket, opening his comlink to Jacen

as he went. He didn't care what time it was. Jacen answered immediately. It seemed he

didn't sleep much, either.

"Where's Ben?" Luke demanded.

"Asleep, Luke." Jacen had that calm, mock-soothing tone that did anything but

soothe him. Patronizing little jerk. "Is there a problem?"

"Have you had any intruders in GAG HQ tonight?"

Jacen gave a quiet little laugh. "We're the ones who do the forced entry, Luke."

"Someone's left Ben's boots here as a calling card."

"I don't understand. Did he leave them behind?"

"He doesn't keep any of his uniform at our place. Someone's taken them from your

headquarters, and as juvenile a prank as it seems-" Luke almost stopped short of

mentioning Lumiya, because he had no idea yet how deep her inroads into the GAG

had become, or even if Jacen was consciously aware of them. But he was angry and

scared for his boy, and that always colored his judgment.

With a faint smile, Luke said,

"It's Lumiya. She's taunting

me. Showing me she can get at Ben anytime she pleases."

Jacen was silent. Luke waited.

"I can't give you an explanation for that, I really can't," Jacen said eventually.

"Well, Lumiya's jerking my chain, as she probably was at Gilatter, too." Stupid,

stupid, stupid. How could I ever have been fooled like that?

"And she has someone inside your organization, so I suggest you get that sorted

out fast."

"We've had one investigation already, and found nothing. We'll have another, if it

makes you happier." Jacen's voice sounded both

offended and irritated, but Luke

couldn't even take that at face value any longer. "But I can assure you Ben is safe-he's

even got pretty good protection right next to him. Lieutenant Lekauf."

"Nice to see the guy get promoted. He strikes me as being very loyal to you."

"As his grandfather was to Vader, Luke. You can't buy loyalty like that. Ben's in

good hands. Let's talk again in the morning."

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Luke shut the link dead. No, the morning wouldn't do, and there was no point

talking to Jacen, who was clearly trussed and tied as far as Lumiya's influence was

concerned. She was right under his nose. So much for

concerned. She was right under his nose. So much for what he'd learned about arcane

Force techniques during his five-year sabbatical.

Luke jogged to the landing pad and tore off in the speeder, maybe a little faster

than was safe. Lumiya had left a very clear trail, beckoning Luke to follow. Well, he

wasn't falling for that. It had to be a diversion-or an ambush.

I've never been afraid of an ambush, Lumiya. I'll walk into one happily, knowing

my enemies are there. Nice try. I'm coming, don't you worry.

He resisted the impulse to drop everything and charge after her trail. She was still

near, or at least still on Coruscant; he could feel it. But he had to talk to Mara first, and

she was at Starfighter Command. He opened the comlink.

How could I have let this go on for so long? I don't care if I'm expected to be the

elder statesman. This stops; this stops now.

"Mara, we have a problem," he said. "Lumiya."

"I'm with Jaina, sweetheart. Do you want me to-"

"She's been outside our apartment." Luke picked his words a little more carefully

now. Mara would go ballistic as soon as he mentioned Ben's boots. It was a sinister,

silent threat. "Stay where you are. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"When there's a trail going cold?"

"On a diversion."

Or a diversion.

"Or a trail she wants you to think is a diversion."

Yes, Mara and Lumiya both had that layer-upon-layer way of thinking, just as

Palpatine had taught them. "I know what she wants," he said, and shut the link.

Luke broke the traffic regulations a dozen times. He skipped out of the regulated

skylanes-always busy on Coruscant-and got a discordant blast of horns from vessels

whose noses he nearly clipped. In the way of automatic actions, his mind slipped into

deep contemplation as he took the familiar route to Starfighter Command.

I know what my problem is.

He thought back forty years, when he'd been ready to

rush to the aid of a total

stranger on the basis of a message in an intercepted hologram. The plea for rescue

hadn't even been aimed at him, but he'd responded to it anyway, without thinking,

without questioning, because it had felt like something he had to do.

And now I act sensibly and soberly, because I'm leader of the Jedi Council, and

I'm not nineteen anymore.

But it wasn't his nature. It wasn't what he did best. Just because he had whatever

gifts the Force had given him more generously than other Jedi, it didn't mean he was

cut out for . . . management. Yes, management: that was it. He thought of the nagging

frustration he always felt when he sent other Jedi on missions, and how he thought that

was just reluctance to admit it was the turn of the young Jedi to take on the physical

derring-do while he made wise judgments in the Chamber.

Sitting on my backside.

What he did best was right wrongs, and if he couldn't put this right for his only

child, then what was he?

I forgot who I am.

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He was an uncomplicated man who cared enough about his friends and family to

die for them, if that was what it took to save them. He

was, as Mara told him at least

once a day, a farmboy.

He was Luke Skywalker. And if he could take on the Empire without a second

thought, he could certainly finish off one of the last pitiful remnants of its rule-

Lumiya.

GA STARFIGHTER COMMAND, CORUSCANT

"Y' know, this always works on the crime holovids . . ." Mara added another

illuminated marker to the holochart of the galaxy and stepped back to see if a pattern of

Lumiya's movements emerged. It was a big galaxy, and Lumiya seemed to cover a lot

of space, which now included Mara's own front doors.

Keep it up, cyborg girl. You're just focusing me better.

"Might as well use the time productively." Jaina leaned over the desk and tapped

in more coordinates. Now that she was a civilian again, she was here in her capacity as

a Jedi working for Luke Sky-walker and the Council, but she slipped back into fleet

ways fast. "So let's add in Alema's known whereabouts . . ."

"Well, there's no pattern there, either . . . Do you think it's a case of Alema

stalking Lumiya, looking for scraps from her table? Why do' those two seem to hang

out together?"

"They both need a lot of spare parts?"

Mara stifled a laugh. "That's not nice, Jaina . . ."

"Seriously They haven't got enough functioning parts to make one decent

humanoid between them."

"They're both good at hiding, whether by disguising their presence or erasing the

memory of being seen." Mara was feeling around her in the Force, just waiting for

Lumiya to spring from nowhere. She could sense her, but not near. "Lumiya's broken

her cover, and she's not stupid, so she wants to be seen."

Jaina kept checking the chrono on the wall and then looking at her own timepiece.

"Did you go to see Jacen?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"You want the truth, Jaina?"

"Don't I always?"

"Lumiya's bending him somehow. Okay, no need to tell me I was the last person

to notice that."

"I wasn't going to. Did you . . . mention that?"

"Yes. I thought it was time someone dropped a hint that we'd noticed our Jacen

had turned into a monster." Mara was getting angry, and her honest inner voice told her

that the only person who deserved that anger was herself, for defending Jacen while the

fact that things were going disastrously wrong was staring her in the face. But Mara

was human, and scared for Ben, and it boiled over onto Jaina. "Forgive me for asking,

but being his twin, have you never had this out with him?"

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"I tried. He responded with a court-martial charge, remember?"

"I can't help thinking that you might have tried slugging him."

"Suddenly he's my responsibility? I'm the one who said he was going dark, way

back."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry." Mara put her hands up in mock submission. She could

apologize, but she couldn't retract her acid tone, and she regretted that. "I just-okay,

none of my business."

"Spit it out, Mara."

"I just don't get how you can be so caught up in worrying whether you want Jag or

Zekk when your own brother's going to pieces and taking others with him."

"Whoa

"Sorry. I said it was none of my business."

"Well, you said it, so-yes, I want to be distracted by personal issues, because

otherwise I'd go nuts trying to understand why Jacen's doing what he's doing to our

parents."

"Maybe it's time we all faced that. Together."

There was an awkward silence. Mara wanted to tell

Jaina that she was a grown

woman now and it was time to stop messing around like a teenager, and that Ben was

more adult at fourteen than she was at thirty-one. It was spiteful, partly true, and partly

fueled by Mara's incomprehension of anyone who wasn't as totally focused on the

mission as she was, to the exclusion of all else.

She kept her thoughts to herself. It was a sign of weary middle age, along with

gray hairs and fading stretch marks.

I spent my whole youth on duty for the Emperor. I never had the freedom that

Jaina's always had. And a little bit of me . . . resents that now.

It wasn't Jaina's fault. She was headstrong and passionate like her father, but she

hadn't quite found the silent, hidden durasteel of her mother yet.

She'll rise to the challenge when it comes. But if this isn't it, I don't know what is.

Jaina had her head down, hair forming a dark curtain as she leaned over the desk,

pretending to be absorbed in the chart, but Mara could feel she was hurt. It wasn't the

first time in recent weeks.

Mara would make it up to her when she calmed down. Families had spats all the

time. The storms blew over.

"Change of plan," said Luke, stepping out of the turbolift with his hair disheveled

and a bag in one hand. Sometimes he had that Don't-stop-me look, and he had it now. It

always made Mara want to stop him. "I'm going after Lumiya. Enough."

"No, you're not," Mara said. "You're too close to this. She's baiting you."

Luke dumped the bag on the desk, disrupting the holochart. Jaina stepped back.

"Ben's boots," said Luke.

"And the point is . . . ?"

"Deposited at our apartment by Lumiya."

Mara put her hand on the boots and felt the remnants of dark energy. Now she was

mad: cold, clear, icy mad. "She's been into GAG HQ. Or Jacen's apartment. I don't

know which idea I like less."

KNOW WHICH IDEA I LIKE LESS.

"need to settle this with her."

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"It is, as some admiral once said, a trap

_"

"For her. Biting off more than she can chew."

Jaina glanced at them both, still looking a little wounded.

"Uncle Luke, I'll stick

my nose in here and say it's better if we go after Lumiya now, because she's clearly

playing a game, and . . . I've never seen you angry like this before."

"Luke, the question to ask yourself is this," Mara said, pulling on her jacket and

checking her personal weapons. "What will you do when

you catch her?"

Luke swallowed hard. "I know what I have to do."

"And what was that conversation we had the other day, about being fit for the

role? Me trained killer, you honest guardian of right?"
Lightsaber, vibroblades, holdout

blaster, flechette launcher, and the last of my
transponders. Check. "Here's the

plan. You keep an eye on Jacen while I go after her."

"I'm coming, too," Jaina said. "I'd hate to miss Alema if she shows up."

Things were getting back to normal, then. Mara would apologize when they were

on their way and Luke was making sure that he knew what Jacen was up to-in case

Tiiniva was staging an elaborate diversion to draw them

Luthra was staging an elaborate diversion to draw them all away from Coruscant.

Luke looked at his hands. "I know you're right. It doesn't feel right, but I know I

shouldn't be going after her bent on vengeance, and I don't know what it's going to take

to make me kill her. And nothing short of that makes sense now."

Mara nodded and hit the comm to the hangar ground crew. "Stand by an X-wing,

please." She pulled on her gloves, the fingerless ones that gave her a good grip but still

let her feel the weapon. "I'm going back, starting from the apartment, and tracking her

from there. She wants to leave a nice trail? She's found just the right person to follow

it."

I'll sort this out, because it's my fault it got this far.

"I should have gone straight after her, and then you wouldn't have talked me out

of this," said Luke.

"Jaina's dead right. You have too much history with Lumiya, and you're too

stoked up. You have to kill cold."

Luke looked heartbroken for a moment. It wasn't disappointment that he was

losing the argument to her, because there was no argument. It was common sense. Just

because they were family didn't mean that military best practice went out the window.

But something had struck him that he didn't like, something more than Lumiya's

constant threats to Ben.

"I hate it when you're right," he said, and managed a smile. "Jacen says Ben's

asleep, and it seems that way. So he's okay."

"There you go," said Mara. She still hadn't told Luke that Ben could shut down in

the Force. She'd have a little chat with her son about that first. "We're off now. Keep

tabs on Jacen. Go and have a concerned avuncular chat with him over caf if you have

to. But be around in case that's where your ex is heading." She patted Luke's cheek and

winked, wanting to make light of it so he didn't see how much Lumiya was getting to

her. "I might be going gray, farmboy, and I don't have her dramatic dress sense, but at

least what I've got is all flesh and blood . . ."

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Luke almost laughed. Mara tapped her forefinger to her brow in a mock salute and

walked off with Jaina. When she got in the turbo-lift, she checked her datapad to see

where Ben's transponder had gotten to.

If you've left that blade in your locker, Ben . . .

A little earlier, it had shown up on the datapad's small screen as a static blip in

Galactic City, in GAG HQ. Now-it didn't.

Mara never panicked, but she reserved the right to professional apprehension. She

switched the scale of the chart.

"What's wrong?" Jaina asked.

"Nothing." Where are you? "Nothing at all."

Mara flicked through ever-larger scales of screen until she picked up the

transponder blip again, and the coordinates didn't make sense.

Ben appeared to be on Vulpter.

What takes you there, Ben? Vulpter's not in the war.

If she told Luke, with the head of steam he'd built up, she knew he'd go in with all

cannons blazing.

So she simply smiled at Jaina, ready to let Lumiya play her game of tag before

Mara finally separated her smug head from her metal body, ending her feud with the

Skywalkers once and for all.

I'm coming, cyborg. It's time.

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chapter nine

I don't want to worry, you, sir, but I've just heard something on the metal

something on the metal

commodities market that might concern us. Someone's talking about offering futures in

Mandalorian iron. And MandalMotors shares are being snapped up for the first time in

years.

-Investment analyst, Galactic Alliance Treasury

MANDALMOTORS RESEARCH WING,
KELDABE, MANDALORE

"What do you think then Fett?" Jir Yomaget was the kind of man who probably

had to be anesthetized to get him into a business suit. He stood with his arms folded,

gazing rapt at an airframe that Fett hadn't seen before, an incongruously scruffy and

disturbingly young man in dark green coveralls and partial

armor. "Prototype?"

Yomaget nodded. "Started life as the Kyr'galaar. Up to three crew, or two with extra

payload, atmosphere-capable, configurable for anything from planet pounding to

hunter-killer roles, and fast. Now tell me it's not gorgeous."

Research wing was a flattering term for the collection of scruffy sheds and

hangars. But the ramshackle appearance of the exterior belied the technology within.

MandalMotors had struggled to get back on its feet under a Galactic Alliance that

wasn't handing out reconstruction grants to Mandalore. Now it had an edge it could

exploit.

"How fast?" asked Fett.

Yomaget probably didn't look at his wife and kids with as much adoration as he

was lavishing on the assault fighter. "Point four hyper-drive. The ultimate shock

weapon."

"And you never offered me the chance to purchase." Fett had modified Slave I to a

point-seven. "That beats an X-wing."

"Unfinished prototype."

It was about fifteen meters nose-to-tail with an eight-meter span, a faceted

charcoal-gray wedge of a ship that had none of the insectoid lines of the StarViper. Fett

walked around it, noting empty racks and housings, and

took a guess that it would pack

four laser cannons and maybe a couple of other weapons. The tail ended in a flat

section with grilles and vents that looked like the ports on a datapad.

The skin was totally plain, its angled surfaces unbroken except for the mythosaur

logo picked out in a lighter gray on the side hatches: no brightwork, no sharp-edged

recesses, and the tinted transparisteel canopy seemed to merge into the superstructure.

Fett would have ducked underneath it to take a look at the blaster pods and store

pylons, but the fighter sat too low for him to do it comfortably. He couldn't face being

gripped by pain and having to crawl out like an idiot.

"So it's fast. And pretty."

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"Deflective stealth hull, cooled vents, scanner-absorbent coating." Yomaget

flourished a forearm plate attachment, tapped it, and the canopy popped. It parted into

two top-hinged hatches, and he swung himself into the cockpit. "Also hinges from the

lower edge, in case the pilot has to bang out. Now, the avionics . . . synthetic vision,

panoramic cockpit display, eye-controlled switch selection, aiming, the works."

"Sounds like you had a contest to see how many gizmos you could cram into one

lighter."

"All we've been able to do since the Vong war ended is reestablish our basic

production models and work up some better ideas."
Yomaget leaned over the side of

the fighter. "They all ended up in here."

"So . . ."

"Well, you wanted to know what we might manufacture with the new beskar.

Personally, I'd be inclined to incorporate it into the air-frame. Micronized beskar skin,

or laminate beskar armor."

"Beviin would call that over-egging the cake."

"Think of this as the demonstrator."

"That would make it the fastest, least vulnerable fighter on the market. The

weapons load might be a compromise." Fett wasn't sure if he had the power or right to

tell MandalMotors what to do with their product. This wasn't Coruscant, where national

security overrode commercial concerns by law. "Add the top-end armaments, though,

and I wouldn't want that sold to anyone else."

"Don't worry, we'll de-enrich the spec for export. We live here, remember. We all

lost family to the Vong." Yomaget jumped down from the cockpit with an agility Fett

envied. Then he pressed the forearm plate attachment, and the fighter made a faint

grinding sound before tilting back on its tail section and lifting through a full ninety

degrees to sit upright, a mechanism not dissimilar to

Slave I's. "It can land vertically in

a footprint of a little over thirty-two square meters."

Fett walked a few meters away to get a better idea of the shape. It didn't look like

any other vessel he'd seen. "I bet it does tricks, too."

"Our shares have rocketed and we haven't even unveiled this."

"I bought a few. Someone had to make sure the majority shareholding stayed in

Mandalorian hands."

"Just as well we don't have a law against insider dealing."

"I don't intend to sell. Might sign them over to someone on the condition they

never sell on to . . . aruetiise."

"Is that a go-ahead for production?"

"Full spec for us, de-enriched for them." Fett walked away briskly, feeling his

unconnected acts of prudence falling together into a policy of sorts. "Make sure the

export hyperdrive spec is a fraction better than an X-wing, no more."

Yomaget trailed after him. This was defense policy on the fly, and the clans didn't

get consulted. And they wouldn't care, Fett knew.

"We're going to arm the Confederation, then," said Yomaget.

"We'll arm anybody, including the GA, if they can pay." Fett hadn't even thought

about the next move: it just happened. "Provided Colonel Jacen Solo comes here in

time to negotiate the deal."

person to negotiate the deal.

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"You're a subtle man, Fett."

"I've never been called that before."

"Fifty percent of production for our own defense?"

Defense. That was one word for it. "Agreed."

Mandalorians liked a sensible compromise. The best deals were where both sides

were happy, or where one was happy and the other dead. Fett stopped short of asking to

fly the first beskar fighter off the production line. He wanted that privilege to go to

Beviin, the nearest he would ever have to a friend.

He looked forward to seeing the reaction when MandalMotors opened their order

book. Jacen Solo would have the choice between letting the GA's enemy buy better

fighters than his, and showing up here. Fett had no doubt which he'd choose, but it

would be fun seeing him have to handle the messy presentational issues in public. That

could be arranged.

"It'll be called the Bes'uliik," Yomaget called after him. "The Basilisk. I always

had a soft spot for the ancient battle droids. Good old Mando name and old-fashioned

Mando iron in a state-of-the-art pack-age."

Fett nodded to himself. Bes'uliik. It had a nice ring to it. A name from the past, a

name that wouldn't go away, however hard the rest of the galaxy tried to make it-ever

the galaxy tried to make it over.

Bes'uliik.

It was the kind of news that made other men walk away whistling.

CHARBI SPACEPORT, VULPTER, DEEP CORE

Ben pressed as close to the viewport as he could to peer at the permacrete below.

It was hazy daylight outside, but his body said it was still last night and he needed more sleep.

As far as the rest of the spaceport was concerned, the well-maintained but very

old Incom tourer was not a Galactic Alliance Guard ship carefully contaminated with

Corellian dust, Corellian food waste, Corellian fabric, and any number of other touches

designed to show a forensics team that the vessel definitely came from Corellia. And

the battered intersystem delivery cutter tailing Cal Omas's shuttle wasn't a spy vessel

with top-of-the-line comms, spoofing devices, and an overpowered hyperdrive.

Jori Lekauf wasn't a GAG assassin, either. He was just a nice ordinary young

Corellian on an adventure with his younger cousin in an elderly ship he'd saved every

spare credit for a couple of years to buy. The trouble was that Ben could believe that all

too easily, even though he'd seen the range of weapons Lekauf carried under his jacket.

"If I'd kept my hair red, the family resemblance would have looked more

convincing," Ben said. He wanted another caf to keep him alert, but he had a vision of

being desperate to visit the refreshers at a critical point in the operation if he drank any

more. "Your hair's reddish, really."

"More sandy blond," Lekauf said. "One redheaded human is noticeable, but two is

asking to be remembered by witnesses. If we have any, that is."

"Could have dressed as Ubese . . . with masks."

"I think that's been done before."

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"I'm just worrying."

"I know."

It was a long wait. Shevu would make contact with them when he landed. His last

transmission said he was a few minutes behind Omas's shuttle, which wouldn't attract

suspicion; Charbi was a busy port freighting cheap and shoddy goods, and ships landed

almost too close together for safety and comfort. Nobody cared who you were as long

as port fees and taxes were paid.

They said Vulpter had once been a lovely planet. It didn't look lovely now: the

skies had that polluted smoky haze that meant there were wonderful red sunsets here,

and not much else to be grateful for. And this was after they'd tried to clean up the

environment. The vast landing strip-landing field, more like-was scattered with

dozens upon dozens of craft in varying stages of disrepair, some taking on

board supplies and fuel, some berthing next to freight warehouses where conveyor

belts disgorged crates into their holds. Their outlines shimmered in the heat haze from

idling drives. And there were all kinds of species wandering around on foot between

the vessels, stretching their legs-anywhere between one pair and four of them, it

seemed. The only concession to landing field safety was a tracery of red and white

painted lines across the permacrete bearing the warnings pedestrians DO NOT CROSS

THIS LINE and BEWARE GROUND TRAFFIC.

But everyone was crossing the lines as they pleased, and battered speeders with

Charbi Port Authority livery swerved around them, honking in annoyance.

Ben decided it was the last place anyone would expect two heads of state to

conduct a top-level meeting.

"Stand by," Lekauf said quietly, pressing his fingertip to his ear. "It's the captain .

. . yes, sir . . . copy that." He looked up. "About twelve minutes before Omas lands.

Shevu's right behind him in the landing queue."

Ben perked up. The Karpaki was folded in two inside his jacket, right on the limit

of what he could hide, and the vibroblade was tucked in his hip pocket. He'd rehearsed

it all in his mind on a continuous loop of what-ifs and if-onlys: rifle to drop Gejjen,

preferably at very long range, and vibroblade to escape if seized.

It would have been better to get Gejjen as the man disembarked, while he was

exposed on the landing field for a few moments without bystanders milling around. But

Jacen wanted the meeting recorded. It was a case of following Gejjen-or Omas-to

the room they'd hired by the hour, then slipping a strip-cam through a gap under the

doors. The building blueprints showed plenty of places to insert the flimsi-thin device.

Each room's doors were set in a recess, so-for once-it was a simple matter of

squatting down as if picking up a piece of litter and shoving the strip-cam into the gap.

"Should have put a hidden bug in Omas's coat or folio or something," Lekauf

muttered. "Then we sit here, pinpoint Geijen's ship, and slot him on the ramp as he

leaves."

Ben fidgeted with the vibroblade, wondering how his mother would have tackled

a job like this. "You can't stick bugs on people without them finding out sooner or

later."

"Yeah, with our luck he'd have changed his jacket. They used to have this stuff

called tracking dust, you know. Just like powder. If the target inhaled it, you could pick

up signals from it for ages afterward."

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"Makes you wonder how much all this stuff costs," said Ben. "I mean, we're dirt-

cheap, but we have to abandon this ship."

"It's an old crate. Saves the Defense Department the cost of disposal."

And leaving it behind would add weight to the setup that Corellian dissidents had

killed their own Prime Minister for giving in to the GA. That was the plan, anyway.

Ben switched seats in the cramped interior to look out from the starboard side.

Gejjen's ship should have landed by now, according to its flight plan: one pilot, three

passengers, maximum five-hour stopover. That was what it said on the CPA

information database that his datapad-scrubbed of all identity, in case of capture-

showed him

Ben avoided looking at the chrono on the bulkhead. He just waited for the word

from Lekauf.

"So how do you feel being an officer now?" Ben asked.

"Weird. But my granddad would have been so proud. I wish he'd been alive to see

it."

Lekauf never mentioned his parents. It was always his grandfather. It struck Ben

that almost everyone he'd grown up with or worked with either had no family or had

key members missing or totally absent. It wasn't normal. He thought about how routine

killing was for his whole family, and knew that most of the beings in the galaxy got

through their entire lives without ever killing anyone, deliberately or accidentally.

It was strange that families like his got to make the really big decisions for worlds

of normal, ordinary, nonlethal people.

Ben concentrated on centering himself, edging a little toward that state where he

vanished from the Force. He pulled himself back just as he felt a drifting sensation that

could have been disappearance, or nodding off.

"Plug yourself in," Lekauf whispered. "It's a go."

Ben activated his comlink and earpiece, and shut down the environmental controls

to leave the tourer.

When Lekauf opened the hatch, the air and noise hit Ben like a solid wall. It

smelled of factories and sulfur. They ambled down the ramp, working hard at looking

ordinary, and made their way toward the terminal buildings as if they were killing time,

not politicians.

Lekauf scratched his ear, repositioning the earpiece. "Got you, sir. Position?"

Ben picked up Shevu's voice clearly. "He'll pass thirty meters to the left of you

unless he deviates. Heading for Building G. You pick him up and I'll follow you in."

"No visual on the target yet."

"He must be inside already."

Oh, this is real. This is happening.

It was a throwback of a thought, back to the time when Ben first started taking

crazy risks, but this mission had an extra dose of risk: Omas knew him by sight, and

had even met Shevu, too. They couldn't afford to be spotted. Ben slouched and

meandered as fourteen-year-old boys were prone to do, turning around from time to

time to chat to Lekauf about safe and meaningless trivia-baka rock, speeders,

anything-while he took a cautious look across the permacrete in Omas's direction.

And there he was: flanked by two men in working clothes, a carefully scruffy figure

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himself. His confident bearing gave him away as a man used to being obeyed, but only

to someone who knew what he was looking for. And Ben did.

"Going okay," Lekauf whispered, not looking toward the three men.

One of the GA Intelligence agents walked through the doors of Building G in

front of Omas. The other followed close enough to tread on his heels. They almost

vanished in the crowds inside the terminal building, but Ben kept them in sight even

though he lost Lekauf for a few moments. One of them

appeared to be checking the

numbers on various doors and exits as he walked, and eventually he stopped at one

marked 53-L and inserted a credit chip in the slot to one side. The doors parted and Ben

got a glimpse of a small, brightly lit room almost filled by a white duraplast table

ringed by chairs. There was already someone in there.

The doors closed again. A steady two-way river of passengers, port workers,

flight crew, and the general temporary population of a spaceport stood between Ben

and the doors.

"You can do this," Lekauf said. "How many in there? I can't place the strip-cam

under the doors if someone else is going to come along and open them again. "

Ben closed his eyes and concentrated on the ebb and flow of the Force, the

patterns of density that he could both feel at the roof of his mouth and see as speckled

color behind his eyelids.

"Six," he said. That made sense: two close protection agents each, even numbers,

two statesmen who didn't trust each other. "Yes, six. They're all inside now."

"Can you see lottery numbers, too?" Lekauf made his way casually through the

shoals of people and squatted down to adjust his boot. Ben saw him take out what

looked like a small flimsi strip, then slide the thing under the hairline ~~gan~~ with quick

ease.

Strip-cams were very small these days, the size of a coat-check stub. They really

were flimsy, and just as disposable once they'd finished transmitting.

"Lovely," said Shevu's voice in Ben's ear. "I can see right up Gejjen's nose. Good

clear sound. Nice job, Jori."

Eventually, Ben glanced around and spotted Shevu leaning against a drinks

dispenser on the other side of the concourse. He was recording the output from the

strip-cam and transmitting it back to GAG HQ. As soon as he had confirmation that it

had been received and stored, he'd erase his datapad

and send a code to the strip-cam to

shred its data. It'd be just a scrap of garbage the cleaners would sweep up, if they ever

came this way. It looked as if they wouldn't.

Ben and Lekauf could hear the conversation in their earpieces, both of them

monitoring it so they knew when to vanish, wait for Gejjen to emerge, and follow him.

It was a fascinating conversation. Ben had started to get the hang of the code and

insinuation that beings in power used to say unpleasant things, a different language that

let them deny later that they'd meant any harm. Jacen was good at it. Ben hoped he

never would be, because it got to be a habit and Jacen seemed to enjoy playing that

game for its own sake.

He recognized Omas's voice. Gejjen sounded softer than he did on the HNE

bulletins.

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It was very weird to listen to a man you were about to kill. Ben was hearing the

last words Dur Gejjen would ever speak.

"So . . . can we agree as gentlebeings to cease hostilities while we sort out a

compromise?"

"Before or after I take this to the Senate?" Omas asked.

"I'm not referring this to my assembly-yet. You might not need to refer it to

yours." Gejjen replied. "We'll stand down if you agree to

yours," Geffen replied. "We'll stand down if you agree to that form of revised wording

in the commitment of planetary defense assets to the GA."

"You might be able to deliver that with Corellian forces, but can you pull back the

Bothans?"

"Are you sure Niathal will do as you tell her?"

"She's a career officer. She will."

"The Bothans are pragmatists. They will."

"As a show of goodwill, you'll commit forces to helping us restore order in places

like the Sepan system."

"Of course. And you need us to come back into the GA fold to stop the

membership hemorrhaging away."

"I won't ask for any statement that causes loss of face. I know how . . . proud

Corellians are. Just something along the lines of differences being bridgeable."

"That's very gracious, Chief Omas. Now, those differences will only be bridged if

Admiral Niathal and Colonel Solo no longer carry the military weight that they do

now."

"You want me to fire them."

"I think you might need to do more than fire them now that they've become used

to getting their own way."

"I think I know what you mean, and I don't care for that solution "

UNRECORDED
"Niathal-ambitious. Dangerous. Solo-ambitious,
dangerous, and Jedi, too. We

can solve the problem for you permanently."

"If you do, I don't need to know about it."

"If we do, I'd like your security services to look the other
way. Solo has ambitious

minions who'd be temporarily blind and deaf in exchange
for promotion, I think."

"I see you know of Captain Girdun, then . . ."

And they laughed. The two of them actually laughed. Ben
heard a faint sound as

if Shevu was clearing his throat. When Ben turned his
head, Lekauf was looking at

him, for once not the permanently cheerful man who
looked so much younger than he

was. He looked old and angry.

"That's how much we're worth," he said quietly. "I bet our Intel guys in there love

the idea of having their man back in command."

Ben's gut turned suddenly heavy and cold. It was a dirty game all the way to the

top. While he was preparing to assassinate Gejjen, Gejjen was doing a deal to strike at

Jacen and Niathal, with Omas turning a blind eye.

Everyone could be bought if the price was high enough. Omas obviously put

peace above individual lives. It might not have been any different in the long run from

any general risking combat casualties, but it didn't feel anywhere near as clean.

Ben switched his attention. He began to visualize the exterior of the terminal

buildings. A walkway ran along the roof, a little-used observation deck where anyone

could sit and watch vessels taking off and landing. It wasn't a popular spot, but it was

perfect for a sniper. As soon as the meeting sounded as if it was coming to an end, Ben

had a minute or two to get up on that roof and wait for Gejjen to exit.

There were three sets of doors Gejjen could leave through to walk back onto the

landing field and rejoin his ship. To cover that span-a couple of hundred meters-Ben

would have to be ready to sprint along that platform in

either direction from a central
point.

I'm ready.

He pressed his arm against his side and felt the Karpaki.
It would be almost

completely silent. He'd also be standing on top of a stark
permacrete platform with no
cover.

I'll just have to be fast, then . . .

The conversation between Omas and Gejjen slowed,
and there were longer pauses

and more restless grunts and sighs. Business was drawing
to a close. At a nudge from

Lekauf, Ben began walking to the roof turbolift without
even looking back. He stood in

the turbolift cab with a family of Trianii looking for a tapcaf, wondering if they could

smell his intentions.

One of the GAG troopers liked free-falling. He'd told Ben that to

jump off a five-thousand-meter building, there was a point where a free-faller had

to simply stop working up to it and step off into the void. Ben was at that point now as

he walked along the rooftop terrace and took up position. He stepped back into the

shadow of a single lonely air-conditioning outflow and unfolded the Karpaki. If he held

it against the leg of his baggy, creased pants, it didn't present such an obvious profile.

There was nobody around anyway. The observation

platform was cracked, and

weeds were thriving in the crevices. He settled down to wait for Shevu and Lekauf to

do the spotting for him.

Jacen's going to go crazy when he hears what Omas has in mind for him.

"Ben, heads up." It was Shevu. "Gejjen's on the move. He's exiting via the south

doors. Go right."

Ben checked around him and jogged to the far end of the platform, keeping close

to the rear wall. He hoped he'd recognize Gejjen. He'd studied the man's face and walk

intently before the mission, but now he might be looking at the back of his head,

depending on the exact path he took back to the ship. It

was a silly, petty doubt. He

hadn't thought it through enough before he embarked.

But when he looked down on the permacrete, and the chaos of ships, freight

droids, and species of all kinds wandering around as if it were a theme park, that neat

military haircut-jet black, glossy, not a strand out of place-drew his eye like a

beacon.

He lay prone and sighted up. The optics brought him instantly a hundred meters

closer to Dur Gejjen, and then there was no doubt that he had the right man in his cross

wires. As Gejjen walked, two security guards in discreet casual clothes weaved in and

out of Ben's shot.

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As soon as Gejjen dropped, at least one of them would be looking for where the

shot had originated. Ben would have to stay low and melt back into the crowds in the

airside terminal, then rendezvous with Lekauf at Shevu's transport.

I can do it. I got in and out of Centerpoint, didn't I?

Ben held his breath, let the Karpaki's smart optics adjust for wind and angle, and

felt his finger tighten on the trigger. One second Gejjen's neat dark head was filling the

scope, and the next Ben was staring at empty permacrete as the rifle kicked back

against his shoulder. The muffled report seemed to come

from a long way away.

Nothing seemed to have gone down in the order he expected-shot, recoil, drop. He lay flat.

What happened?

Did I kill him?

He could hear shouts carried on the air from three stories below. His body made

the decisions for him and he found himself scrambling backward to the rear wall while

Shevu's voice in his ear kept saying, "Get out of there, Ben."

He ran at a crouch to the turbolift, found that it was on a lower floor, and took the

fire-escape stairway. It was going to plan. He could
merge into the crowd

merge into the crowd.

Back on the ground floor, he slipped through the fire doors and made a conscious

effort not to look panicked. Maybe professional assassins could take this in their stride,

but he couldn't. He'd put aside the fact that he'd just killed a man and found he was

totally caught up in the simple act of getting away.

When Shevu put his hand on his shoulder from behind, Ben thought he was going

to have a heart attack.

"Keep walking," Shevu whispered. Curious crowds were gathering at the

transparisteel doors to gawp at the unfolding drama on the landing strip, and security

staff were struggling to get through the crowd. "Just keep

on walking."

If they sealed the doors . . .

It was chaos. Nobody seemed to know what had happened yet. That bought Ben,

Shevu, and Lekauf a few more minutes. Charbi seemed the kind of place where

passengers and freighter captains would walk right past a dead body if it meant their

flight left on time.

They were counting on it.

"I'm right behind you," said Lekauf's voice in his earpiece. "If we walk down to

the south doors, we can just go around the perimeter to Shevu's shuttle."

Ben was scared. He was happy to admit it. He hadn't been afraid at all on

been afraid at all on

Centerpoint, but now he knew better. He kept a little distance between him and Shevu,

remembering to pause every so often and

look at the commotion as if he were genuinely curious about what was happening,

but he carried on walking.

Above him, the holoscreen that usually showed arrivals and departures was turned

over to the traffic-control tower's view of the landing strip.

Yes, he'd killed Gejjen, a textbook head shot.

I can't feel my face. My lips feel numb.

Now Ben was seconds away from those doors, walking with the steady but

thinning stream of droids, repulsorlifts, and passengers heading out to the vessels.

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Nearly there.

He was a few meters away from the transparisteel doors when he saw a man in

familiar casual clothes running at full tilt toward them. The doors parted, and Ben was

staring down the muzzle of a blaster.

"Armed officer, CSA!" the man barked. "Everybody-stay where you are-"

Ben balanced on a blade's edge between surrender and making a run for it.

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chapter ten

Verpine negotiator Sass Sikili, speaking today at the opening of BastEx, has

warned Murkhana that the Roche government will respond with "appropriate

measures" if it continues to breach trade agreements on technology exports. Murkhana

is keen to move into the growing market for secure small-unit comlink networking, a

field dominated by Verpine products.

-HNE business news, noted with interest by Boba Fett, Mandalore

SPEEDER PARK, ROTUNDA ZONE,
CORUSCANT

Lumiya had left a magnified wake in the force like a water speeder on a lake.

While it was generous of her, Mara wasn't amused.

"I didn't get stupid overnight," she muttered. "Don't insult me, tin-can."

"And what were you saying about Luke being too close to all this?" Jaina asked.

"Deep breaths, Aunt Mara. Deep breaths."

"I'm psyching up. I find it helps. You use the Force your way, and I'll use it mine."

"Wow, am I calming you down now? That's a headline to save for the

grandchildren."

Mara paced a ten-meter square of the area, feeling dark energies pulsing like

shock waves. Jaina stood back and watched.

"She's taken off from here," Mara stated.

"Has she led us here to divert us from somewhere else on

Coruscant?"

"She's got a narrow range of targets, Jaina. Ben or Jacen-or even Han and Leia,

if she's teamed up with Alema. Your parents aren't on Coruscant, and if she's after

Jacen, she must have had her chance to take him when she got into GAG HQ to grab

Ben's boots." Mara squatted down to touch the permacrete. She expected to get a jolt of

some kind, a taste of Lumiya mocking her, but there was something disconcertingly

benign about the impression the Sith had left behind. Yes, like she managed to convince

Luke she meant him no harm. Lumiya seemed to have discovered a rare talent for

Force-acting. "If she's after Luke, she's passed up two

chances now."

"So it's Ben."

"Ben's . . . away. He's not on Coruscant."

Jaina looked at Mara with an expression that said she couldn't work out why Mara

was stalling her. But Mara wouldn't budge. The less the family knew about Ben's

situation, the better. Sooner or later, it'd slip out that she'd put a trace on him, and

however old he was when that finally happened she'd lose his trust forever. It would

hurt him.

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"GAG business," Mara said, answering the unasked question. She cast around in

the Force, groping for anything that said Lumiya was heading for Vulpter, but she had

no sense of that at all. What she picked up was Ben, nervous for a moment, then

disappearing as Jacen must have taught him. She'd have to tackle that when the current

emergency was under control. "Okay, if she wants me to follow her, I'll follow."

"Let's call in Zekk and Jag, because I'm betting Alema's in town again, and

_"

"No offense, Jaina, but I think it's me she wants. You go find Bug Girl."

Jaina's pursed lips looked like she'd decided to swallow an argument. "Okay," she

said at last.

"It's just an old dark side feud. " Mara didn't want Jaina to feel that she was

snubbing her. Relations were edgy enough at the moment. "Let's not allow her to divert

both of us."

So Lumiya was taunting her. / com get at your husband. I can get at your son. If

she was so set on killing Ben for the death of her daughter, she still seemed to be

missing chances. So what did Lumiya want from her?

Mara returned to base to find one of the ground crew waiting patiently by her

allocated XJ7. She climbed into the cockpit and started her instrument check.

"Is Lumiya really a Shh?" the technician asked.

"The very last of her kind," said Mara, not asking what he'd heard and how he

knew the name anyway. She felt a pang of guilt at her sloppiness for arguing loudly

and forgetting there were other personnel around. She sealed the XJ7's hatches. "I'll

make sure of that."

Mara ignored military air traffic regulations and circled over the area where she'd

last picked up Lumiya's powerful wake. If she concentrated, it was relatively easy to

follow, and she found herself leaving Coruscant orbit on a bearing for one of the

moons, Hesperidium.

"Oh, yes, Palpatine loved that place," she said aloud. "You heading there for old

times' sake?"

Lumiya was definitely playing a game. But she wasn't stupid enough to think she

could offer Mara her hand and find it still intact like she had with Luke.

The wake led to Hesperidium's main resort, which wasn't quite as splendid as

Mara recalled. She wondered if it was feeling the pinch of postwar recovery, and if

there still weren't enough tastelessly wealthy folk to go around. Port traffic control was

surprised-to say the least-to find a military vessel on its scanners.

"I need to put down for a while," Mara said, knowing they had no choice about

the matter. They could hardly stop her landing. "Getting

weird readings on my

instruments. I have to check it out."

"Let us know if you need help," the ATC controller said.

"We pride ourselves on

doing anything and everything for all our visitors."

"Classified," Mara said, and ended the conversation in the way that only she

could.

When she landed and saw the selection of vessels standing on the private strips of

the hotels, she realized that a XJ7 probably looked like an eccentric billionaire's toy,

and a small one at that. Some of the craft here were staggering in their size and

opulence; she wondered how they even managed to land. There was also a thriving

land. There was clearly a thriving

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class of the ultrawealthy that had come through the last decade pretty well unscathed,

and life was going on uninterrupted for them now, regardless of another war. Credits

seemed to operate like deflector shields: if you had enough of either, nothing could

touch you.

She checked around her-in the Force, and visually-before sliding out of the

cockpit and jumping to the ground. At least she'd managed to dress like eccentric

wealth, and few would look at her.

Yes, there were definitely some bizarre-looking flying palaces here . . .

And then she felt darkness touch her shoulder in the brilliant morning sunshine.

It was so tangible, so dense, that she spun around with her hand on her lightsaber

hilt expecting to find Lumiya ready to swing at her. But there was nobody.

You want to play games?

It was early. A couple of hotel guests in sports clothes jogged by and glanced at

her, but ran on. She prowled between the vessels on the strip, feeling the darkness

pressing on her sternum like a coronary. Something dark was here-and that meant

Lumiya. The crushing sensation in her chest was getting so powerful that she ignited

her lightsaber's blade, ready to fight when she rounded

her lightsaber's blade, ready to fight when she rounded the next hull.

This is it, Lumiya. No more games.

She sprang into the gap, lightsaber humming.

Staring back at her wasn't a veiled figure with a lightwhip but a single,

disembodied, flame-red eye ten meters wide. Her instinct said it was alive, an alien

being, but it was clearly a ship of some kind, and that meant only one thing: Lumiya

was inside.

It was a trap, Mara was sure of that.

Fine. But sometimes traps swallow prey that's way too big for them . . .

She looked over the hull for a hatch, but the roughly textured surface-was it

stone?-was unbroken.

Come inside.

Mara wondered why she was thinking that and then realized that the thought was

actually a voice inside her head, in the fabric of the Force itself. It was inanimate, yet

sentient; and it wasn't a droid.

It was the ship.

Mara concentrated hard on sensing Lumiya, but she could detect nobody inside

the vessel. Suddenly an aperture appeared in the hull and a ramp extruded. It was too

tempting, and she was too old a hand at this kind of game to walk straight in, but she

had to know what was going on. The wake ended here.

Lumiya had used this ship.

But-

I can take her. This is all mini games. I'm not falling for it.

If Lumiya was waiting within, hiding somehow, then Mara would kill her. If she

wasn't, then Mara would sit in wait for her, and kill her then. It was all the same to

Mara. She didn't have anything more urgent to do right then.

She placed her boot on the ramp and took a few cautious steps, lightsaber held

two-handed. If the hotel had security cams and could see what was going on, it was just

too bad.

Mara felt bewilderment that wasn't hers.

You're not who I expected.

It was the ship again.

"What d'you mean, I'm not who you expected?" No, she didn't need to speak: she

realized she could think back at this thing.

You are . . . very similar.

"Thanks. Thanks a bunch." Maybe the ship had a high regard for Lumiya. Mara

decided that it was as good a source as any of information. She thought her next

question, not even in words, but in concepts and attitudes she thought she'd left behind

a long time ago. The mental conversation left a taste in her like being a Hand again.

Where is she, Ship'?

The other one? Close by.

You're a thing of the Sith, aren't you?

You know darkness well. Better than the other one that I expected to see return.

Mara didn't know what to make of that, but right then she was prepared to accept

that her intent was far more malevolent than Lumiya knew how to be. She wanted

destruction. She wanted obliteration.

Last of your kind, Lumiya. And about time.

Mara hesitated on the brow of the ramp. She thought for a minute that she might

be pulled in, and the spherical ship would then trap her inside and make a run for it

INSIDE AND MAKE A RUN FOR IT.

She took the precaution of reaching inside with one hand to place the last of her tiny

transponders-her only remaining gadget from her previous existence-just inside the

hatch. It attached to the oddly stone-like coating she could feel within. At least if that

happened, someone might trace her. And if Lumiya ever returned to the ship, the

transponder would report her position every time Mara's emitter pinged it.

Mara took a cautious breath and lowered her head to look inside.

The ship really was empty.

Not just devoid of crew-empty. There was nothing within the hull; no cockpit,

no instruments, no systems indicators, nothing. It was hollow, lit by a red glow as if

there were a fire burning steadily behind the bulkheads. She hadn't seen that light from

the outside.

And that was as far as she got. She felt something coming, and she knew what that

something was. She took a few steps back down the ramp and waited, lightsaber still

extended.

A slim figure in a dark gray suit and veiled triangular headdress stepped into the

space between the parked ships.

"Hello, little housewife . . . ," said Lumiya.

Mara's autopilot kicked in and she was the Emperor's Hand again, silent and

focused. There was nothing worth saying anyway. Amateurs gave speeches;

professionals got on with the job.

She Force-leapt five meters at Lumiya, slashing down right to left, two-handed.

The stroke-all power, no finesse-clipped the Sith's headdress as she sprang back,

slicing off a section. Lumiya's eyes widened, pupils dilated, but she was already

whirling her lightwhip about her head. The tails crackled and hissed, missing Mara

only because she threw all her energy into a Force push to slow them a fraction.

Mara didn't take that weapon lightly. It was the worst of

both worlds, leather strips

studded with impervious Mandalorian iron fragments and tendrils of sheer, raw,

murderous dark energy. Mara drew her blaster and rolled under the hull of the ship next

to her. The light-whip gouged through the durasteel with a shriek of tearing metal,

filling the air with the smell of hydraulic fluid, and the spurt of liquid turned into a

torrent that began spreading in a thick pool. As Mara rolled clear on the other side of

the ship, Lumiya landed heavily on both feet and brought the whip down so close to

Mara's head that she felt the rush of air on her right cheek like a breath. The crack was

deafening.

Mara wasn't even thinking when she aimed the blaster. Lumiya's whip hand was

raised to throw as much weight as possible from the back stroke. A puff of white vapor

burst from Lumiya's shoulder, and she staggered a few paces.

Metal. Maybe I hit metal.

Maybe she had, because Lumiya teetered for a second but came right back. Mara

sprang horizontally from a crouch and cannoned into Lumiya's legs with all the power

she could muster from the Force. She hit solid durasteel. Blood filled her mouth but she

couldn't feel a thing-yet. Clinging to Lumiya's knees with one arm, denying her the

space to swing the whip, she brought her down like a

felled tree before smashing her

head into the woman's face.

And that hurt. Oh yes, Mara felt that. She'd caught not Lumiya's nose but the

cybernetic jaw, and it cut deep into her forehead. Fighting on pure reflex now, part

stunned, she killed the lightsaber blade for a second and held the hilt like a dagger,

stabbing it down into Lumiya's chest before flicking the energy back on. Lumiya pulled

to the side as the blade punched through flesh. Mara smelled it. She flicked off the

blade to pull back again, triumphant.

I've done it. Dead. Dead, you-

But Lumiya was screaming, and that wasn't right at all. The scream seared

THE SCREAM SCARED

through Mara's spinning head. It was more than sound. It was-

Mara scrambled to her knees to look down at what should have been a dead

woman, and stared into green eyes that were utterly devoid of any emotion, and then

the world darkened like an eclipse.

Maybe I'm the one who's dead.

Something hit her square in the back, pitching her forward onto Lumiya. Mara

struggled to turn over without letting go of either lightsaber or blaster, but something

coiled around her neck and jerked her backward. The lightwhip was still in Lumiya's

fist, she could see the thing, she could see it, so what was

around her neck, choking

her? She felt as if she was flying backward at high speed, and then she hit something so

hard that it punched every bit of breath out of her lungs and left her gulping for air.

A second or two was all it took. Mara lay trying to suck in air in painful, straining

gulps, eyes stinging, and saw Lumiya's boots run past her face at a stagger, missing her

by centimeters.

What's in my eyes? What's stinging?

She raised her hand to rub them and her knuckles came away red and wet. It was

blood. The last thing she saw as she looked up was the orange sphere, that impossible

Sith shin soaring vertically into the air and extending

shot ship, soaring vertically into the air and catching webbed vanes like living wings.

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Mara managed to prop herself up on her elbows. She was suddenly aware of the

two runners she'd seen earlier, all nice and neat in their crisp white sports gear, staring

at her in horror. She summoned what focus she had and concentrated hard.

"You've just seen two stuntwomen performing for a holovid, shot by a hidden

cam," she said. "You didn't see a fight at all."

"We didn't see a fight at all, dear," said the woman obediently.

The man gawped, and then grinned. "Wow, it's amazing how real that blood stuff

looks!"

"Isn't it . . . ," said Mara, and somehow got to her feet, retrieved her lightsaber hilt

and blaster, and walked off with as much grace as she could manage.

I was sure I'd finished her off. Mow did I miss?

She almost sobbed with frustration and struggled to get into the XJ7's cockpit, still

trying to work out what had jumped her from behind. When she checked her injuries in

the reflective surface of her datapad, her face was streaked with blood, her right eye

was swelling and closing already, and there was something like a rope burn across her

neck. She could see indentations in her skin that looked like a twisted wire cable.

Something like a droid jumped me. A machine, anyway.
That's why I didn't sense

it.

It was crazy to fly a fighter after a head injury, she knew,
but there was no other

way back to Coruscant. She fired up the drives,
swearing and cursing. She'd had the

cyborg witch right there, her lightsaber in her, and she still
hadn't killed her.

And I didn't feel any malice from her, either, Luke. Just a
busted head.

This was going to take plenty of bacta. Mara lifted the
XJ7 clear and set it on

automatic for the homeward leg.

Luke is going to go nuts when he sees me in this state.

Her adrenaline was ebbing, and the pain was making itself felt now. She settled

into a shallow meditative trance to speed the healing process.

Why didn't she kill me? She had the chance. I brained myself on her kriffing metal

jaw.

Then Mara remembered the transponder. She fumbled for the datapad again and

activated the search emitter. A yellow blip-no, two yellow blips-showed.

One was still on Vulpter: Ben. The other was edging across the grid on her screen,

moving away from the Core.

Lumiya.

Gotcha, she thought, smiling for a second before she

remembered her split lip.

Gotcha.

Lumiya and her bizarre Sith ship were on a bearing for the Hydian Way node.

Either she wanted Mara to follow, or she didn't know about the transponder.

It was okay. Mara could take her anytime now. And two could play the Comeand-

get-me game.

She leaned back in her seat and concentrated on reducing her ripening black eye.

JACEN SOLO'S OFFICE-DOORS CLOSED-GAG
HQ, CORUSCANT

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Jacen played the recording four or five times before he

was satisfied. It was a

distorted ground-up shot, the sort that endoscopic strip-cams tended to capture, but the

soundtrack was clear and the participants in the meeting were clearly identifiable as the

GA Chief of State and the Corellian Prime Minister. There would be no argument that

the two men had met, thrown out the GA's entire defense policy, agreed on private

terms for a cease-fire without reference to the Supreme Commander or the Senate, and

discussed the removal by assassination of Colonel Jacen Solo and Admiral Niathal.

This was all he needed to justify the next step.

He leaned across his desk and tapped the internal comm. Droids didn't mind how

many times they were summoned to the office.

"Aitch," he said. "I need you right away."

"Certainly, sir," said HM-3.

The droid took ten minutes to show up. When he clunked in, his arms were laden

with datapads and even bound flimsi. He'd come prepared for one of Jacen's explainthe-

law-to-me sessions. Sometimes it was disturbing to meet a droid who could

anticipate needs that well. Jacen settled for being impressed.

"It's time to action the amendment," Jacen said.

If a droid could have registered disappointment on an immobile face, then HM-3

did. His voice left no doubt. He enjoyed going through

the finer points of

administrative law with Jacen, probably because nobody else wanted to hear. The fact

that he carried the statutes around with him rather than simply tapping into the GA

networked archive was a sign of his genuine . . . affection for the law. It was an entity

to him, not simply words.

"Let me recap, then, sir." HM-3 laid the armful of legal reference sources on the

desk and pulled out his working datapad. ". . . amend the Emergency Measures Act to

include in its scope the GAG's powers to detain heads of state, politicians, and any

other individuals believed to be presenting a, genuine risk to the security of the

Galactic Alliance, and to seize their assets via the Treasury Orders Act. "

"That's the one," Jacen said. "When might that be enacted?"

"I can circulate it right now, sir, and it becomes effective at midnight. You're very

regular about these amendments."

"I've learned a lot about the importance of administrative discipline from you,

Aitch."

"Thank you, sir. So many don't."

"And my apologies for dragging you in here for so little."

Even with a droid, humility and gratitude could go a very long way. HM-3

gathered up his source data and made for the doors.

"My pleasure, sir," he said.

Jacen waited for the doors to close and let out a breath. He steeled himself not to

think of Tenel Ka and Allana, because that was a luxury he couldn't afford at this

moment, but he missed them so much-especially Allana-that it hurt him to breathe

sometimes when he thought of them. Lumiya was occupied elsewhere; there was little

chance that she'd catch him reaching out in the Force to his family. But he was taking

no risks, not now that so many things were coming within his grasp.

I've got you now, Cal Omas. I've got you, you fool.

At midnight, he would have the legal authority to arrest Chief of State Cal Omas

for actions likely to present a risk to the security of the Galactic Alliance. He would

notify the Supreme Commander, who was-until 0900 tomorrow-the acting Chief of

State in Omas's absence, and who would step into his place if for any reason he couldn't

discharge his duties.

Like when he's arrested for selling us down the river to the Corellians, and

planning to assassinate me and Niathal. She's going to love that bit.

It was too late to pull back from the brink now. This had to happen. Niathal knew

it was coming, and the promise of power had secured her silence. She needed to take

her silence. She needed to take

the evidence to Senator G'vli G'Sil, chair of the Security Council, to "clear her bows" as

she liked to put it. Once that nicety was out of the way, she could participate in the

coup with a clear military conscience.

After that, the next stage would be to settle her in the titular role as Chief of State

while consolidating his own power base quietly behind the scenes, because he wouldn't

be part of that structure laughingly called democracy.

It was chaos, pure and simple. It was a glorious word to justify abdication of

responsibility by those who could, if they were prepared to make the effort, create a

better galaxy for the vast majority. It was a word for

finding someone else to blame.

Democracy, freedom, and peace. They were all tricks, like words used to train

veermoks to come to heel or attack. They were sounds with no real meaning, nothing

definable, just triggers that everyone had been conditioned to think were desirable,

tangible things. Peace-well, Jacen could define that. But democracy? Freedom?

Whose freedom, and to do what? Freedom was a pretty nebulous concept when all

most beings wanted was an absence of disorder, a full stomach, and some hope that

their offspring would have a more comfortable life than they had.

Jacen rubbed his eyes, feeling the lack of sleep of the

past week but determined

not to doze even for a few minutes. Shevu hadn't called in. Half the job was done, but

Jacen didn't yet know what had happened to Gejjen. Whatever had happened, Ben had

either shot him or missed by now. Jacen switched on HNE, expecting a newsflash

about the assassination, but it was still showing some nonsense about a holovid star

with an embarrassing personal life. There was nothing to do but fill the waiting time

with productive work. He opened the comm to Niathal.

"I'm sending you something on your secure datalink," he said. "At one minute past

midnight, I'll be acting on it. Time your visit to G'Sil carefully."

"I think I can manage that, Jacen . . .,"

"Wait until you see what I'm sending you," he said. "It's rather different watching

them carve up our future."

"Let me know five minutes before you . . . pay your visit."

Jacen leaned back in his seat and waited for the call from Shevu.

And he could still feel that Ben was alive, if not well.

CHARBI SPACEPORT, VULPTER

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It was a lockdown. Ben, like everyone else in the crowd, stood still as the

Corellian Security officer-ministerial protection branch, he guessed-trained his

blaster on the crowd.

"Nobody's going anywhere," he said. "This port is being sealed by the Vulpter

authorities and you're all going to be scanned for ballistic residue."

"Why?" a male voice called from the crowd.

"There's been a projectile shooting," the officer said. "A murder. I want you all to

wait, nice and calm, and then we'll check you all out, and you'll be free to go."

"That's going to take hours," someone said.

"Then it'll take hours," said the officer, and flicked the charge test on his blaster so

they could hear the whir and see the flash of an indicator bar that said he was ready to

shoot. "I'd really like your cooperation, folks."

The hum of murmurs, gasps, clicks, and other varied expressions of horror and

impatience swept across the gathering crowd. Ben's gut was knotted tight. He didn't

dare look behind him to see where Shevu and Lekauf were. He could feel their

presence and had a good idea of their positions, but that wasn't enough. He needed to

see them.

Carefully, he turned around and caught Lekauf's eye. He ambled over to him,

slowing down as he passed so it wasn't obvious they were together. He'd need to steer

clear of Shevu, too. There was no point getting them all arrested.

Ben activated his earpiece and spoke barely moving his lips to contain the whisper.

"I'm going to find a weak point and get out," he said. He felt everyone could see

the rifle folded under his jacket, even though they all seemed far more interested in

what was happening beyond the transparisteel doors to the landing area. Red and blue

lights were reflecting off the walls as security vehicles streamed onto the field. "I can

jump anywhere, open any door, remember. I'll make my own way back home."

"You do that," said Lekauf's voice in his ear, "and they'll know it was a Jedi."

"No Force nonsense," said Shevu. "Relax. We'll get

around this. Contingency

plans, gentlemen."

"I'm covered in trace, sir."

"Jori," said Shevu. He never normally used Lekauf's first name. "Jori, I'm going

to--"

"I don't think that's a good use of manpower, sir." Lekauf was moving toward

Ben. He looked grim. "And you're too far from Ben to do anything about it."

Lekauf was right next to Ben now. In the crush of passengers and pilots milling

around, getting in one another's way, he could press right up against him unnoticed.

The lieutenant reached under Ben's coat and grasped the rifle. Ben clenched his arm.

me. Ben clamped his arm

tight against his side to stop him from taking it.

"What are you doing?"

"Contingency plan. Let go, Ben."

"You're going to dump it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm going to get rid of it."

"What about the ballistic contamination? You can't dump that."

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"Announce it to everyone, why don't you . . ." Lekauf was suddenly Master

Efficient again, like he'd been on the practice range, his slightly goofy good humor

gone. He stood chest-to-chest with Ben, and after a two-second, almost immobile tussle

that nobody else could see, he loosened Ben's clamped elbow and slid the folded

Karpaki under his own jacket. "Now stick with the boss. Promise me you will."

"You're nuts, Jori."

"Yeah, like Granddad."

Ben felt utterly useless. Lekauf had to bail him out of this mess. He should have

been able to do it by himself. Some Jedi. Some supersoldier. He wondered how he'd

live this down, and also why he was more worried about that at this moment than about

taking a life, even a rotten one like Gejjen's.

Lekauf moved back along the terminal hall to the central doors that led onto the

landing area. Ben went to follow him, but Shevu stepped into his path casually, as if

being rude and careless to a stranger.

"Whatever happens," he said, almost inaudible, lips barely moving, "you're to

stick with me, and follow me, unless I get grabbed-and in that case, get back to base

any way you can."

They'd war-gamed a few scenarios in briefings, including getting split up or

captured, but this all felt very different now.

Lekauf was at the main doors, looking as if he were trying to check where the

tourer was. Then without warning, he grabbed a woman tight around her neck, drew his

blaster, and held it to her temple.

"Open the doors!" he yelled. "Open them now, or I blow her head off!"

Pandemonium broke out. People scattered, leaving a clear area around Lekauf;

security officers and the Corellian cop struggled against the tide of bodies trying to get

clear, blasters held high. Lekauf was suddenly doing an amazing job of looking red-

faced and dangerous.

How's he going to pull this off? We're surrounded. Locked in.

This hadn't been in the briefings. Lekauf was improvising. He had to be. Ben

broke away from Shevu and pushed through the crowd.

"I said open the kriffing doors, or you'll be scraping her

off the ceiling." Lekauf

clicked the blaster and the woman hostage started shrieking, a thin little wail at first

that rose into a full-blown panting sequence of screams and yelps. "You're going to let

me board my ship and leave here, and she gets to live. Don't mess with me. Don't

kriffing mess with me."

"Just let the lady go," said the officer. He pushed through and stood at the edge of

the cleared floor area. "Just put the blaster down. Let her go."

"So you can spray my brains all over the terminal? Yeah. As if."

"Kid, this isn't going to do you any good. We can talk-

"Yeah. She won't have a nice chat with me about Calien

Yeah, like you'll have a nice chat with me about Gelfin.
I killed the scumbag and

I'm proud of it. He was caving in to the GA. Lining his
own pockets. I'm a patriot. You
hear? I love Corellia. They ought to give me a medal."

The officer gestured to the security guard at the exit, and
the doors parted. Ben

watched in horror, unable to move. Lekauf backed out
of the doors, half dragging and

half carrying the terrified hostage, and made his way
laboriously to the tourer. It

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seemed to take forever. It was a long, long way to
struggle with a woman in a headlock,

edging backward, followed by a slowly moving knot of
police and guards waiting for

the first slip that would give them a clear shot at him. Ben wanted to run after him and

help, but had no idea what to do; even if he created a diversion, they were all still

trapped one way or another.

Lekauf activated the tourer's ramp and backed up it. The woman had stopped

screaming and started sobbing.

"Okay, out, now." Shevu was right behind Ben, mouth right next to his ear, and he

grabbed his collar in a slow, twisting grip to show he meant business. "Slow and calm.

Don't waste this. He's bought us time."

Ben wanted to yell, But what about him ? He didn't, though. He'd already

abandoned too much of his training, and this wasn't the

abandoned too much of his training, and this wasn't the way soldiers did it. His legs

were shaking under him. Lekauf reached the top of the ramp and shoved the woman

down it; the hatch slammed behind him, leaving the hostage crying and screaming on

the permacrete. Police rushed forward to grab her. Marksmen moved in to take up

positions around the vessel.

Now everyone else in the terminal was forgotten, and the Corellian officer ran

onto the field, met up with his buddy, and ran for the cordon.

"Ben, that's it, come on-" Shevu jerked on his collar, pulling him bodily toward

the doors at the south end of the terminal. A little bit of Ben was calculating where they

would be placing troops and what their tactics would be for stopping Lekauf from

taking off. If Lekauf got a move on, he could be out of orbit and jumping to lightspeed

before whatever excuse Vulpter had for a fleet could get airborne.

But the tourer sat on the permacrete, silent, no haze of heat exhaust venting from

its jets. He could see it through the transparisteel walls as he moved toward escape, and

couldn't feel relief.

It dawned on Ben that Lekauf wasn't going anywhere.

Maybe the thing had failed to start.

Oh no, no, no . . .

The drive hadn't stalled on him. Ben could feel Lekauf

THE DRIVE HADN'T STARTED ON HIM. BEN COULD FEEL LERANU now-terrified, oddly

triumphant, and with a strange sense of peace despite the dread. It was the strangest

combination Ben had ever sensed in the Force.

"What's he doing, sir? How's he getting out?"

Shevu kept swallowing. Ben saw the lump in his throat bob up and down. "Has to

be done."

"What has to be done?"

"A good cover story."

"I don't-"

"Ben, move it. Now!" Shevu grabbed his arm so hard that it hurt, and hauled him

across the permacrete to the shuttle. The tourer was now

surrounded by police and

armed guards; lines of security droids were clearing an outer cordon and moving back

vessels that were parked too close. "Don't blow this mission. The job's done."

"But Jori's going to be arrested. He can't sit there forever. We can't leave him, and

what happens when they interrogate him, 'cos they're going to find-"

"Ben, shut up. And that's an order. There's nothing we can do."

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Ben couldn't believe it of Shevu. He could have struggled free and gone to help

Lekauf, and . . . and what? He couldn't use his Force powers in public. He couldn't take

on a small army of police. He couldn't risk arrest and discovery.

He still wanted to go to Lekauf's aid. No comrade left behind, that was the rule,

same for troopers as it was for Jedi, same for every tight-knit group who faced danger

together.

"We can't leave him," Ben sobbed, and was about to change his mind, and let the

GA and the Jedi Council sort out their own troubles if he was arrested and found to be

Luke Skywalker's son, carrying out political assassinations. "We just can't abandon

him."

As he stared brokenhearted at the battered tourer, a massive explosion sent it

flying into a thousand fragments, shooting a column of flame and roiling smoke high

into the air, almost knocking Ben off his feet. Police scattered, those who could ran.

Some were blown meters. It all seemed to take place in slow motion and silence, and

then the sound rushed back in and time resumed normally.

The captain still had a grip on Ben's arm like a vise. Ben's lips moved but he

couldn't hear himself.

"Yes," Shevu said softly, and dragged Ben as he craned his neck to stare back at

the wreckage and flames, numb, shocked, and lost. "Now we can."

chapter eleven

Breaking news . . . we're just getting reports that Corellian Prime Minister Dur

Geijen has been shot dead at a spaceport on Vulpter, Deep Core, by a Corellian

terrorist. Early reports indicate that an armed siege followed the shooting, but that

appears to have ended when the assassin blew himself up in his ship on the landing

strip. We'll have more on this story later.

-HNE newsflash

SLAVE I. LAID UP OUTSIDE KELDABE,
MANDALORE

It was a very interesting news day. Fett had his cockpit monitor tuned to the news

channel, watching the wheels come off the rest of the galaxy. He'd seen that happen

often enough to spot the signs of greater chaos to come.

Usually, it meant a time of good fees and rich pickings for bounty hunters. Now

his priorities had to be a little different, and he waited for a call from the office of Sass

Sikili, the Verpine whose job was to communicate with outsiders on behalf of Roche.

The Verpine were getting anxious. How any species that churned out that many high-

quality ornaments could get anxious Fett didn't understand, but that was the Verpine for

you. Insectoids could get jumpy, and when one got jumpy-the hive-mind made them

all jittery

Fett pondered the assassination while he waited. He couldn't say he was sorry to

see the passing of Dur Gejjen, but at least the barve paid promptly. Fett had been

betting on him staying in office for more than a few short months before getting the

inevitable shot in the head, though. It was indecently premature even by the standards

of Corellian politics. Who had really killed him? Not some Corellian hick waving the

flag, that was for sure. Gejjen had a line of would-be killers that would have stretched

from here to the Core.

"Mandalore Fett . . . ," said a voice on the comm. It was high-pitched, a little

above tenor, and buzzed with a faint resonance. "We noted your return with delight."

"Need someone dragged screaming to your hive, Sikili?"

"Not today, thank you. But we have a business proposition for you."

"I'm all ears."

"Ah . . . we hear exciting things about iron deposits, which we assume to be

true-

"They are."

"-and many highly desirable things can be made with Mandalorian iron. We

would like to acquire some."

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"Happy to sell, when we have a surplus for export."

"We note the unstable nature of the galaxy these past months, which will be

exacerbated, we expect, by the passing of Prime Minister Gejjen."

"Yeah. Good times for the arms trade."

"Indeed. But also anxious times for us, when Murkhana challenges our markets,

and now Kem Stor Ai talks of war with Murkhana, which is too close for the hives'

taste."

"You pack enough hardware to make Murkhana and Kem Stor Ai into their own

asteroid field, Sikili. Half their kit comes from Roche. Spit it out."

"We are a literal people, Fett."

"I'm literal, too. Let's all be literal together."

Sikili went quiet for a moment. Fett could hear the faint clicking of his

mouthparts. "Now that you have abundant beskar, you'll rearm. Roche may be outside

of your sector, but the last time Mandalorians had plenty of beskar, the Mandalore

sector became much, much bigger."

Verpine took a little time to explain where they were heading, grinding through

each step of the sequence, but they got there in the end.

"You're worried we'll expand all over you," said Fett. "Invade you."

"Yes. It's the specialty of your species."

"We're homebodies now. We like to put our feet up and

watch the holovids."

"When you make jokes, the hives become more worried, because you're not a

joking man. Therefore-"

It was getting painful and he didn't want to hear Sikili's character analysis. Fett

found it amusing that he hadn't threatened or hinted about the fate of Roche-or even

thought much about it-but that had always been part of his armory, as it had been for

the Mandalorians as a whole. They had a certain reputation that did the advance work

for them.

"Sign a treaty with us, then," he offered.

"To do what, Fett?"

"Nonaggression pact. Neighborly mutual aid."

"You have nothing to fear from us, so you'll want something in exchange, because

you're a mercenary and-"

"Bounty hunter, part-time. What I want is the mutual bit."

"What can we do for you to avoid being added to your collection?"

"Supply us with exclusive products in exchange for our exclusive metal. We give

you our special skills-military strength-and you give us yours in defense technology

and quality control. Maybe even joint work on new projects."

"Ah, you Mandalorians have always . . . adopted technology from others. You

might forcibly adopt ours now."

"Deal's on the table. You made me notice you. Bad idea."

Sikili was silent again. Verpines had a way of communicating instantly with all

hive members through some organ in their chests. Fett guessed that Sikili was

consulting the hive.

"Deal accepted. We'll need details."

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"I'll get my people to talk to your people." Fett could imagine the reaction on

Coruscant-and Corellia. "We look forward to a long and productive alliance with

Roche."

"We will announce this happy and reassuring news. Good day, Fett."

The good thing about literal-minded insectoids was that they were transparent in

their business dealings: no games, no bluff, and-usually-no skipping out on deals.

Fett wondered if he should have talked it through with the clans first, but it was his

prerogative to choose Mandalore's allies, and teaming up with the best technologists in

the galaxy wasn't going to upset anybody-not on Mandalore, anyway. It would

certainly ruin everyone else's day.

So people think we're rearming. We are, but not for the reasons they think. This

could be . . . interesting.

He secured Slave I, out of habit rather than mistrust of his own people, and took

the speeder bike up to the woodland where he'd re-buried his father's remains after

exhuming them on Geonosis.

Ailyn was laid to rest there, too, but Mirta was clearly still uneasy about not

returning her to Kiffu. She seemed to see the interment as a temporary stopover. He'd

marked the graves with simple stones because it mattered to him to be able to find them

again, although he had never been one for visiting graves.

Not even yours, Dad.

Now he was going to put that right. He had no excuse. He wasn't a galaxy away.

All the times I've traveled from world to world, all the light-years I've covered,
and I never called in at Geonosis to pay my respects.

Fett grasped briefly at an excuse in his Mandalorian roots. Beviin had always told

him it was the armor that mattered to Mandalorians, not the decayed shell abandoned

by the spirit. I did that, didn't I? I recovered my Dad's armor and left his body. I did

that much, at least.

Nomadic mercenaries couldn't have cemeteries, and they couldn't carry corpses

with them. It was probably based on pragmatism, but Mandalorians-with few

exceptions, like the Mandalores-still didn't have elaborate shrines and graves even

here.

The clearing in the woods was a peaceful, unspoiled spot, somewhere the

Yuuzhan Vong hadn't managed to destroy. Tall silver-leaved galek trees, centuries old,

fringed an area of spongy moss and short yellow grass, giving the spot an air of

permanent sunlit calm even on an overcast day. Even before Fett set down the speeder

bike, he could see Mirta kneeling by her mother's grave, staring down at it, with Ghes

Orade, Novoc Vevut's son, staring at her. Their helmets were placed to one side.

She had a funny idea of romance, that girl, but Orade seemed close to besotted, so

maybe he didn't care where he had to follow her. They

both looked around and watched

Fett as he approached. He tried to avoid crushing clumps of fragile amber ferns.

"Tell me if I'm interrupting," Fett said. Orade looked up at him and got to his feet.

"Here's the deal. You break her heart, I break your legs."

"Deal," said Orade. He had a sharp-featured pale face and a scrap of bright, blond

beard. "See you later, Mirta."

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Mirta looked past Fett to watch Orade leave, and then glared at him. "I suppose

that's your idea of protective concern, Ba'buir."

"Meant it," Fett said. "You're no use to me when you're emotional."

"So . . . what did you want me for?"

"Didn't. Just came to visit Dad's grave."

Her nerf-frying stare softened, probably from embarrassment. Weeping together

over Ailyn just that one time hadn't opened the emotional floodgates and given them a

blood-bound relationship cemented by shared grief. It was, and probably always would

be, wary and restrained.

"I'll come back later," Fett said.

"No, I was just leaving anyway."

"Okay, let's both stand around in awkward silence for a while and I'll give you a

ride back to town."

For some reason, the one thing that never embarrassed Fett was admitting his love

for his father. He didn't care if that made him look soft. People said it didn't, especially

if they wanted to carry on breathing. He hooked both thumbs in his belt and

contemplated the slight depression in the soft mossy ground, realizing he should have

filled the grave with more soil to allow for settling.

I'm not doing too bad, Dud. Did you ever have to make domestic -policy when you

were Mandalore, or did you just fight? I suppose you know I'm dying.

The last thought caught him unawares. Fett believed in decomposition and eternal

oblivion: he'd dealt them out so many times, he knew what awaited him. It was Reviiin

and his talk of the manda that had him falling into those stupid thoughts about eternity.

"I knew you were basically okay when you split the heart-of-fire to bury half with

Mama," Mirta said quietly.

"I'm not sentimental."

"A real scumbag would have kept the stone intact and sold it."

Fett resented the interruption of his one-sided conversation with his father.

"Maybe if I'd left it whole, somebody could have read the information in it." He

straightened up, arms at his side. "Are you done here?"

Mirta shrugged, collected her helmet, and began walking toward the speeder. It

was an answer of sorts. They set off for Keldabe. There were no straight roads; it made

ambushing and pinning down would-be invaders a lot easier.

"What does everyone else do with bodies?" Fett asked.

"Turn left when we get to the river and I'll show you."

Mirta seemed to have taken this born-again Mando thing seriously. Fett had

expected her to kick over the traces and turn wholly Kiffar, like her mother, but she'd

jumped to the other extreme. If he hadn't known she wasn't motivated by wealth, he'd

have thought she was positioning herself to inherit his fortune. That would have been

easier. Right now, he had no idea what her motive was.

"Gejjen's been assassinated, by the way," he said, banking the speeder to turn

along the course of the Kelita River. "Heard it on the news."

"Good," she said. She was definitely his granddaughter. "Slimy shabuir!"

"I put the full fee for Sal-Solo in a trust fund for you."

"Thanks. You didn't have to."

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"No. I didn't."

"There it is."

"What?"

"The grave."

Fett couldn't see anything, just lush water meadows flanked by rich pasture

banked by rich pasture,

vibrantly green even after harvesttime. They said the area had beaten the Yuuzhan

Vong's attempts at environmental destruction because the fast-flowing water in the

meadow and the river carried the poisons away downstream. Even to Fett's urban and

unagricultural eye, it looked like rich soil. "Where?"

"Try your terahertz GPR."

Fett blinked his ground-penetrating radar into life. When he looked at the land

now, he saw the variations in density and the pockets of less compacted soil. He also

saw clusters of lines and debris so tangled together that he couldn't make out what they

were.

"It's a mass grave," Mirta said.

Fett stopped the speeder and they got off to look. His boots squelched in the

sodden grass, and while it was far from the first time he'd walked on a carpet of the

dead, this felt vaguely uncomfortable.

"Lost a lot of people," he said. More than a million. Nearly one in three

Mandalorians had died defending the planet. Mirta seemed to be expecting some

statesman-like behavior, so he tried. "And no memorial."

"This isn't a war grave," Mirta said. "Mando'ade usually bury in mass graves

anyway. We all become part of the manda. We don't need a headstone."

The exceptional fertility of the soil suddenly made sense.
There was no point

wasting organic material.

"Manda."

"Collective consciousness. Oversoul. We don't do
heaven."

Fett winced. "I know what it is."

"And it gives back to the living. You'll get a marked
grave, of course, being

Mand'alor. Unless you choose not to."

"Probably just to make sure they know the old
Mandalore won't show up again to

reclaim the title."

"Maybe just to show respect."

"Has it occurred to you," Fett asked, "that all this is a

Has it occurred to you, Fett asked, that all this is a rationalization of the fact

that Mandalorians were always on the move, couldn't maintain graves, and needed to

dispose of lots of corpses? And that it's free fertilizer?"

Mirta took off her helmet, probably to let him see the full thundercloud of her

disapproval. "There's nothing profound that you can't reduce to banality, is there?"

"I'm a practical man."

"We're a practical people." We. Kiffu had ceased to exist for her. "But there's

nothing wrong with seeing the bigger picture."

"Can I opt out of the manda? I'm not spending eternity with Montross or Vizsla.

Or do we take guests from other species? If we adopt

them in life, makes sense we take

them afterward, so what about the rest of the galaxy?"

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Mirta seemed about to spit something vitriolic at him but instead sighed, jammed

her helmet back in place, and went back to the speeder. Fett pondered how tedious it

would be if there really were some existence after death, especially if it weren't ticket-

only. The one person he wanted to see again was his father. The rest of the dead

-

loved and hated, but mostly just unloved and dismissed-could stay dead.

He resolved to keep his mouth shut in the future. It had always been the best

always been the best

policy in the past, and meaningful conversation was one of the few things he couldn't

seem to master. He took her into the center of Keldabe following the twisting course of

the Kelita, skimming above its meanders and river cliffs. The ancient river had

gradually kinked back on itself as it ground away patiently at the banks, and it looked

as if one good flood would break the narrow necks of land and straighten the course

again. A quick inspection with his helmet GPR showed dried-up oxbow lakes pressed

like hoofprints into the land on either side. Until the crab-boys had showed up, most of

Mandalore had been as it had since before humans arrived: primeval, wild, and still full

of the undiscovered. Fett hated the Yuuzhan Vong afresh for ruining that.

Novoc Vevut, Orade's father, built and repaired weapons. He was in the yard of

the workshop that also served as his house, machining

blaster parts. Fett shut the speeder down at the entrance and Mirta slid off the

saddle.

Vevut pushed his transparent protective visor back onto the top of his head and

gave them both a big grin.

"Aw, nice to see you two doing stuff together," he said.

"Osi'kyr, Fett, are we

going to be related?"

Mirta looked at him with a warmth she didn't direct at

IVITA LOOKED AT HIM WITH A WARNING SHE DIDN'T DIRECT AT her own grandfather. Fett

hadn't picked up on how far the relationship with Vevut's son had progressed, then. "If

beskar is such a good defense, how come you've got so many scars, Buir?" she teased.

"Forgot to wear your helmet?"

She'd called him Papa. Vevut grinned. "I cut myself shaving."

"With a Trandoshan."

"Marry Ghes, and I'll make you a blaster that can take the head off a dozen

Trandoshans with one shot."

"You know how to turn a girl's head," she said, and removed her helmet and boots

before disappearing into the house.

Vevut brushed shiny coils of swarf from the grinding bench. His long woolly

black braids were tied back with a piece of string while he worked, but the gold clips

strung along them like trophies still rattled and chinked as he moved. Combined with

the striking scars in his ebony skin, they made him look formidably battle-hardened.

Beviin said the gold had come from his kills over the years, and that he'd melted it

down to make the ornate clips. They made Fett's braided Wookiee scalps look low-key.

"When I adopted Ghes," Vevut said, not raising his eyes from the workbench, "we

had a hard time accepting each other at first, too." He rasped glittering shavings from

the metal he was shaping and held it up to check the edge. "And I'd known him all his

life. His parents were my neighbors. Just because Mirta's your own blood doesn't mean

it's automatic."

"I'll bear that in mind."

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"Any objections to Orade?"

"Mirta's well over thirteen. She can make her own choices."

"He's a good lad."

"I know." Fett's own inability to cope with partners was no reason for him to have

any opinion on his granddaughter's life. But he meant it about breaking Orade's legs. It

was a paternal reflex that came out of nowhere. "I did a deal with the Verpine

government today. We now have a nonaggression pact with Roche provided they share

tech with us."

Vevut stopped rasping sharp edges. "Hey, I didn't even hear us fire any shots . . ."

"They heard the word beskar."

"I do believe good times are on their way again, Mand'alor."

"If you feel like sitting in when we talk weapons with them, your views would be

useful."

"Okay. I'll leave my bug spray at home as a mark of respect."

"I'd better tell the clans. In case anyone's thinking of signing up for Kem Stor Ai.

The Verpine would be upset about that."

It was a good relaxed way to run a nation. Fett sent word out via his datapad and

waited for objections, not expecting any. Apart from questions like the discounts that

might now be available on custom Verpine weapons, the chieftains took the news in

their stride.

It was as if Mandalorians saved all their passions for two things: their families and

their wars. Fett returned to Beviin's farm via the river and paused to look at the vast

mass grave again.

Next time, I'll be a Mandalorian. I'll be a Mandalorian. I'll be a Mandalorian. I'll be a Mandalorian. I'll be a Mandalorian.

Most species found the words unmarked mass grave the
stuff of horror, the worst

possible end to life. And yet Mandalorians chose it. Fett,
on the cusp between Mando

and aruetii despite his title, tried to see his people as the
aruetiise saw them, to fully

understand the fear just a few million of them could cause
simply by existing.

Detached, he saw an invading army wiping out whole
species, fighting galactic wars,

destroying everything in its path; and he saw mercenaries
and bounty hunters,

unemotional masked dealers in death. The image burned
into the collective galactic

psyche was one of violent savages, thieves, and looters,
whose temporary loyalty to

anyone but their own could be bought but never

guaranteed.

It happened to be almost completely true-except the bit about loyalty. Most

people didn't understand the nature of a contract.

And they never got close enough to see Mandalorians at peace. Come to that, not

many Mandalorians did, either. It was a restless galaxy.

Fett resigned himself to existing in no-man's-land-too Mando for the outsider

but not Mando enough for some of the clans-and made his way back to Slave I, which

was still the haven in which he preferred to sleep. He hoped Beviin wasn't offended.

Worrying about someone else's feelings was a novelty, and Fett knew what Beviin

would say about the psychology of sleeping in a spacecraft when a perfectly

comfortable home-any number of homes--was available.

When Fett reached the ship and unlocked the hatch by remote, he found a

message waiting for him. It could have been relayed straight to his HUD, but Jaing

Skirata did things his own idiosyncratic way.

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I SEE YOU DID RIGHT BY MANDALORE. I'LL DO RIGHT BY YOU.

Fett hadn't judged wrong, then. He dropped his dose of capsules into his palm and

washed them down with a mix of water and the cocktail of liquid drugs that Beluine

had prescribed. It was just slowing down his decline. not

stopping it.

Jaing hadn't said he'd succeeded.

Death's a motivator, not a threat. You've still got things to achieve before you

become fertilizer. You'll just have to do them sooner rather than later.

Fett switched on the monitor in his cramped quarters and sat back with a pack of

dry rations to watch the news as Corellia went into meltdown, and the Verpine

government of Roche announced talks with Mandalore to agree to a mutual aid and

trade treaty.

Then he took out the black book his father had left him. He'd listened to every

message recorded in it more than a hundred times, and studied his father's image in it.

When he was afraid he was beginning to forget what Jango Fett once looked like, he'd

take it out and run the messages again.

He hadn't forgotten: not a pore, not a hair, not a line. But he ran it again anyway,

and decided tomorrow might be a very good day to go public on the Bes'uliik.

JEDI COUNCIL CHAMBER, CORUSCANT:
EMERGENCY MEETING

"This one," said Master Saba Sebatyne, "would like to be assured that the Alliance

had nothing to do with Gejjen'z death. It was unnezzezary."

Luke couldn't blame her for jumping to conclusions. It was his first thought too

and his second was that the GA's agents-or even Jacen-had a hand in it. But the

assassin had, it seemed, sealed himself in his ship and blown it up, a Corellian-registered

ship scattering solidly Corellian evidence. Luke had seen crazier things than

that. It was a zealot's act, and all too common.

"There are plenty of Corellians with reasons to want Gejjen dead," he said. Where

had Mara got to? He half expected her to stride through the doors of the chamber

carrying Lumiya's head in triumph. "But I'll conduct my own investigations."

Corran Horn looked up from his clasped hands, which he'd been studying with

unnatural concentration. It couldn't have been easy watching his homeworld plunge

into recrimination and finger-pointing. "It's less about who actually did it than who the

various factions think did it, and that won't be influenced by anything as irrelevant as

hard facts."

"Well, I need to know, and I don't want HNE telling me," Luke said. "Kyp, can

you monitor the headlines while we're meeting?"

"Time was," said Kyp Durrón, "when the government of the day used to keep the

Jedi Council informed, and we didn't have to rely on the media."

Yes, Luke had noticed that the Council was no longer kept in the loop. He

returned to the main issue. "So what if it is us?" So far everyone had managed to avoid mentioning Jacen.

Kyle Katarn joined in. "Is assassinating heads of state legal?"

"In a war, I believe it is."

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"Fine time for Omas to be away," said Katarn. "If I were the paranoid type, I'd say

it was spooky that he was out of town, location undisclosed, at the same time that

Gejjen was shot. Better test him for ballistic residues when he gets back to the office."

"This isn't a joking matter," said Kyp.

"Okay, sorry. But it's lousy timing."

Luke thought Niathal had done a commendable job of looking calm and

reassuring for the media. It had been a few hours since the news had broken, and the

news channels had wheeled out every analyst, politician, and air taxi pilot who had ever

held an opinion on Dur Gejjen. Niathal, quite splendid in her white uniform, was

impressive. She looked as if being Chief of State was just another job she did when

everyone else was too busy. She'd scored a lot of points.

And Luke hadn't had a chance to call Han or Leia. That was his next task, as soon

as he got out of this meeting. They'd know what was really happening-if anyone did.

Come on. Mara. Where are you?

"So how does this change things?" Kyle asked. "Who's going to be leading the

Confederation now? Is it going to stay a Corellian thing?"

"If it's the Bothans," said Corran, "Force preserve us."

Luke was still waiting for word from Niathal. The Jedi Council wasn't part of

government, and while Omas was away it wasn't getting instant answers. Luke realized

how fragile and informal the relationship between government and Council could be

when different people were holding the reins.

"Just to spice up the mix, the Mandalorians are joining forces with the Verpine."

Kyp seemed to be listening to the news via an earpiece, judging by the glazed and

defocused look in his eyes. "What does that sound like to you?"

Luke thought of Fett's dead daughter, Jacen's guilt, and Fett's track record. He'd

been awfully quiet; worryingly so.

"They're rearming," Luke said.

"They said they were staying neutral." Durrone said.

Kyle shook his head slowly, brushing specks from his lap in a distracted way.

"Oh, yeah, if my long-lost daughter was tortured to death by the GA's secret police, I'd

be neutral. First thing I'd do. Walk away and be very, very neutral."

"You don't have to be on one of two sides to rearm, or even take part in a war,"

Luke said.

Still nobody had said the J-word. But Luke could hear the name at the back of

every mind.

"Well, we know a few facts." Kyle counted off on his fingers. "One, Mandalorians

aren't exactly heavily represented in social services and the caring professions. Two,

they have a brand-new supply of that iron of theirs for their war machine. Three,

allying with the Verpine makes them the single most powerful producer of advanced

weapons technology. Four, I hear they're still sore about getting no help to rebuild

postwar when they went out on a limb for the New Republic."

"It's not good, is it?" said Corran.

"I'm betting they'll step up for Corellia in the next few days."

"Fett's said to have killed Sal-Solo, or at least one of his Mando thugs did. Where

does that leave them?"

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Luke had heard the real story from Han. Never had he missed the good old clear-

cut days of Rebellion versus Empire, good against demonstrable evil, as much as he

had right then. The trouble with taking away the certainty of evil was that its vacuum

was filled by all kinds of more nebulous threats, rivalries, and feuds. It became

increasingly hard to judge where the threat was coming from.

If it hadn't been so ingrained in the nature of most species, Luke would have seen

it as a Sith plot. It would have been so much simpler.

"I think we should offer Jedi mediation to both the GA and Corellia, as far as the

assassination goes," he said. "I know it sounds bizarre in the middle of a war, but

there's war with rules, and then there's war with no holds barred, and we need to--"

The doors opened and Mara walked in. "Sorry I'm late," she said. "Ran into a few

problems."

She managed to stop the meeting dead. Luke stared in horror at her face. She had

a black eye and split lip; she was holding herself as if her ribs hurt. She settled into her

seat in the circle with slow care.

"Ran into an armored division, more like," said Kyp, staring. "What happened to

you, and where shall we send the flowers for the other guy?"

"And this is after a healing trance." She smiled, and it was genuine, but there was

definite anxiety. Luke could feel it. It was all he could do not to abandon the meeting

there and then, and go to her. How had he not felt what was happening to her?

"Sorry to interrupt," she went on. "I assume we're worrying about the implications

of Gejjen's death."

--
"And Mandalorian rearmament."

"Forget that for just a second," Luke said. "Mara, I need to know what happened to you."

"Why, darling, thank you for asking! I'm very well. Just a flesh wound." She

shook her head in disbelief, but it seemed aimed at herself. "Look, I caught Lumiya.

She's in a worse state than I am, believe me."

"And?"

"The situation's under control."

"Where is she?"

"I'm tracking her to her base."

All eleven Council members were waiting in complete

silence for Mara's next

words. She looked at the other Jedi around her, gently pushed Luke's unspoken inquiry

and concern out of her mind with a firm later, and settled back in her chair. Luke

couldn't pin it down, but she was in turmoil under that facade.

"It's no good looking at me like that," she said. "I'm not discussing it, I'm not

sharing the mission, and I'm not going to take it easy, which I'll bet is going to be

someone's suggestion. Yes?"

"Mara hath spoken," said Kyp. "But that doesn't stop me asking where Lumiya is,

and what she's driving."

"Nice try, but go find your own deranged dark sider to play with, because

Lumiya's mine."

Corran gave Luke a knowing smile. "She's fine."

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Mara was certainly satisfied about something, but not so content about something

else. Luke would find out later. He moved the meeting on.

"Can we actually do anything about the Gejjen situation here and now?" There

was a chorus of a reluctant "no" around the circle. "Okay, then, all we can do is keep an

eye on the situation, and I've got a request in with Omas's secretary to see him as soon

as he gets back."

"You know what happens if heads of state are away when a crisis breaks," Kyp

pointed out. "They take a pounding in the polls, and it's the beginning of the end. Let's

make the most of Omas while we can."

"Who's friendly with Niathal?"

They all turned to look pointedly at Cilghal. She tilted her head slightly to fix

Luke with one eye, always a disconcerting thing in a Mon Calamari. "Just because

we're Mon Cals, Luke, it doesn't mean we have guaranteed harmony. We come from

different schools of thought."

"You're Ackbar's niece, and I bet that counts for a lot with a Mon Cal admiral . . ."

"I'll do my best, then."

The meeting broke up, Mara remaining seated. Corran patted her on the head like

an indulgent uncle as he passed, and then wagged a silent warning finger: Get that

black eye seen to. Luke waited until everyone was well out of earshot and then walked

over to squat in front of Mara and put his hands on her knees.

"You can't keep this from me."

"I head-butted her, that's all. Metal jaw, nonmetal head."

"If you got that close, how did she get away?" Oh, bad question: Luke braced for

an onslaught about shaking hands again. "I mean . . ."

"I think she has a droid with her. Something jumped me

from behind, and it wasn't

organic." Mara showed him a discolored mark like a rope burn at the front of her neck.

"Whatever it is, it can pay out a metal cable. And she has this weird spherical ship like

a disembodied orange eye."

"Don't you think all that's a good case for not hunting her alone?"

"She wants me to catch up with her. I'll be extra-ready next time-and there will

be a next time."

He'd promised her. If anyone could take Lumiya, Mara could, and he knew he had

to put his own fixation with Lumiya out of his mind-stop it from clouding his

judgment. He'd give Mara a little more time but

judgment. He'd give Mara a little more time, but wondered how he'd feel if she came

home battered and bruised like this again.

Chasing individual Dark Jedi was far more difficult and time consuming than he'd

bargained for. Sometimes he wondered why Lumiya and Alema had proved so much

harder to hunt and deal with than a whole Empire, but that was the answer: the Empire,

by its very size and pervasiveness, was everywhere. It was hard to avoid finding it, but

two Jedi with concealment skills could vanish very effectively in an entire galaxy. It

would always be a case of getting them to come to him- or Mara.

"But you'll be home for dinner tonight," Luke said. "Don't spend all night working

again."

"Believe me, I'll be home," she said. "That's where I'm heading now."

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"I'd better see what Han and Leia have to say about Gejjen, while I hang around

the Senate and wait for Omas."

"If I'm still sitting at home with a congealing plate of nerf casserole at midnight . .

."

"Okay Dinner at eight. Set in permacrete."

Luke walked down the corridor with her in silence and she gave him a

conspiratorial grin as the turbolift doors closed. He opened his secure comlink and

opened his secure comm and
called Han.

"I'm not in mourning," Han said, utterly callous in that charming way he had.

Luke knew he didn't care for Gejjen and never had: it was hard to weep for a man who

approached you to kill your own cousin, even if that cousin was a grade-A scumbag.

"No need to spare my feelings. He was a head shot waiting to happen."

"What's the public mood like over there?"

"There hasn't exactly been a run on mourning clothes, but folks are nervous."

"So who's at the helm in Coronet now?"

"They're slugging it out. For the while, it's going to be a committee job."

"Who do you think did it?"

"The biggest task CorSec has is to work out how to manage the lines of suspects.

Not that they need to dig up any-two different terror groups here have already

claimed responsibility for it. Yes, we have 'em, too."

"I never realized how divided you all were."

"We're never divided about Corellia. Just who's the best candidate to run it."

"Are you and Leia okay?"

"Yes, we're fine, and no, I'm not telling you what we're doing at the moment. Stop

worrying."

Luke almost raised the topic of a GA smokescreen. It was fairly common to carry

out a hit and set it up to look like another faction to achieve maximum discord. But he

thought better of it, because it smacked of Jacen, and Han didn't need to hear that his

best friend thought his son-stranger though he was-had a hand in it. Some things

were best dealt with by friends, cleaned up, and smoothed over. When Lumiya was

finally brought down, Luke would spend his time putting Jacen back on track. It was

the least he could do for Han.

Omas couldn't have picked a worse day to visit his doctor, but it was unusual for

him to be so reticent about routine arrangements. Luke hoped it wasn't something

serious.

It was bad enough losing Gejjen, because at least he was a known quantity, and

Luke had become used to his way of thinking. If Omas's future was in doubt, too-

well, that was one unknown too many.

CORUSCANT MILITARY SPACEPORT

Ben sat in the cargo hold of the ship long after the ground crew had secured the

landing dampers and the drives had cooled completely.

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He was almost comfortable staring at the bulkhead opposite, in the sense that he

feared taking his eyes off it. If he did that, the numbing meditation he'd slipped into

would be broken, and he'd have to think.

Jori Lekauf was gone. It was one of those facts he couldn't take in even when he

saw it happen. The guy had been alive and well the night before, even hours ago, and

now he didn't exist. Ben simply couldn't feel death.

It was more than the biological facts, and he knew those all too well. The former

CSF officers in the GAG had regaled him with fascinating stories from the police

forensics labs, but knowing how to cause death and what it looked like, and being able

to feel a life wink out of existence in the Force did nothing to hammer home the fact

that his friend was gone forever, and that he wouldn't see him again, and all the things

that made Jori Lekauf part of the fabric of the universe, someone who mattered, were

so far beyond his reach.

And it was Ben's fault. Lekauf had died to protect him.

"Come on, Ben. The techs want to start stripping down this crate."

Captain Shevu stood in the hatch, fingers hooked over the top edge of the

coaming. Ben felt that if he moved, the whole world would come unraveled.

"I'll be along in a minute."

Shevu waited for a moment and then came to sit down with him. Ben suspected

that if he'd been a grown man, Shevu might have been harsher, but he thought Ben was

still a kid, too young to be on this kind of mission whether he was a Jedi or not. In

many ways, Shevu was right. But nobody was ever old enough to lose a friend and not

feel it cutting through to the center of his chest. If Ben ever got that old, he didn't want

to carry on.

"We don't lose many troopers in special forces. It makes it harder when we do, I

think. It's hard for me, anyway."

Ben gambled on whether to speak or not. He took a breath and waited to feel

everything around him shatter.

"He didn't have to die, sir." Once he heard his own voice, Ben just felt like he

couldn't breathe. Nothing worse. "He could have taken

couldn't breathe, feeling worse. He could have taken off. We could have run for it, or

even been captured, and the job would still have been done."

"Ben . . . our orders were to make it look like a Corellian schism, and not to get

caught or leave a trail. Can't have Jedi exposed as assassins, especially not you. We had

to get you out of there."

"It didn't have to be me. Any trooper could have done the job. I wanted to do my

duty, but if it hadn't been me, if Jori hadn't felt he had to protect my identity, he'd be

alive."

"Ben, what do you think would have happened to him if he'd been taken back to

Corellia?" Shevu lowered his voice. "You saw what we do here to prisoners. You think

worse than that can't happen in Coronet?"

"So what if I had been caught? My dad would have been humiliated? So what?

Jori's life for Dad being upset?"

"I could give you a list of reasons why having Corellia think their own kind did it

helps the GA. But you don't want to hear that right now." Shevu stood up and beckoned

to Ben to follow. He meant it. "There are anti-Gejjen factions claiming responsibility,

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so the mission worked fine-strategically. Now go home and take a couple of days off.

If you can't stand being around your folks or or

if you can't stand being around your sons, or if you
around Colonel Solo, come over to
my place. My girlfriend won't mind."

It was the first time Ben had heard Shevu hint that being
around Jacen wasn't
necessarily the best thing for him. Ben didn't care about
Jacen right then, but the
rational bit of his mind that wasn't drowning in shocked
grief made a note of it.

"Thanks."

"Now I've got to tell his parents. I'll have to come up
with a really good cover
story, and thank providence that there's no footage of
him splashed all over the news
right now, because that'd be a really lousy way to find
out your son was dead."

Shevu sounded beaten. He was probably pretty close to Lekauf, but he'd never

said. Ben had learned a lesson about being an officer today, and it was that lives were

to be spent in pursuit of an objective; it might have seemed obvious, but when you

worked alongside the people who might lose their loved ones because of your

decisions, it acquired a whole new meaning.

"I don't think I'll ever stop feeling guilty about this," Ben said, relieved that he had

so far managed not to burst into tears.

"Me neither," said Shevu. "Because it was supposed to be me who blew the ship if

things went wrong."

"We never planned that-"

"You didn't. We did. Need to know, and all that." Shevu stopped a passing ground

crew speeder and told the driver to get Ben back to HQ. "Wash that stuff out of your

hair and go home."

An hour later, Ben found himself staring at his familiar reflection in the HQ

refreshers, toweling his hair and wondering if Jacen had set him up.

I didn't have to do the job. Any one of us could have passed unnoticed at a

spaceport.

But it was hindsight. Jacen had tasked him to do it before anyone knew where the

meeting would take place. Ben still felt something was

wrong, but couldn't pin it down.

He'd just lost his buddy. Maybe that made you think crazy things. When he left

the HQ building and walked out into the late-afternoon sun, completely disoriented by

the shifts in planetary time over the last forty-eight hours, he lowered his head and just

walked aimlessly, hands in pockets.

Suddenly he felt someone's hand on his shoulder. He almost shrieked. He'd shut

out everything around him. Then he found he was staring into his mother's face, and

something was terribly wrong.

"Mom! Who hit you?"

"Forget that, Ben." She hugged him to her, a really desperate and crushing

embrace. "I've got some questions and I will absolutely not be stalled this time." She

had hold of his shoulders, eyes scanning his face as if she was looking for injury. "This

is between you and me, I swear, not your father."

They ended up in a tapcaf in the Osarian quarter. The table was greasy and the

elbows of Ben's jacket stuck to it every time he leaned on them, but nobody knew them

here. Even if the food had been appetizing and not searingly hot, Ben wasn't hungry.

Mara lowered her voice. "I want to know why you've been to Vulpter."

Ben was stunned. How could she possibly know? Who'd

talked? It was

completely classified. Most of the GAG hadn't even been briefed on it.

"I haven't."

"You can stop the game. I know where you've been, and I have a horrible feeling I

know why. The whole planet's seen the news."

Mara just stared at him, not blinking, suddenly not his mom at all. He was

supposed to deny everything. He stared back, silent.

"I could ask Jacen, sweetheart, but I'm not sure I could believe him if he told me

what the time was."

"You know I can't talk about my work, Mom."

"Oh, I know. I've never hidden my past from you, so I

know exactly what your

work entails. I can talk to you like a grown-up, Ben, because once you do the kind of

job you're doing, you're not a kid any longer. Do we understand each other?"

Ben thought of Jori Lekauf and felt his stomach starting to knot and shake. He

desperately wanted to blurt out that his buddy had died and that he wanted to roll time

back to before he'd fallen into this mess, and that-that-

"Mom . . ." He couldn't get it out. She put her hand on his and squeezed. "Mom, if

I tell you, will you tell me who hit you?"

"Okay, it was Lumiya. I caught her, but she got away. I gave her a good hiding,

and she won't get away next time. Now your turn."

and she won't get away next time. Now-your turn.

Ben took a deep breath. This was either going to make everything better, or be the

start of something disastrous. He couldn't tell: all his Force impressions had deserted

him.

"I did it, Mom."

"Involved ... or did it?"

Ben's mouth took over without his permission. "Folding-stock Karpaki, frangible

round."

Mara actually sat back in her chair and her left hand moved as if she was about to

put it to her mouth. Her right hand was still clamped tight on his.

"Okay," she said.

"Lekauf was killed, Mom." Ben couldn't remember if she knew Lekauf or not. It

didn't matter. He needed to say his name and tell someone. "Jori got killed-he got

killed to save my skin."

Mara busied herself sipping from the cup in front of her. Osarians liked very

strongly scented herbs, and Ben knew he'd never be able to smell that aroma again

without being dragged back to this awful moment.

"Why did you do it, Ben?"

"Orders. I was the best person to do it."

"Your whole company is suddenly short of snipers? Whose orders?"

"Jacen."

Mara was doing a reasonable job of not reacting, but Ben wasn't fooled. She was

furious. He could see it in the whiteness of her skin, and the contrast with the yellowing

bruise around her eye made it even more noticeable.

"Okay, sweetheart," she said. "Let's not tell your dad, because he'll rip Jacen's

head off in the mood he's in at the moment. Can you face coming home?"

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"I don't think I can sit and have dinner and not talk about this to him."

"Okay, so where are you planning on going?"

"Home. Jacen's apartment." Ben could see she wasn't
happy on the idea. "On

keen on the idea. "Or

Captain Shevu's place."

"Wherever you feel safest, Ben. I won't force you to come back with me as long

as you swear you'll come to me the second you have problems, okay?"

"Okay."

"I'm sorry about your friend. I really am."

"Nobody's ever going to know how brave he was."

"I know."

"Are you angry with me? Stupid question. You must be."

"How can I be, after what I used to do?" She gripped both his hands as if she was

afraid he'd run away. "This is what we made you, isn't it? We wanted you to be like us.

We wanted you to be a Jedi and do your duty . . ."

Mara was quiet for a while, gazing out the window onto the sky-lane packed with

traffic and clearly thinking hard.

"You still haven't told me how you knew, Mom."

She jerked back to the conversation, blinking. "No. I haven't. But I know, and I'm

the only one who does. And I also know you can hide in the Force like Jacen does, and

it scares me because the first time I felt it I thought you'd been killed. Please, Ben, don't

hide from me. Ever."

"I wasn't, Mom. I was just trying it out."

"Okay."

"Am I going to feel bad about. . . you know, the other guy? 'Cos right now I don't care."

"I didn't," she said, seeming to understand he meant Gejjen. "Not until lately, and

then it didn't feel like guilt. Just . . . not quite understanding why I did it, because being

what I was didn't explain it all to me."

"I'd better go."

"You'll be okay. I'll always be there, remember. Call me."

Ben leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek. He loved her so much right then;

what other mom could take news like that, horrific news, and still be there for him? He

leaned farther and whispered in her ear

leaned farther and whispered in her ear.

"He was having a secret meeting at the port with Omas. To discuss a cease-fire."

When Ben straightened up, she smiled, but there was a real glint in her eye that

said she was anything but happy.

"Thank you," she said. "I love you, Ben. Call me, okay?"

"Love you, too, Mom."

Ben couldn't stand it any longer. He walked out of the tapcaf and spent the next

couple of hours wandering around, staring in shop windows and not seeing anything,

before he got an air taxi back to Jacen's apartment and shut himself in his room.

It was going to take a long time to make sense of this. He slipped the vibroblade

under his pillow, reluctant to let it sit as far away as his desk, and wondered what

Captain Shevu was telling Jori Lekauf's family.

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chapter twelve

Ori'buyce, kih'kovid.

All helmet, no head.

-Mandalorian insult for someone with an overdeveloped sense of authority

REPUBLICA HOUSE, CORUSCANT:

0001 HOURS, GALACTIC STANDARD TIME

Jacen Solo, in the formal uniform of a colonel of the Galactic Alliance Guard,

stood outside the lobby of the Republica building flanked

by Sergeant Wirut and

Trooper Limm.

It was a real shame about Lekauf. He was a great loss. Ben had done well, but he

should have been back at work right away. Jacen planned to talk to Shevu later about

sending Ben on leave without clearing it with him first.

"You sure this is going to be enough, sir?" asked Wirut. "Just the three of us?"

Jacen smoothed his black gloves down over his fingers. It was one minute past

midnight, and that made what he was about to do thoroughly legal, justified, and

overdue.

"I don't think Chief Omas has a platoon up there, -----"

somenow."

Wirut didn't reply. Jacen was the first to admit that going to arrest the elected head

of the most powerful organization in the galaxy with a couple of troopers was low-key,

but he saw no point flooding the area with an entire company. Omas wouldn't put up a

fight. If he did, one Jedi and two armed troopers were ample to deal with it.

Jacen opened the comlink to Niathal.

"We're in position now," he said. "We're going in."

"I have an emergency appointment with Senator G'Sil in ten minutes," Niathal

said. "He's not happy about it, but I told him it couldn't wait."

"He's got no inkling of what's happening?"

"If he has, he hasn't shown the slightest sign of acting upon it."

"Okay. There's no going back now. We're committed."

"Just do it . . ."

The security guard on the front reception was a man used to seeing all kinds of

uniforms wandering in and out of Republica House. The luxurious tower housed the

elite of the GA, and every Senator seemed to have his or her own entourage of

bodyguards as well as military visitors. Most Coruscanti knew what a GAG uniform

looked like by now anyway-Jacen had made sure his secret police were anything but

secret, at least in terms of their existence-but he gave the crowd proper identification

guard proper identification

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without being asked. There was no point being rude or throwing his weight around. The

man was only doing his job.

"No need to announce me," Jacen said.

The guard checked his datapad. "You're on his admission list anyway. Go on up."

It took minutes for the turbolift to reach Omas's floor. As the cab climbed, the two

troopers simply stared at the wall ahead of them. Jacen felt their reluctance, and wanted

to know if it was due to a fondness for Omas or a distaste for military coups, but he

didn't ask. Any army that liked the idea of a coup wasn't worth having. It had to be the

last resort.

"How the other half lives . . . ," Wirut said as the turbolift doors

opened onto a lobby of extraordinary luxury. The air was perfumed, a pleasantly

neutral woody scent, and the broad corridor was lined with niches filled with rare

Naboo crystal-Omas had a weakness for that-and iridescent Shalui ceramics. "I

could fit my apartment and my ten neighbors in here."

"If we put fancy pottery in the corridors of my building, it wouldn't be there long,"

said Limm. She cast an envious eye at a shimmering red vase that changed gradually to

green and turquoise as the angle of the observer changed. "Still, his insurance payments

changed. Still, his insurance payments

must hurt."

"Possessions are burdens." Jacen smiled. "What you have can always be taken

away, so wealth breeds fear."

"I'll willingly face that kind of fear, sir," Wirut muttered. "And a nice big

SoroSuub yacht. That would scare me very nicely."

The magnificent doors to Omas's apartment were engraved bronzium, an abstract

design by one of Coruscant's top artists. Jacen couldn't recall the name. It seemed a

waste of talent when the doors were seen only by Omas, his inner circle, the

housekeeping staff, and repair droids. Republica House had the kind of architecture and

design that warranted public tours.

Jacen paused, marshaling his thoughts before pressing the bell. The troopers stood

back and pulled down their visors, standard procedure when entering a building. For a

moment Jacen thought they were going to stack either side of the door, but they were

simply taking a pace backward, Limm keeping an eye on the corridor as a routine

precaution.

Omas answered the door himself. Jacen knew he didn't have day-and-night close

protection these days, but somehow he expected a droid or even a real butler to receive

callers. The Chief of State looked at him with a puzzled frown, and then at the two

down, and then at the two

troopers.

"Good evening, Jacen." He stepped back and ushered them in. "Wretched

business, this shooting. I can't say I liked Gejjen, but it shows how careful we have to

be in our line of work."

He ambled down a long hallway that made the corridor outside look like a lower

levels slum. The art on the walls was breathtaking, and most of it seemed to predate the

Yuuzhan Vong invasion. Some gallery curator had a very secure hiding place, then. At

the end, Omas turned around.

"Can I get you good people something to drink before we sit down?"

Somehow it would have been so much easier if Omas had been hostile.

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"Sir," said Jacen. "I'm arresting you in the name of the Galactic Alliance for

activity likely to compromise the safety of the state."

Omas frowned slightly, as if he hadn't heard right. He walked a few steps back

along the passage where the downlighters cast pools of light on velvet-pile ruby carpet.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're under arrest, sir. We'll let you call your lawyer later, but right now it

would be a good idea if you came with us."

Omas gave a little snort of amusement. "Jacen, my dear

boy, this is Cal Omas

you're talking to. Don't be such a prat-arrest me? Arrest me?"

Jacen reached in his jacket and took out a datapad. "Under the terms of the

Emergency Measures Act, anyone, including heads of state, politicians, and any other

individuals believed to be presenting a genuine risk to the security of the Galactic

Alliance can now be detained. That's a quote, sir. The amendment to the law to include

heads of state came into effect at midnight, and you are a head of state . . ."

Omas looked stunned rather than alarmed. Jacen was used to the GAG producing

fear when they paid a visit, but amazement was

disconcerting.

"I saw that amendment come through on the notifications circular yesterday,"

Omas said, still quite casually conversational. "Good grief. You really did it, didn't

you? You actually changed the law and planned this."

"Sir-"

"Am I allowed to know what risk I'm supposed to pose to my own state?"

"I can show you, sir," Jacen said, and switched his datapad to the strip-cam

footage of the meeting with Gejjen. He cued it up and then held the pad so that Omas

could see the screen. "Please feel free to view it all and then tell me if that's not you in

the room with two Alliance Intel officers the late Prime

the room with two female riot officers, the two police
Minister, and his two CorSec
protection officers."

The look on Omas's face was priceless. Jacen felt a
flood of relief that he had

finally, finally made Omas realize that he was now a man
with no future. Omas stared

at the datapad and did indeed watch the whole meeting.
Behind Jacen, Wirut and Limm

waited in patient silence.

"Well," said Omas. "What can I say?"

"Sergeant Wirut will accompany you to pack an
overnight bag," Jacen said. "We'll

take you out as discreetly as possible."

"Secretly? Oh, I see . . ."

"No, sir, you're not going to disappear and turn up floating facedown in some sewer. This will be conducted legally and openly."

Omas stared impassively into Jacen's face and then looked past him at the two

troopers. Jacen could feel the man's fear even though he looked perfectly at ease.

"Sergeant, I do keep a bag packed for eventualities," Omas said, almost smiling. "If you

don't trust me not to blow my brains out in the bedroom, by all means go to the fifth

door on the left and pick it up for me. It's in the first closet as you enter the room. Tan

leather holdall."

There was nothing worse than a dignified detainee. Jacen knew that within

twenty-four hours the barracks and the CSF bar would be full of the gossip about how

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magnificently brave Omas had been. Wirut disappeared into the bedroom while Limm stood guard.

Omas stepped a little closer to Jacen, his face centimeters away, so close that his breath brushed Jacen's skin like a hand.

"You obnoxious, power-crazed, ludicrous little jerk," he said sweetly, with the smile of an indulgent grandfather. "You had Gejjen killed, too, didn't you?"

Jacen waited for him to spit in his face and still smile, but Omas conducted

himself impeccably as he left. Wirut walked behind him, blaster visible but not jammed

into the Chief of State's back, and Jacen led the way. It was the longest, most awkward

turbolift descent that Jacen could imagine. When they reached the lobby, the security

guard stared for a moment, put down his holozine, and stood up.

"Sir? What's happening?"

"Would you water the plants while I'm away, please?" Omas said pleasantly. "I'm

afraid I'm under arrest."

There was a second GAG transport waiting outside. Wirut and Limm ushered

Omas into it, then watched it speed away to GAG HQ. Jacen found that his hands were

shaking. It was an effort to take out his comlink.

"Admiral, it's done," he said. "Time for a public announcement."

Wirut pushed back his visor and wiped his face with his glove. "That," he said,

"was the hardest thing I've ever done. Next time, sir, can I volunteer for snatching

heavily armed Wookiee psychopaths? It'd be a lot easier on my nerves."

Wirut and Limm joked, but the arrest had crossed an emotional line for them, and

it showed. Jacen climbed into the speeder beside them and took a long route through

the canyons of buildings, checking for signs that Coruscant, the heart of galactic

democracy, had undergone a silent, bloodless, and

thoroughly civilized military coup.

Outside government buildings and bank headquarters, small groups of GA ground

forces stood guard. It looked like no more than the routine public order precautions for

festival nights, except the uniforms were not the blue of CSF.

"Weird," said Limm.

"Poor old Jori." Wirut sighed. "Poor kid. He was so keen to live up to his

granddad."

Jacen rubbed his eyes and realized he was in for another very long day. And the

sun wasn't even up yet.

"I won't forget that," he said. "I never will."

chapter thirteen

SENATE BUILDING

Trading on the ISE was suspended in the early hours of this morning when Acting

Chief of State Admiral Cha Niathal declared temporary martial law following the shock

arrest of Cal Omas. A statement is expected in the Senate within the hour. Meanwhile,

other galactic financial centers report brisk trading. KDY "A" shares closed fifty point

three credits up on yesterday, and both MandalMotors and Roche Industries ended the

day up more than thirty credits.

-Market News: business headlines

Senator G'Sil glanced at the holocams that transmitted Senate debates to every

office, restaurant, and public area in the Senate Building, then shook his head, eyes

closed for a moment.

"Full house," he said. "You'd better have a good speech ready, Cha. A really good

one."

Niathal adjusted her uniform and prepared to go out onto the

Chief of State's platform to address the Senate. Things weren't playing out quite as

she'd imagined, but then battles never did, and the political arena was as prone to the

fog of war as any fleet engagement. Jacen Solo, whom she expected to see strutting

around the Senate, was keeping a low profile. But she'd see about that. If she was going

to be shoved out front to tap-dance for his coup, she'd make sure he was visibly part of

their double act. She wasn't taking responsibility for this on her own.

"It's temporary, it's for the duration of the war, and no ordinary citizens will notice

an adverse impact on their lives," she said, rehearsing her key messages. "Play a bit of

Omas's clandestine meeting footage, wave around the news on Mandalore and Roche,

and everyone nods and says, yes indeed, Admiral, we live in dangerous times, please

do look after us as an interim government while the Chief of State's office is thoroughly

investigated."

"I like Jacen," G'Sil said, suddenly very quiet. "But is he reliable these days?"

"Reliable for what?"

"I would never have authorized the Gejjen business. It was . . . extreme."

"It's done. Corellia is wobbling a little, because their assorted lunatic fringes have

given us a massive bonus by claiming they did it. Bothawui has been brought up short,

because they probably think we did it but can't believe we had the nerve, and-well, I

never thought I'd live to say this, but those ghastly little Mandalorian savages have

been wonderfully helpful."

"Cha, I don't want to worry you, but have you noticed they're rearming? With

Verpine tech, too?"

"I certainly have. Best news of the week."

"They must teach you something at staff college that's beyond us lesser mortals."

Niathal checked the chrono. She had ten minutes to psych herself up into

appearing as a safe pair of hands, reluctant to take the burden of the reins of state and

anxious to hand them back as soon as the current unpleasant business was over. Yes,

she meant that, too. She wanted the Chief of State's post, but she wanted a genuine

mandate to do it; and there was no better way to achieve

mandate to do it, and there was no better way to achieve that than to show she

could be a responsible leader in this most extreme of situations. When she finally

ran for office, the electorate would know her by her deeds.

As long as I can keep Jacen on a choke chain, of course, and, he doesn't ruin it for

me. If he gets out of hand . . . well, there's always Fett.

"Have you ever kept nuna?" she asked.

"Not in the apartment . . ."

"I'm told they tend to form rival groups within the flock, and they can get very

territorial. Squabbles break out. Now, let wild bursas into the coop, and it's bedlam-

they go into a killing frenzy, grab as many nuna to eat

later as they can, and escape.

They don't care which group they eat. That's your Mandalorians."

"It's a lovely analogy, but it's lost on me."

"Forget strategy. Mandalorians don't care who wins. They just want to eat, drink,

fight, and maintain their self-image."

G'Sil gave her a long, wary stare. "You're the Supreme Commander. I assume you

can assess a military risk."

"You want my assessment? Fett has no intention of expanding his small sphere of

influence. Mandalorians might have been a mighty empire a few millennia ago, but

they can't handle the difficult business of running a modern complex democracy. They

modern, complex democracy. They

know it, so they just want to live their primitive warrior fantasy and revel in their reputation."

"Which is earned."

"I accept that they're phenomenal soldiers."

"They kicked out the Empire and the Yuuzhan Vong, without any help from us."

"That still doesn't mean they want to dominate the galaxy. There are fewer than

three million of them on Mandalore now, and they don't have anything like a

government structure that could organize them well enough to take over the GA or the

Confederation. They'll always be the bursa let loose among nuna. They're opportunistic

feeders."

"But Fett's a smart, smart man. Forget the Wookiee braids."

"He wants to see Jacen Solo fall a long way," Niathal said.

"I don't buy fostering galactic chaos just to get back at one man, even if it's

Jacen."

"No, we've created our own chaos. Fett's just the distraction act." Two minutes to

go: Niathal sipped a glass of water and rolled her head to loosen her neck. There was

nothing worse than a strained voice caused by tight muscles. She needed to sound

relaxed, regretful, but authoritative. "As long as he plays hooveyman the GA holds

together, because the smaller planets are scared the Mandalorians will be back and

they'll cling to us for protection."

"Or rush to the Confederation . . ."

"Not if the Confederation buys Fett's arms, and we don't. We can rob him of his

neutrality, or at least the appearance of it."

G'Sil continued to look at her as if she'd arrived from beyond the Outer Rim. He

was taking this coup

-and she was happy to call it that in private-remarkably well.

Given his position, she'd expected him to want a piece of

the action.

"G'vli, will you run for the Chief of State's office in due course?"

"Will there be a Chief of State?"

"I fully intend to return to elections and civil rule once the war is over."

"Then no, I won't. I'm fine not being where Omas was. If a thing can happen once,

it can happen twice." G'Sil steered her toward the access to the floating platform. "You

need to watch your back with Jacen."

"I know," she said. "So I'm neutralizing him now. Start as you mean to go on."

The word neutralize had several unfortunate meanings, and judging by the look on

G'Sil's face, he'd thought of the worst one. "No, just

tactically. Where is he, anyway?"

"He probably had some fingers he needed to break. Let me worry about finding

him later." G'Sil followed her onto the platform. "Here we go."

Niathal looked down at her boots as she stepped onto the platform, and when she

looked up, the sheer scale of the Senate chamber unsettled her for a split second. It was

a blessing: she knew her genuine dismay would come across as humble reluctance.

There was nothing worse for a new military dictator than looking too keen.

For a chamber of thousands of delegates-even with the recent secessions and

defections-it was remarkably quiet. Her platform drifted

serenely into the center of

the massive chamber. She was looking into lights and shadows, generally unable to see

faces. It was, in so many senses, a theatrical stage complete with blinding footlights.

"Gentlebeings," she began. Formal: strictly formal was the best bet, she

calculated. "I never expected to be addressing you in this way, and I find myself barely

prepared for it. I greatly regret the need to stand on this platform. But the need has

arisen, it will be a need for the shortest period possible, and apart from the temporary

leadership of the GA, nothing else will change. I stress that. There is no curfew, no

censorship, and none of the other trappings of martial law. Had Chief Omas been taken

ill, I would be standing here anyway, and nobody would be panicking. What's

happened overnight is no more constitutionally significant than that. I've merely

exercised my responsibility as the Supreme Commander to deputize for the Chief of

State, on the advice of the GA security services. As soon as the general security

situation with the Confederation is resolved, and I expect that to be within the short

term, I'll step down and we'll hold elections for the Chief's office."

There wasn't a single lie in there. There was never any need to lie. She meant

every word. There was simply information that the Senate didn't have, and everyone

went through life with an incomplete picture of the galaxy anyway.

One of the representatives for Kuat signaled to speak.

"When you refer to the security services, Admiral, do you mean Alliance Intel or

the GAG?"

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Niathal wondered if G'Sil had engineered the question, because it was so perfectly

on cue. "I'd like to share some material with you," she said. "So that you understand

where the need to act arose."

It was possibly contempt of court to show the images of Omas's meeting with

Geiiien: evidence like that would prejudice his chance of

Gejjen, evidence she had would prejudice the chance of a fair trial, but she had a

shrewd idea that Omas wouldn't be cleared by a jury, return to work with his reputation

intact, and sue the GA for wrongful arrest. In his case, the arrest was verdict and

sentence in one. She gestured for the images to be projected onto the viewing screen on

each delegate's platform.

It was gratifying to hear the faint exclamations of surprise as the scene played out,

complete with Alliance Intel officers. Niathal displayed a little dignified pain at the

moment of betrayal, when Dur Gejjen discussed how to remove her and Jacen from

their posts. The silence that followed was perfect.

"So, you'll understand why I felt I had to take advice from the GAG, because

Alliance Intel's objectivity may have been compromised by attendance at that meeting,"

she said. "And while it's not illegal for two heads of state at war to have discussions, it's

unacceptable for them to plan the removal of a Supreme Commander without

consulting the Security and Intelligence Council."

She hoped they noted that the chair of that council was sitting at her right hand. It

was time for him to do his party piece, so she sat down and let G'Sil have the floor.

"I've got very little to add," G'Sil said. "Except to say that I'm saddened to come to

this. A word about the presence of GA troops on the streets alongside CSE officers

streets alongside CST officers.

This is simply a precaution in case the anarchic elements on Coruscant try to take

advantage of the situation. As in any democracy, they have the right to exist and to

speak, but if any of them attempt to capitalize on the situation, then the rule of law will

be upheld."

"Well, there's no need for the anarchists to overthrow the government now, is

there?" said the delegate from Haruun Kal. "You got there first . . ."

"With that in mind," Niathal continued, "I intend to ask Colonel Jacen Solo to act

as joint Chief of State with me. A matter of checks and balances, so that the temporary

power doesn't rest with one person, and one can subject the other to scrutiny."

She let the comment from Haruun Kal pass. Nobody else picked up on it. By

failing to invoke the full range of emergency restrictions she now had the right to

impose, she felt she'd sent out a clear message that this really was a case of an

embarrassed and reluctant military being hauled in to mind the shop because the

civilian head of state had been a very naughty boy. It seemed to have worked. Either

the Senate was collectively terrified, or it was 90 percent convinced, 10 percent wary.

She would settle for either.

G'Sil followed her back to her office. She sat down and felt the relief flood her

let the relief hood net.

"Next?" said G'Sil, and poured two cups of caf from the dispenser. "We have a

breathing space while the Senators panic about their share prices and the Corellian

administration flounders like beached daggerts."

"Reopen the stock exchange," she said. "I need to see the finance secretary at

some point today to arrange for Treasury intervention if the market panics again. I'm

bringing Alliance Intel under GAG command, and assigning Captain Girdun to that-"

"Oh, classic-"

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"-and I want Omas's office sealed until further notice."

G'Sil looked mildly surprised. "You're not moving in there?"

"I'm not, and neither is Jacen. It smacks of enthusiasm for power rather than

necessary duty. We seal it as it stands, which is best practice in terms of allowing CSF

to preserve a potential crime scene." She tapped the internal comm code for Senate

Building Maintenance into her desk keypad. "And nobody fights over whose chair it

is."

G'Sil finally gave way to the smile that was trying to cross his face. "And what an

elegant way to neutralize Jacen, should he hanker after power. Give it to him to start

with."

Ton don't need to know we did a deal. "I don't like having opposing forces

approaching from the rear, G'vli. I like them where I can see them."

"That's the first time I've heard you refer to Jacen as . . . opposing."

"We want the same outcomes," she said carefully, aware of how ephemeral

alliances were in this game. "Order, stability, and peace. I don't care for his methods,

that's all. Once I manage to teach him that putting citizens in camps and killing

prisoners is not the done thing, we'll get on just fine."

"You have to see the Jedi Council, too."

"I'll see Skywalker later, but not the rest of the armed mystics . . ."

Niathal paused and sent a message to Luke that she wanted to continue the good

working relationship he'd had with Omas, and that he would be welcome for an

informal discussion. She'd remain cautious, though, because they seemed to represent a

third and unelected power, neither civilian nor military, and every time she looked at

Jacen Solo she saw just what Jedi could turn into.

"This has been surprisingly civilized," G'Sil said. "The business of the chamber is

going on as usual. No riots, no protests, no counterrevolution."

"It isn't lunchtime yet."

"Nevertheless, this is remarkable."

"And we have a war going on. Even if the Corellians are spinning their wheels at

the moment, Bothawui isn't. I have crews out there on the front line."

It was simply a statement of fact. She still wore a uniform, and whatever her

ambitions the service ethic was very nearly coded into her genes by now. She really did

have a war to win and people to bring home alive.

"Oh, you're good," G'Sil said, misreading her totally.

"You're very good. Stang, I

might even vote for you on the strength of today's showing."

That was the only way Niathal wanted to remain in this post-by election; it made

it much easier to hang on to it than being a dictator. She

was also an officer who liked

her moral lines, her rules of engagement, completely clear.

Within those, though, she believed in taking the battle to the enemy and pressing

home every advantage.

"I look forward to it," she said.

JEDI COUNCIL CHAMBER

177

It had been a long night, and the morning's news left Luke reeling. He looked at

Mara across the Chamber, noted that her injuries were largely healed, and wondered

when she was going to be ready to talk to him about what was making her grind her

teeth in her sleep.

Something had got to her, and the fact that she was silent and not raging about it

worried him. It meant it was more than Lumiya or Alema.

"Makes you wonder what tomorrow might bring," Kyp said wearily, scratching

his head with both hands as if he were shampooing his hair. "A bombshell with every

bulletin."

"I haven't always seen eye-to-eye with Omas, but I don't believe he's a security

risk." Luke had never handled frustration well, and age hadn't mellowed that. He could

see what was happening; he knew his

history, and he had no love of military government.

Nobody of his generation

who'd grown up under the Empire did. "So now we have two threats-an external war,

and an internal coup. Where do we concentrate our efforts?"

"Well, Niathal is well within her rights to assume power under the

circumstances," Corran said. "So it's not exactly a coup, and much as we might not like

it as citizens with a vote, as Jedi we have no business interfering in that."

"Can I say it?" Kyp asked. "Because it's just staring us in the face and nobody's

mentioning it."

"Go on . . ."

"Jacen. There, I said it. Jacen, Jacen, Jacen. What in the

name of the Force is

going on here? Okay, maybe we should have taken him to task when he started kicking

down doors with the GAG. Now, overnight, he's busted the Chief of State and taken

over. Extreme? Out of control, my friends."

"Has he actually declared himself joint Chief of State? Personally?"

Cilghal looked up. "Admiral Niathal announced it. We've heard nothing from

Jacen."

"Then maybe it wasn't his idea." Luke looked at Mara to catch her eye, but she

seemed in a world of her own. "Mara?"

"Sorry." She snapped to attention, blinking. "I don't see

Jacen being dragged

kicking and screaming to the big office, somehow. Regardless of who came up with the

idea, he's hardly rushed to decline the honor."

"He's gone to ground," said Kyp. "We've been through a whole twenty-four hours

of news bulletins without seeing him. He must be chained up somewhere to keep him

away from reporters."

"How would we know?" Corran asked. "He never talks to us, and he's holed up in

his cozy GAG bunker when he's not out harassing Corellians."

"Time I went to see him," said Luke. "I mean really see him. Niathal's sent a

message saying she wants to maintain the good

relationship between the Jedi Council

and the Chief's office. I'm taking her up on that as soon as she can clear her schedule."

Mara seemed to be concentrating on the proceedings again. "If I didn't know

Corellia was in dire straits over Gejjen's death, I'd have said it was an outside attempt to

destabilize the GA. If he'd still been alive, they'd have moved in on us by now."

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It was an interesting thought that suddenly got more interesting in Luke's mind as

he rolled it around. Mara could always spot the issue. The two events might have been

coincidental, or they might not, but the assassination was tied up with the removal of

Omas, and not only because he'd been meeting the Corellian shortly before he died.

The crazier news programs were speculating wildly that Omas had been directly

involved in the assassination, but Luke felt that something more convoluted was

happening, and judging by the grinding-cogs expression on her face, Mara did too. She

wasn't quite talking to herself, but her lips moved occasionally, involuntarily, as she

stared into the mid-distance.

You used to talk everything through with me, Mara. What happened?

"You know what?" Kyp said. "We're missing an important point. As Jedi, either

we're players in GA politics, or we're another instrument

of the elected leadership, like

the fleet. If we're the latter, then we might have our opinions, but we do as the

legitimate leadership directs. If we're not, then we've got no more right to start

interfering with the status quo than the Monster Raving Anarchist Party. Jacen might be

completely off the charts now, but he's not acting as a Jedi. He's an officer in the

security forces who happens to be a Jedi."

"When my front doors come crashing in with a GAG boot," Corran said, "that's

going to make me feel so much better."

Kyp twisted around in his seat to jab a finger in Corran's direction. "I'm not saying

we shouldn't act. Just that we need to be clear where we stand. And Niathal and Jacen are within their rights."

"There's rights," said Mara, "and there's right."

Kyp raised an eyebrow. "And the semantics thought for the day was brought to you by our sponsors . . ."

"I'm seeing Niathal," said Luke, slapping his palm down on the arm of his chair. I

should have gone with my gut so long ago. I really did take my eye off the ball trying to

live up to this role. "And before we start griping about lack of action, think about this.

When it was a matter of your not approving of Ben's involvement with the GAG, it was

a choice between letting him carry on and hauling a

teenage boy home. Now we're

talking about action against . . . what, exactly? Stage our own coup? Depose Niathal?

Confiscate Jacen's lightsaber? I'm up for most things, I admit, but we have to think this

through, because we might leave matters worse than before we started."

"Well, trying to talk him around is off the menu," said Mara. "So I'm sticking with

going after the irritant in this. Lumiya. But let's not forget that Omas didn't exactly

behave sensibly, and Niathal isn't in Lumiya's thrall. She's got her own agenda, and I

don't get any sense of the dark side influencing that."

Luke knew she was right. The dynamics were complex. The best thing Jedi could

do was to tackle the things that non-Force-users couldn't. Once again, he missed the

clarity of thoroughly evil adversaries, or at least those he thought were evil.

It was hard to turn against your allies. It was as hard as turning against your own

family. Now they were one and the same.

GAG HEADQUARTERS, CORUSCANT

179

The worst thing about waking up that morning was the few seconds of blank

comfort before remembering what had happened, and then the world collapsed again.

Ben couldn't stop seeing Jori Lekauf everywhere he looked. He couldn't face staying at

home: he needed the company of his friends, the people who missed Lekauf, too. As he

walked through the GAG security gates, and the system accepted his identicard to open

the blastproof doors, every face in the corridor was Lekauf's. When Ben went into the

locker room, he could hear his voice. It was a running nightmare conjured up by a

combination of his Force-senses and the simple human reaction to fresh bereavement.

He wanted it to stop, but he felt he was being disloyal to a dead friend for wanting not

to see him everywhere.

Zavirk was still in the monitoring room. He looked up at Ben and tapped the mute

button on his earpiece. "You okay?"

"Fine."

"I won't say it."

"Fine."

"And not your fault, okay? Could have been any one of us." Zavirk tapped the

button again and dragged the adjacent chair closer for Ben to sit down. "You heard that

the boss is . . . well, really the boss now?"

"Yeah."

"Should be good news for us."

Ben knew that his father would say it wasn't good news at all. He sat in the

monitoring room for a while, just grateful to be among the troopers, and then wandered

off to find a quiet spot. If he couldn't handle this kind of stuff without being devastated,

he'd be no use in the GAG. Every other trooper here got on with it. Shevu had probably

had an awful conversation with Lekauff's parents, but when Ben walked by his office,

he was hard at work, marking up a duty roster on the wall and getting on with things.

Okay, I'm fourteen. I could say, all right, I'm just a kid and I don't have to be

tough when my buddies get killed. But I can't pick and choose when I act like an adult.

I've got to get on with it, or go to school like every other kid my age.

And he was scaring his mother. She had enough problems of her own hunting

Lumiya.

According to the roster display, Jacen was on duty. The time codes showed he'd

been at HQ since about one in the morning. Ben couldn't feel his presence, but that

didn't surprise him now. There was a time when Jacen had hidden in the Force when he

had to; now he only showed himself when he seemed to feel it was necessary.

Without thinking about it, Ben found himself shutting down, too. As he walked

down the corridor, the tiles still gleaming with spots of water because the cleaning

droids were just meters ahead of him, he let himself merge with the matter and energy

around him. The more he did it, the less he felt like he was in a trance, cut off from

reality, and the more he felt like he was observing the world as it truly was, particles

within particles. It gave him a fleeting feeling of serene clarity. It was relief of a kind.

At the top of the corridor, a pair of doors led to the holding cells. That area was

always kept shut, but today there was a notice fixed on the wall next to it that read top-

level clearances only. They were holding Chief Omas down there. It seemed surreal.

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Ben carried on toward Jacen's office and he could see as he rounded the corner that the

doors were open.

As usual, he couldn't feel Jacen's presence, but he could

near him talking to

someone.

Who is it? Odd. I can't feel anybody else.

Jacen might have been on his comlink, but his tone of voice wasn't that slightly

stilted, self-conscious one that he tended to lapse into when he couldn't see who he was

speaking to. In fact, he sounded as if he was trying to keep his temper.

"You overplayed your hand," said Jacen.

"You worry too much," said a woman's voice.

That was the point at which Ben realized something was very wrong. Only a Jedi

could be there and not be sensed-or a Yuuzhan Vong, and they weren't exactly

frequent visitors to the GAG HQ. And the voice was somehow familiar, even though he couldn't place it.

It was dishonest to sneak up on his commanding officer-on his cousin, his

mentor-but it seemed like the only sensible thing to do. Keeping himself hidden in the

Force, Ben edged silently along the corridor and stood as close to the open doors as he could.

This wing of the headquarters building was deserted, and Jacen probably relied on

sensing people coming and going. He thought he and his guest were alone.

"You cut it too fine," Jacen was saying. "There's being a decoy, and there's being

too clever, and you crossed that line. Are you recovered now?"

"Yes," said the woman's voice. It had that slightly husky edge to it, like she used

too many death sticks. "But it worked. It gave you the space to act without having her

crawling all over your operation. She really thinks I want revenge for some daughter . .

."

"I sometimes think your cover stories are too complex."

"And mind-rubbing Ben about Nelani isn't?"

Ben recoiled. It was all he could do not to storm in. Jacen. You did that?

"He wouldn't understand why I had to do it," said Jacen.

"And that's why he can't ever be your apprentice. Get rid

of him, find another one,

and stop wasting your time."

"Now, there's my real problem . . ."

"I can't help you there. Whoever it turns out to be, that's the Force's decision.

You'll know very soon."

"Well, I dealt with Omas, anyway. A clear path."

"Are you going to keep him here?"

"I thought house arrest might be more sensible in the long term. Republica House

is easy to secure, and it makes us look like the good guys. People still like Omas."

"And here you are, joint Chief of State . . ."

"That way Niathal thinks she can keep me quiet."

"Or under control."

"She's way too smart."

"Play nicely with her. You need her to keep the military behind you."

"You're such a strategist, Lumiya . . ."

181

Lumiya. Lumiya?

Ben thought he'd misheard, or that his state of mind was making him hear what he

wanted to hear, like Lekauf's voice. But he knew what he'd heard, and his first reaction

wasn't one of fear or dread, but agonized embarrassment.

He'd trusted Jacen, and Jacen had lied to him.

He'd mind-rubbed him

And they were talking about him as if he was in the way.

The fact that Jacen was knowingly talking to a Sith as if they were old friends

seemed to take second place to that. For all his denial, Jacen knew Lumiya. And she

could walk into GAG HQ and just talk to him. Jacen wasn't being conned by her; he

was chatting casually with her about what he'd do next.

Ben found himself scrabbling for excuses that would explain why Jacen could be

meeting with Lumiya and still be someone he could trust, someone with a perfectly

good reason for it all.

Jacen's a Jedi. He can't be in league with her. She's done something to him. Mind-

influenced him or something.

This woman had left his mother with a battered face. This woman was all he'd

been taught to fear and avoid, and Jacen was talking to her in his office, as bold as

anything.

Ben knew he had to tell someone, but he'd run out of people to

trust. If Jacen could be influenced like that, anyone could-except Mom. Mom

wasn't in Lumiya's thrall, or she wouldn't have been in a fight with her.

Ben had to find her. He had to warn her.

That morning he'd felt like things couldn't possibly get any worse, and now he

knew they could.

182

chapter fourteen

If you think you're going to scare us off by cozying up to the Mandalorians, Bug

Boy, you've got another think coming.

-Hebanh Del Dalhe, Murkhanan Department of Trade and Industry, to the

Roche ambassador, during a disagreement on intellectual property rights

BEVIIN-VASUR FARM, KELDABE, MANDALORE

"Too much holonews is bad for you," said the man standing in the doorway of the

outbuilding. Fett had spotted him coming-it was hard not to. His armor was

extraordinary. There was no real need for Fett to be vigilant on Mandalore, but then

Jaster Mereel had once thought he was perfectly okay among his own people, too. Safe

was always better than sorry. Fett carried on cleaning his helmet, feet up on the chair.

"It's riveting," he said, nodding in the direction of the monitor that he'd propped

on the table. The news anchors and commentators had descended into a feeding frenzy

about the bloodless coup. "Jacen Solo, the boy who wants to be Vader when he grows

up. He finally did it."

"He probably looks in the mirror when he brushes his teeth and tells himself it's

his destiny."

"And you are?"

"Venku."

He didn't have a proper Keldabe accent. If anything, he sounded like he'd spent

time on Kuat, and maybe Muunilinst, too. That wasn't unusual for Mandalorians, and it

was more common now that so many were flooding back to what Beviin called

Manda'yaim.

That was the traditional name for the planet, not Mandalore. Fett had never

realized that. Every day was an education that told him how far adrift he was from his

own people.

"Sit down, Venku." Fett gestured to the last remaining

Sit down, Venku. Fett gestured to the last remaining chair in the room. He tried

to think leader and not bounty hunter. "Whatever it is, get it off your chest."

Venku had the most eclectic armor Fett had ever seen. It was a custom to wear

sections of armor belonging to a dead relative or friend, but Venku had no two plates

that matched. Every piece was a different color. The palette ranged from blue, white,

and black to gold, cream, gray, and red.

"What happened to your fashion sense? Did someone shoot it?"

Venku still stood, ignoring the chair. He glanced down at his plates as if noticing

them for the first time. "The chest plate, the buy'ce, and shoulder sections came from

my uncles. The forearm plates were my father's, the thigh plates came from my cousin,

and the belt was my aunt's. Then there's-"

"Okay. Big family."

"Those who are tab'echaaj'la and those who still live, yes."

Fett had given up asking for translations. He got the general idea. "I'm nearly done

with cleaning my bucket."

"And they said charm wasn't your strong suit. Okay, I came to tell you I'm

relieved you decided to be a proper Mand'alor. The Mando'ade are coming home. You

probably don't notice much beyond your own existence

probably don't have much beyond your own existence, but this is your purpose."

Fett had never thought of himself as easygoing, but normally he couldn't get

worked up enough to slug fools if he wasn't paid to. This man didn't strike him as a

fool, but he'd hit a nerve and Fett couldn't quite work out why.

"Glad I could be more useful than a doorstep."

"Which is why I'm also relieved to give you this." Venku opened a pouch on his

ammunition belt-his aunt's belt, he'd said, so she must have been a typical Mando

woman-and placed a small, dark blue rectangular container on the table. "And don't

mistake this for adulation or sentimentality. You owe your people. There'll be someone

along shortly to administer it."

Venku turned toward the door as the word administer bored into Fett's skull.

"Whoa there."

Venku glanced over his multicolored shoulder. "Don't try doing it yourself. It has

to be inserted into the bone marrow, and that's going to hurt like you wouldn't believe.

Let someone qualified do it. It'll still hurt, but they'll place it correctly."

So this was one of Jaing's minions. He certainly didn't have his boss's sartorial

style, although he did have expensive dark green leather gloves, and Fett couldn't guess

what or who had contributed to those.

"Tell him we're even," Fett said. "And . . . thank him."

Venku started to say something then stopped as if he was getting a message via

his helmet. Fett tilted his own helmet in his lap so he could see the HUD display that

was patched into Slave J's external security cam. A man tottered past the ship, clearly

very old indeed from his gait but still wearing full lighting armor, and paused to look at

the ship. Then he moved out of cam range in the direction of the building.

Fett would never rule out even a senile Mandalorian as a possible threat: if the old

man had survived to that age, he was either unusually lucky or a serious fighter. But

Fett remained with his feet on the chair, wiping the red

shimmer-silk lining of his

helmet with a sapon cloth, consumed with curiosity but hiding it perfectly. The old man

appeared in the doorway, squeezed past Venku, and stared at Fett.

"At least I lived to see the day," he said. "Su'cuy, Mand'alor, gar shabuir. "

It wasn't the most polite greeting that Fett had ever received, but it was certainly

the most relevant to a terminally ill man. It was the only possible way that warriors and

mercenaries could greet each other: "So you're still alive." He'd worked out what

shabuir meant, too, but he chose to take it as ribald affection rather than abuse.

The old Mando walked out with arthritic dignity, paused again at the double doors

again at the door to stare

at Fett, and went on his way.

"You made his day," said Venku.

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"I shouldn't ask."

"Then don't." Venku sighed, then put his hands to his helmet to pop the seal. The

rustle of fabric muffled his voice as he lifted the buy'ce.
"Oh, all right, then."

Boba Fett was looking into the face of a man perhaps ten or fifteen years younger

than him: dark hair with a liberal threading of gray, strong cheekbones, and the very

darkest brown eyes. He'd looked much like that himself twenty years ago. The nose

was sharper and the mouth was a stranger's, but the rest-it was a Fett face.

He was looking into his own eyes, and into the eyes of his long-dead father.

"I'm Venku," said the Mando with the motley armor. "But you probably know me

better as Kad'ika. Interesting to meet you at last . . . Uncle Boba."

OSARIAN TAPCAF, CORUSCANT

I couldn't think who else to tell," Ben said. "Or who else would listen to me if I

did."

Mara wondered if he'd been crying about Lekauf or Jacen's breathtaking betrayal.

He'd been crying about something, though, and he was doing a reasonable job of

disguising it.

"I believe you, Ben."

"Maybe I did imagine it."

"You didn't." No, he certainly couldn't imagine Lumiya having a friendly chat

with Jacen, dissecting their run of triumphs, and deciding when Niathal would no

longer be useful.

And discussing their lies. No daughter to avenge-and wiping out Ben's memory

of what happened to Nelani.

Ben had the useful ability to recall things he'd seen or heard with nearly complete

accuracy. Mara's scalp had tightened and tingled as she heard her son, her precious kid,

relating the exact words of that Sith cyborg and her accomplice, like an innocent

possessed by a demon.

Accomplice.

Mara realized she'd shifted her position by a few parsecs. Not a vain, conceited,

naive victim of a manipulative Sith: an accomplice. Jacen wasn't weak-minded enough

to fall that far and that fast unless he wanted to.

"I haven't told anyone else and I don't want to," Ben whispered. "Not Dad, either.

I mean, you can tell him if you really think he needs to know, Mom, but I don't want to

see the look on his face when he finds out what a moron I've been."

But I defended Jacen. When did I get stupid? "No more of a moron than the rest of

us, sweetheart."

"What are we going to do?"

"I won't ask you to do anything." Mara had let her drink get cold. She couldn't

swallow it anyway, even if it hadn't tasted like the Millennium Falcon's hydraulic

overflow, because her throat was tight with rage. "Ben, you have a choice. I told Jacen

that Lumiya was trying to kill you, and he was all innocence."

"So you knew about Ziost, then . . ."

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"No, I don't know anything about Ziost. But you're going
to do it." " . . . "

to tell me."

Ben's face fell. She had to gather what intel she could, but it was also good for

Ben to learn that it was all too easy to give away information accidentally. Just the

word Ziost made all the pieces start to fall into agonizing place.

"Jacen sent me on a mission to Almania to recover an Amulet that had some dark

side power. I ended up on Ziost and a ship attacked me, but I found a really weird

vessel and got away."

"Just like that."

"It wasn't Lumiya, actually. It was a Bothan."

"And how did you find this ship?" Mara was trying to work out the scam. She

knew what she'd done to Lumiya's ship, and that the transponder was now showing it

was stationary on Coruscant. If the last thirty-six hours hadn't been total mayhem, she'd

have paid her another visit by now. "Just parked, hatch open, with the key in the

drive?"

"It . . . look, I'm not insane, but it spoke to me."

"Ohhhh . . ." Mara had enough pieces in the puzzle now to see the rough shape of

the picture that would emerge. "Spherical. Orange. Like a big eye."

Ben's face drained completely of color. "Yes."

"Tell me about it."

He struggled visibly with something Mara guessed he'd

He struggled visibly with something. Maria guessed he'd been sworn to secrecy. It

was way too late for all that loyalty bunk.

"I've seen the ship, Ben. It spoke to me, too. It said it thought I was the 'other one'

like me, and I thought it'd mistaken me for Lumiya, but it meant you, didn't it?

Somehow it picked up on our similarities."

Ben gulped in air as if the relief of being able to share the awful experience were

saving him from drowning.

"I worked out how to pilot it. It communicates through the Force."

"And it's soaked in dark energies. I know. Go on."

"I don't know how it works, but if you visualize what you want it to do, it does it.

It sticks out parts of itself and forms them into cannons, all kinds of weapons."

Perfect. Perfect. Mara was getting a better picture by the second. Lumiya could

think at the ship and it'd rush to do her bidding-maybe even extrude a cable, whip it

around Mara, drag her away, and nearly throttle her.

It wasn't a droid. I got bushwhacked by a living ship, a Sith ship.

That old, cold clarity and pitiless sense of purpose flooded Mara's body, and

instead of making her gut churn, as any mother's might at hearing the kind of risk her

son had been subjected to, it settled her into a calm and rational state close to

transcendence. She was the Hand again, planning her

unsubscribed. She was up there again, praying for
move.

"So what happened to the ship between the time you
found it and when I came
across it the other day?"

"Where did you see it?"

"Hesperidium. When I caught up with Lumiya."

Ben's shoulders sagged. He folded his arms on the table
and lowered his head onto

them. Mara waited, stroking his hair because she
assumed he was crying again.

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He straightened up, face stricken but eyes dry. "I flew it
back to the Anakin Solo

and handed it over to Jacen."

THE END OF THE JOURNALS OF BEN SOLO

Everything fell into place. The only pieces missing now were how she would put

an end to this, but that was her specialty, and it could wait awhile until she'd made sure

Ben was safe.

"Okay, I think you know how serious this is," she said. Their heads were almost

touching over the table. To the Osarians who used the restaurant and who spoke very

little Basic, they probably looked like mother and son having a tearful argument over

homework and poor grades. They would never have guessed that it was about the fate

of the galaxy.

No, it's not about the galaxy. Enough of the galaxy. The galaxy can look after its

own problems for a while. This is about my child, my only child, and some Sith scum

trying to kill him while his own cousin, my own nephew
who should be looking after

him, helps her do it.

It all became very clear and simple from that moment onward.

"Ben, will you accept a suggestion from me?"

"Anything, Mom. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry--"

"Hey, I'm the one who should be sorry." I trusted a monster. I shouted down my

husband. I ignored every single sign that Jacen was trouble. "But you're in real danger,

and it's going to be more than you can handle, so I want you to be very cautious. I want

you to behave like a coward for a change. Take no risks. In fact, I'd like you to report in

sick, and get as far away from Jacen as you can until I get this fixed."

Ben nodded, grim, very old eyes in a terribly young face. He really was just a kid

even if he behaved like a man now. Mara was instantly so proud of him and so fiercely

protective at the same time that the only cogent emotion she could identify was the

instinct to seek out and kill whatever threatened him.

She could do that. It was her calling.

"I'll do it carefully," he said. "So Jacen doesn't realize I've found out that Lumiya

is making him do all this."

Oh, sure she is. "That's right, sweetheart."

"I promise I won't hide in the Force from you, but ... I might have to do it to hide

from her. Or even Jacen, if she's got him so far under her control that he's . . . taken

over the government."

Sometimes you had to hear someone else say it to believe it.

"Tell you what," said Mara, smiling, "why don't you show me how you do it?"

Then maybe I'll get a better sense of when you're just hiding, and when to worry."

Ben nodded, eyes downcast.

There would be no holds barred now. Mara would use every means and weapon at

her disposal, and there would be an end to this.

They spent the rest of the day doing something that they hadn't done in a very

long time: just wandering around the Skydome Botanical Gardens, talking and having

fun-or as much fun as could be had with a galactic civil war in progress and a military

junta running the GA. The only evidence of the huge upheaval was that the CSF officer

on patrol in the plaza had a Galactic Alliance Defense Force sergeant walking the beat

with him.

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Apart from that, nobody seemed troubled. Mara wondered if all cataclysmic

events in history were noticed only by a handful. Like Ben had said-prophetically-

over lunch only days before, perhaps it had been that way during the Empire, too, and

most people's lives were the same under Palpatine as they had been under the Republic.

She didn't want to think it was true. Luke certainly didn't.

"Come on, Mom," Ben said. "Let's go find a nice spot on the lawns and I'll teach

you how to vanish."

They said it was a sure sign of imminent old age when your kids could teach you

things. It was a simple thing, hiding in the Force, but then so was dieting, and not many

people could knuckle down to that and make it work, either. Ben was a remarkably

patient teacher. After a couple of hours, she could manage a minute or two without

manage a minute or two without

needing to grab something solid.

"I'm sorry about Lekauf," she said, putting her arm around him as they walked.

"I'm sorry I wasn't very kind to him. Sounds like he was one of the best."

"He did it to make sure I got away. How do I live with that kind of sacrifice,

Mom?"

"By making your life count, I think, so that his wasn't wasted."

It was the closest she'd ever felt to Ben, and probably the first time they'd really

related as adults. It left her feeling profoundly happy. The irony wasn't lost on her that

it was in the midst of some of the worst events and

greatest threats they'd ever faced.

Times like this made you painfully aware of what truly mattered.

"Ben, you're probably going to see a side of me soon that isn't good old Mom." He

smelled wonderfully of that indeterminable Ben-ness that she had enjoyed when he was

tiny, and that was still there under the scent of military-issue soap and weapon

lubricant. "But I want you to know that whatever I do, however much of a stranger you

think I become, I love you, and you're my heart, every fiber of it. Nothing matters to

me more than you."

She stopped to hug him, and he hugged her back rather than just submitting to the

indignity as he usually did. It went on for a while.

"You know why I believe you, Mom? Because you didn't tell me to trust you.

Everyone else tells me to trust them, and that's usually the cue that I shouldn't."

Mara got another glimpse of the man her son would be, and the mother she'd been

so far. It hadn't worked out so badly after all.

She knew only too well what the stakes were now, and what she had to do.

JACEN SOLO'S APARTMENT, CORUSCANT

Ben?" Jacen looked around the apartment, but there was no sign of his young

cousin. He'd probably gone back to see his parents. He still needed reassurance about

the dark necessity in life, passing through that stage between being oblivious of

consequences with the careless cruelty of a child, and the more sensitive but

responsible acceptance that life dealt harsh and unavoidable hands to many. At the

moment, Ben both felt too much and had too little life experience to handle the pain.

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Jacen looked through the contents of the conservator and decided to order a

delivery from a restaurant instead. There was a pattern now,

he realized, and it was becoming less of his making; he'd put the pieces in place,

the Force had responded, and now it was his turn to make choices when it offered them.

make choices when it offered them.

It was a dialogue.

Lekauf was part of the pattern, too. But Jacen was still working out why it hadn't

been Ben who'd died. He'd almost been sure that was the way it would end.

So I thought my destiny would let me off the hook with him. It won't.

Jacen comlinked an order for a three-course Toydarian low-fat banquet, and ran a

tub of hot foaming water in the refresher. The steam condensed on the mirrored wall,

and he found himself writing in the haze with his fingertip.

HE WILL IMMORTALIZE HIS LOVE.

It still didn't make sense. If it meant killing the person he loved most, as Lumiya

said, then there was no question: he would have given his life for Allana. But at every

turn in the last few months, he'd ended up protecting her. You'll know when it happens.

Lumiya was certain of that, and Jacen believed it, too.

Immortalize. Make immortal. Write into history. Make permanent. Why not just

kill ? Maybe I translated the tassel wrong.

People read holozines in the tub to relax, but Jacen found himself behaving like a

bachelor slob and eating his take-out banquet. He was exhausted. He had the feeling he

was coming to the peak of a wave, struggling up the gradient, and that when he hit the

crest-that final hurdle to his Sith destiny-things would
make sense

case and make sense.

Jacen laid his fork on the edge of the tub and overwrote the prophecy again in the condensation.

HE WILL IMMORTALIZE HIS LOVE.

Killing what you loved was the ultimate act of obedience and submission to

higher duty. He'd seen a feature on the holochannels about a tribe-couldn't recall

which, where, when-who trained their elite troops by giving them a nusito pup when

they entered the cadet program. They were encouraged to bond with the pup, to race it

against other cadets' nusitos, and to generally learn to love it. Then, before the cadet

could graduate, he was ordered to strangle his pup. If he

couldn't, or wouldn't, he was

kicked out. He had to be able to put duty before emotion.

That's me. That's what I have to do.

Full of too much Toydarian sourfry, tired, and lulled by hot water, Jacen let his

mind wander, and reached out in the Force to touch Allana and Tenel Ka. He risked

this with decreasing frequency now. The latest attempt on their lives had been a stark

warning of how precarious his family's position was. He'd never heard Allana call him

Daddy. He probably never would.

My family. Yes, that's who my family is. Not Jaina, not Mom, not Dad; my little

girl and her mother. Trust me to fall for a woman whose

girl and her mother. Trust me to fall for a woman whose customs prevent her ever

naming the father of her child.

He could have sworn Allana reached back at him. He was so thrilled that he

opened his eyes, and then realized that it was one more chance for someone to find her

and harm her. Lumiya wasn't above that. It was the Sith way. Making someone suffer

and hate only strengthened their Sith powers.

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He'd visit Tenel Ka as soon as he was certain that he and Niathal had consolidated

the takeover and that the war would be fought more logically and with less regard for

keeping insignificant worlds happy.

Got to deal with the Bothans next. Lumiya can earn her keep again.

But he couldn't keep his eyes open. He wasn't dozing, but Force-visions wouldn't

leave him alone. It was as if the Force was shaking him by the shoulders and telling

him to pay attention and get on with it, because time was running out. Each time he

closed his eyes, he saw the trust that Ben placed in him, and the lies he'd told the boy,

and the danger he'd put him in. And Ben still kept coming back for more. He was

desperate to do the right thing. Now Jacen saw him clearly, head in his hands, sobbing:

"It's too high a price. "

What was? Lekauf? No. There'd be many, many

What was? Lekaufs. No. There'd be many, many Lekaufs. Wars were full of them.

It was one reason why Jacen had to put an end to fighting, any way he could.

Maybe ... it wasn't Ben, but about him.

Why have I thought this over so many times? Why is it obsessing me? Because I'm

denying it. Because I can't accept it's him. Because it has to be him.

It would be easy to kill Ben, because Ben trusted him. Jacen knew how bad that

would make him feel. It was strangling a nusito pup.

You don't want to see the inevitable. Do you?

Jacen dried himself and spent the rest of the evening assembling

his personal armory. He examined his lightsaber and

blaster, and knew that those

still wouldn't be enough when Luke and Mara came after him to exact vengeance for

Ben. He took out the box of assorted poisons and pathogens that could be delivered by

dart or projectile, yet another range of weapons that might make it past the defenses of

his most persistent enemies. He had all the bases covered: chemical, biological,

mechanical.

He just wanted it all over with.

And when Ben was gone, who would be his apprentice then? Just before he fell

asleep, it crossed his mind that Admiral Cha Niathal had demonstrated an excellent

grasp of the rule of two

grasp of the rule of two.

It was just as well she wasn't a Force-user.

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chapter fifteen

This has to be about more than getting tough on chaos and disorder. I need to be

tough on the causes of chaos and disorder-greed, corruption, and ambition.

-Jacen Solo, joint GA Chief of State, speaking at a lunch for the heads of

Coruscanti industry

BEVIIN-VASUR FARM, MANDALORE

Mirta put her finger to her lips, and the four of them stacked around the door as if

getting ready to storm Fett's stronghold.

"I'll check," she said to Orade. Beviin winked at her. Medrit just kept glancing at

his chrono as if he didn't have time for all this. "You can hide behind me if you like."

Orade licked his lips nervously. "Cyar'ika, when Fett says he'll break my legs, he's

just looking for an excuse."

"He's a sick man, Ghes, and if you tell anyone, I'll be the one doing the breaking."

Ghes Orade would have faced a cannoned-up Chiss fleet armed only with a sharp

stick, and laughed about his chances of survival, but he was scared stiff of her

grandfather. Mirta wondered if she was doomed to have all her romances doused

liberally with freezing water because everyone now knew

she was a Fett. She leaned on

the barn door-the building had been a drying shed-and two indignant faces turned to

her.

"What are you doing to him?" she demanded. "Has he had a relapse or

something?"

Fett was breathing hard as if he was in a lot of pain, hands clenched against his

chest, face white and waxy. A woman she'd never seen before stood over him, holding

a large-bore needle-tipped syringe up to the light and checking the reservoir. Another

man in a ragbag of assorted armor was standing with his back to the door. He didn't

turn around.

"Jaing kept his promise," Fett said, breathless. "Or he's having the last laugh and

poisoning me. We'll see."

"There's a slower and less painful way of getting this where it needs to go," said

the woman, flicking the syringe with her finger to clear air bubbles. "But there's no

point messing around given the state you're in, Mand'alor. Direct into your bone

marrow. Two shots to go."

"Just do it." He took his hands off his chest and parted his shirt. Mirta was

surprised how bony he was: he looked such a fit, strong man in full armor. She never

wanted anyone else to see him like this. "Is this the best Mandalore can offer me? A

veterinarian who spends her working day with her arm up a-

"Believe me, I prefer treating nerfs. Keep still. Or I'll miss and puncture a lung. Or

worse."

"How long is this going to take?"

"Mand'alor, do you know what the alternative site to the sternum is for this

treatment?"

"Amaze me."

"The pelvic bones."

Fett's expression was predictably blank, and he didn't say another word. He

say another word. He

looked away, and anyone else would have thought it was casual annoyance at having

his schedule interrupted, but Mirta knew him well enough by now to see he was in

excruciating pain. She took the risk of stepping forward and folding her hand around

his. He took it, too. She thought he'd break every bone in her fingers when the vet lined

up the needle-so big that Mirta could see the hole in the tip-and pressed it hard into

his breastbone, as if she were preparing a nuna for roasting.

There was an awful squelch. Orade swallowed loudly.

"If you're going to faint or throw up, son, go do it outside," the vet said irritably.

"Failing that, find some analgesics. Where do you keep them?"

"Forget it," Fett said. "I need to know if you're doing me any damage."

"It's okay, Ba'buir," Mirta whispered. "You'll be okay."

"If the Sarlacc didn't finish me off, she won't, either."

The vet, all smiling menace, inserted the syringe in a glass vial to refill. "Last one.

Shut your eyes and think of Mandalore."

Mirta glanced over her shoulder at the man in the multicolored armor. He slipped

off his helmet.

"Just making sure he doesn't die before he does something useful for

Manda'yaim," said the man. "If it works, and it should, then he'll start to show signs of

recovery in a few days."

He looked a lot like Fett-and Jaing-and the resemblance was unsettling. The

Kiffar part of her, the one that cared about bloodlines, told her this was her kin. Clones

got around a bit during the war. She probably had a lot more genetic relatives than

she'd first thought.

Fett crushed Mirta's fingers again and didn't make a sound.

The vet straightened up and opened a bottle of pungent-smelling liquid to clean

her hands. "Normally, I swat my patients across the rump and let them get on with

grazing. But seeing as it's you, I'll skip that and suggest

you take it easy for a day or so.

Expect a big bruise."

Fett gave her a silent nod of acknowledgment as she left, and fastened his

undershirt. Then he looked up at Mirta. "Say hello to your uncle Venku." He indicated

the man in the motley armor, who still hadn't acknowledged her. "Alias Kad'ika."

It was all making sense now. Kad'ika had to be the son of a clone trooper. There

must have been a lot of them out there, and she wondered how many of them had any

social graces or senses of humor, or if they all took after Ba'buir.

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"Just doing my bit for Mandalorian unity" Venku said

slipping his helmet back

on as if her close inspection was making him uncomfortable. "Wouldn't do for the

Mand'alor to snuff it just when we're on the rise again."

He leaned over Fett and put two fingers against the pulse in his neck. Mirta

expected her grandfather to flatten him for daring to lay hands on him, but he simply

looked at the assorted plates of beskar'gam with idle curiosity and tolerated the

examination.

"Your heart rate's up," Venku said. "Get some rest."

"Field medic."

"Yeah, they say I have a healing touch." Mirta found that hard to believe. Venku

straightened up. "Any problems-tell the folks at Cikartan's tapcaf in town. They'll

know how to contact me."

Venku made for the door. As he brushed past her, he stopped and tapped his

finger against the heart-of-fire dangling from her neck. He obviously never worried

about getting a punch in the face.

"Interesting," he said.

He was a chancer, a man who could obtain things-and obviously information as

well. It was worth a try.

"It's a heart-of-fire," she said. "It belonged to my grandmother. I need a full-

blooded Kiffar to help me read the memories imprinted

in it."

He paused for a few moments. "Mando'ade come from all kinds of places. If I

find anyone who can read the stone, I'll let you know." Then he was gone.

Orade nudged Beviin.

"Go on," Orade said. "Tell him. It'll make him happy-okay, happier. Happy

people heal faster."

Fett put his armor plates back on. "What's going to make me happy?"

Beviin had the beatific smile of a man who'd finished laying up stores for the

winter and just enjoyed a big meal. "Yomaget's got something to show you."

Fett grunted. He was the least sympathetic man Mando

Fett grunted. He was the least expressive man Mirta knew, but he seemed vaguely

disappointed. "He's got the Bes'uliik spaceworthy, has he?"

"Bang goes the surprise."

"It's the thought that counts." He stood up and was instantly transformed from her

sick Ba'buir into Boba Fett, ruthless and relentless. But he didn't stride out the door

right away. She took a guess that he was feeling the effects of the treatment and wasn't

going to admit it, not even in front of people who knew exactly what was wrong.

"Where is it?"

She gestured to the ceiling and offered him her arm.

Mirta was still looking for a reason not to hate Fett, and

she was ready to look

pretty deeply. She decided she could start by loving him for his sheer guts. Nothing

fazed him, nothing stopped him, and nothing made him feel sorry for himself. They

stood outside the barn and waited in silence. It looked like a tiny hut set against Slave I,

laid up in her horizontal mode nearby.

A low rumble interrupted the rural peace.

Fett looked up as a dull black wedge shot across the sky and vanished behind a

forested hill. Mirta lost it, but then it circled back again, came to a dead halt in midair

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about two hundred meters above them, and descended smoothly on humors. It landed

smoothly on burners. It landed

on its blunt tail section and then extended struts to tilt through ninety degrees and come

to rest horizontally like a conventional starfighter. The canopy lifted and Yomaget

climbed out, slid onto the ground, and kissed the matte fuselage.

"Cyar'ika," he said to the ship, running a tender hand over the skin. "I think I'm in

love."

"Nice," said Fett.

"Puts the uliik in Bes'uliik."

"Yeah, I can see it's a beast. What's different?"

"We applied the micronized beskar skin, Mand'alor. She's a toughened shabuir

now. Care to show her to the Verpine?"

"It'd get their attention."

"If they share their ultramesh technology with us, we might be able to lighten the

air frame and improve her top end in atmosphere. If we skin her completely in solid

beskar, she's going to be invulnerable, but heavy."

"We'll keep the heavy ones. Maybe the Verpine can come up with a better fuel

solution."

"Well, if you're not going to take her for a spin, I will," said Medrit. He scrambled

up onto the wing and eased himself into the cockpit, looking as if he would fill it.

"Shah a Mando-Verpine assault fighter. That'll cause

some sleepless nights on

Coruscant."

"If we can mine and process the ore fast enough."

Yomaget looked hopeful. "We could ask those helpful insectoid chaps to lend us

an orbital facility or two."

"I'll go see them," Fett said. "Got to think long-term on this. No point handing

over too much to Roche early in the game."

Medrit spent the next hour taking the prototype Bes'uliik through its paces over

the Keldabe countryside while the rest of them watched. Yomaget captured the

aerobatics on his holorecorder, looking satisfied.

"We'll be able to do this in a matter of days," Yomaget said.

"I might slip this hologram out to a few contacts," he said.

"We're not a modest

people, are we?"

"Remind them that most of our adult population can fly a fighter, too," Fett said.

"For starters."

He went back inside the barn. He didn't manage a smile, but Beviin turned to

Mirta and cocked his head. "Believe it or not, that's a happy man."

Maybe he was a better judge of mood than she was. She was relieved just to hear

Fett use the phrase long-term.

Times were changing. The rest of the galaxy might have been tearing itself apart,

but the Mandalore sector-which now informally

controlled Roche, if a protectorate

agreement counted—was a haven of optimism after a decade or more of grim

existence. That night, Mirta found the Oyu'baat tapcaf packed with new faces, and the

singing was raucous.

If Jacen Solo, her mother's murderer, had been roasting slowly over the Oyu'baat's

open fire instead of the side of nerf, Mirta might even have joined in.

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SENATE BUILDING, CORUSCANT

Jacen's official airspeeder brought him up to the main Senate entrance. He could

have entered the building by any number of more private
platforms, but he had no

platonists, but he had no

intention of sneaking in via the back doors; being seen counted for a lot, and he still

had his heroic image to protect.

A line of citizens waited outside the doors that admitted members of the public to

the viewing galleries. Some just wanted to watch the day's business, but there was a

small group who were clearly protesters. It wasn't just the FREE OMAS banner that

three of them were carrying among them. There was a taste of anger in the Force, vivid

despite the permanent background of fear and uncertainty.

"Drop me here," Jacen said. "I'll walk."

"They'll harass you, sir," said the Gran chauffeur. "I ought

to take you straight up

to your floor."

"They've got a right to see who's governing them." It wasn't as if they could cause

him any harm. "I find that talking to people generally clears up misunderstandings."

Jacen had expected at least one mass protest or a riot broken up by water cannon

and dispersal gas. GAG intelligence showed that Corellian agents still operating on

Coruscant were doing their best to make that happen. But the general willingness of the

population to accept the change of regime surprised him. The stock exchange had

suspended trading for a few hours, and some shares had bounced around: but the traffic

still flowed, the stores were full of food, HoloNet programming was uninterrupted, and

everyone was getting paid.

Unless you were Cal Omas or a civil liberties lawyer, the military junta was

temporary and benign. There was a war on, after all. It was to be expected.

I ought to write a study on this. How to take over the state: smile, look reluctant,

and keep the traffic flowing.

And it was just Coruscant. The rest of the GA worlds went on running their

planetary business as they saw fit, unmolested, and that meant there was no need to

stretch the fleet and the defense forces by deploying them to keep order on thousands

of other worlds-their own, in many cases. All Jacen and Niathal had to worry about

was Coruscant, because the political and strategic reality was that Coruscant. . . was the

GA . . . was Coruscant.

The rest of the Alliance is detail. I have its heart and mind.

"Good morning," Jacen said. The group of protesters stared at him with a

collective, slowly dawning oh-it's-really-him expression. Even a face that had been on

HNE as regularly as his took some recognizing out of context. He extended his hand to

them, and one man actually shook it. Most species responded well to placatory

courtesy. "I just wanted to reassure you that Master Omas will get a scrupulously fair

hearing. We've let him go home, too."

When folks were worked up for yelling and seemed to want to be dragged away

by CSF heavyweights, they were totally upended by having the object of their fury

listen to them. Jacen's patient smile met disoriented surprise. A couple of CSF officers

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began wandering across, probably expecting trouble, but Jacen dissuaded them with a

little Force influence and they stopped a few meters away to observe.

More important, though, was the HNE news droid trundling around the Senate

Plaza. There was always at least one on duty here, just hanging around to get stock

shots, but now it had an actual story. Jacen watched it approach in his peripheral vision.

"Doesn't matter how you dress it up," said the young woman holding one end of

the FREE OMAS banner. "The GA is being run now by the Supreme Commander and

the head of the secret police, and nobody voted for you."

Jacen managed an expression of slightly wounded innocence. "You're right, I

didn't run for office, which is why I won't remain joint Chief of State any longer than I

have to. Would you like to see something? Inside the building?"

The woman looked at him suspiciously. "There's always

a catch."

The news droid was right behind them now. Sometimes the Force placed things in

his grasp. Suddenly he realized that everything was being handed to him and all he had

to do was react, just as Lumiya had told him, and not analyze everything.

"Your choice," Jacen said. "I just want to show you the Chief of State's office.

Anyone else want to come along?"

The security guards weren't happy, but what Jacen wanted, Jacen got. He led a

straggling group of protesters, day visitors, and the HNE droid through the glittering

lobby and up in the turbolift to the floor of offices where the public was almost never

allowed, the seat of galactic government itself.

A few civil servants in the corridor did a double take but carried on about their

business. Niathal must have seen him come in on the security holocams, because she

was wandering around the lobby, clutching a couple of datapads. Jacen acknowledged

her with a smile and walked up to the carved double doors of the Chief of State's suite

of offices.

The doors were sealed

-taped shut. The bright yellow tape with the CSF logo and

the legend do not tamper was purely cosmetic, but it made the point far better than the

impregnable but invisible electronic lock.

"That's Chief Omas's office," Jacen said over the head of the HNE droid. He stood

back casually to let it get a better shot of him explaining earnestly to this random

sample of the electorate. "It's for the elected head of state. It stays sealed until someone

is elected to fill it. Neither I nor Admiral Niathal has moved in. That matters very much

to us."

The thing about Mon Cals was that you could never tell if they were rolling their

eyes or just taking notice. Niathal was probably rolling hers, though. Jacen could feel

her amusement at his expense.

The little crowd muttered and oohed and ahed. It was a

hole in him.

"Last time I saw anything that slick and oily," she said, "was when Ocean leaked

a whole lube reservoir over the aft weapons flat."

"Ah, but you were absolutely right to seal that office. Neither of us should have

it."

"I believe in sharing everything."

"As do I," Jacen said.

"So let's try to address the media jointly, shall we? No point looking like a

publicity addict, Jacen. Citizens might misunderstand your motives."

"I'm here to serve the galaxy," Jacen replied, and meant every word. "Never

underestimate the power of being pleasant."

"That's fine on Coruscant, but your charm doesn't travel well." Niathal beckoned

him to follow. "I have Senator G'Sil in my office, and the Senator for Murkhana, Nav

Ekhat. We've hit a small snag in our new policy."

Ekhat didn't look like a woman who'd had a restful night. She didn't wait for Jacen

to sit down before she launched into a tirade that had obviously been gathering steam

long before he and Niathal walked in.

"I understand you're concentrating forces in the Corellian and Bothan sectors," she

said, stabbing her finger at the holochart in the center of the meeting table. "Where

does that leave us?"

does that leave us:

"Explain your concerns," said Jacen.

"The new treaty between Roche and Mandalore."

"And you feel threatened by this."

"Given the state of our relations with Roche, yes. Are you aware that we've been

having a disagreement about export markets?"

G'Sil leaned forward. "Put another way, the Verpine are accusing Murkhana of

reverse-engineering some of their most lucrative weapons command systems,

breaching their patents, and selling cheap knockoffs to undermine their markets."

"Put another way, Verpine don't like healthy competition," said Ekhat. "Now

they've signed a deal with Mandalore for mutual aid and technical collaboration. It's the bugs-and-thugs show."

Jacen watched Niathal shift ever so slightly in her seat and felt her annoyance.

Anyone who dismissed Verpine as bugs probably also dismissed Mon Cals as fish.

"Are you expecting this alliance to threaten your security directly?" Jacen asked.

"Because if the Verpine were seriously annoyed, they have plenty of military hardware

to make their point without calling in Keldabe."

"Verpine might make the stuff," she said, "but they rarely use it in anger. The

Mandalorians, on the other hand, treat warfare as a national sport."

"But this is about Mandalorian iron." Niathal was working up to telling Ekhat that

Murkhana was on its own. She'd probably enjoy it after that bug comment, too. "The

Verpine want to produce enhanced armaments and vessels under license."

"No, they want Mandalorian protection, too."

"Why?" Jacen couldn't see Murkhana attacking Roche.

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"They're afraid the fighting on Kem Stor Ai will spill into their backyard, and

they're rich pickings that might prove too tempting for a system at war."

"I'm missing the connection."

"Mandalorian protection tends to be of the outreach

kind, Colonel. It's a short step

from turning out to repel the Kemi and malting a . . . disciplinary visit to us."

Niathal got up and walked around the table, looking at the holochart from various

angles. "And are you breaching the Verpine patents?"

"We don't think so," said the Senator. "But the products are very . . . similar."

"You see, I'm not sure we should commit troops to trade disputes. This war is

about the responsibility of member planets to commit military resources to common

defense. That's one reason why the former Chief of State is former-because he was

ready to concede part of that principle."

"As a member of the GA, we expect support when

attacked."

"Roche is a neutral world," Jacen pointed out. "If you were attacked, we'd have to

assess the situation, but I feel this has to be referred to the interplanetary civil courts

first."

"So you're saying we're on our own."

Jacen would play the nice officer today. Niathal was doing a fine job of being the

nasty one. "I'm saying that you should try to resolve this dispute by other means rather

than escalate straight to saber rattling. But . . ." He thought about the talk of a new

Mandalorian assault fighter. It was interesting enough on its own, but if it was a

... collaboration with the Yuuzhan Vang, the CA would have to ...

collaboration with the verpine, the GA needed to get an idea of what

it could do. He decided to disagree with Niathal. "But perhaps the presence of a

GA squadron and frigate might make Roche more willing to sit down and discuss the

matter again."

Niathal turned her head very slowly to stare at Jacen. He knew the risk he was

taking.

"If we have spare resources, then we'll consider it," she said.

"Roche warned us that it'll take direct action if we don't cease production of the

disputed products." Ekhat looked at all three of them pointedly in sequence as if

defying them to say the word no out loud. Then she stood and picked up her folio case.

"So sooner rather than later, please, or you'll lose another Rim world. And I don't mean

resignation."

G'Sil watched Ekhat stalk out, then shrugged. "So much for the Mandalorian

threat making the little planets rush to our protective arms, Cha."

"They did rush," Niathal said. "And that's the problem. If we're seen deploying a

Star Destroyer every time some member state has a local disagreement, we'll open the

floodgates, not that they're not starting to open already. Policy is to concentrate on

breaking the big boys who won't play by GA rules, or

we'll be putting out fires across

the galaxy for decades to come." Jacen braced for impact. "And, Colonel Solo, you will

not commit fleet resources like that without discussing the matter with me."

"I didn't commit anything. I just stated the obvious."

"And I didn't agree to it, either."

"Wouldn't it be useful to have an excuse to wander out to the Rim and take a look

at those new Mandalorian fighters?"

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"If they've built any yet."

"I say commit a couple of nights if we can't spare a complete squadron. If we

move one of the frigates out from Bothan space, that'll

bring it within range of

Murkhana, at a stretch."

"Are you sure you want to provoke Mandalore?" G'Sil asked. "It's got that extra

personal dimension now, and the last thing we need is Fett making this a vendetta

against the rest of the GA. His neutrality has been a bonus, to be honest."

"I'm well aware that Fett has neither gone away nor forgotten his daughter," Jacen

said. "But he's far too smart to waste his troops to fight a personal feud."

Mandalore was always a problem: always had been, always would be. It wasn't

big enough to be a galactic threat, but wasn't small enough to dismiss-or remove.

Tough on chaos, and the causes of chaos.

It was being the third element in a universe of pairs that made Mandalorians

disruptive. The universe was binary, bipolar, ruled by the balance between opposites,

whether that was dark and light or action and reaction. It couldn't accommodate that

extra pole and remain orderly. Mandalorians were an inherently destabilizing influence.

"Are you still with us, Jacen?" G'Sil asked. "You look distracted."

"Just wishing the Mandalorians would go away."

"Pay them to stay at home," said Niathal, gathering up her data-pads to leave.

"That's the permanent solution. As long as they have the occasional therapeutic fight to

work off their aggression, they'll be happy. And that's just the females." She headed for

the door. "I have fleet commanders to brief. Shame we can't approach Fett to see if he's

changed his mind about staying out of the fighting."

"Isn't paying them not to fight tantamount to an insult to their honor?" Jacen

asked.

"I think you're getting them mixed up with some other warmongering savages.

They'd see it as protection money. They're pragmatists."

"If only all wars had such simple economic solutions."

G'Sil smiled ruefully. "Well, they've mostly got economic causes."

"Not this one," Jacen said. "It's about order. About

NOT THIS ONE," JACEN SAID. "IT'S ABOUT ORDER. ABOUT responsibility."

Niathal and G'Sil both concealed their reactions at the same time and said nothing.

He could tell they thought he was becoming eccentric, or perhaps that he hadn't quite

got the hang of high-level politics. Either way, their reaction said that he wasn't playing

the same game as them, and they were right.

But it was all going too smoothly. No riots, no outcry except for some of the

minority media and the usual suspects in the legal and liberties community, but apart

from endless media analysis of Omas's time in office-almost as if he'd died-the vast

majority of Coruscanti had treated it like a fall from grace instead of a military coup.

Having a Jedi on board did seem to make the regime change appear much more

wholesome in public opinion.

"I'd expected to be storming barricades this week," Jacen said. "What did we do

right?"

"We didn't suspend any normality," said G'Sil, making interesting use of we.

"Every other politician remained in place. Just the people who administer it at the top

level changed."

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Order. It's all about order. This is the microcosm of the entire galaxy; the dry run

for how my rule will be in due course. Quiet normality for

for how my fate will be in the course. Quiet normally for the majority.

But Jacen was worried that it might prove to be the lull before the storm. He

thought of Tenel Ka and Allana, and the impulse to visit them while he still could was

overwhelming. Lumiya said he had to listen to those voices, and not think sensible

things like mundane beings did.

"I need forty-eight hours out of the office," he said. "To catch up on things. Can I

trust you two not to oust me while I'm away?"

Niathal didn't seem amused. "You'll return to find Boba Fett sitting in your office,

but if you have to go . . . you must."

"I trust you implicitly," he said. He trusted her not to be

stupid, at least. Lumiya

could keep a watchful eye on the situation while he made the trip to Hapes.

Boba Fett. That was an ax still waiting to fall, and if it didn't keep him awake at

night, he was certainly conscious that Fett's continued lack of bloody revenge was

unsettling. Jacen put the Mandalorians on the list of things for which he'd find a

solution when he was established as a Sith Lord. Vader had had the measure of them in

his day. Jacen would, as well.

That, too, was in his destiny.

LUMINOUS GARDENS SPA, DRALL,
CORELLIAN SYSTEM

So still no new Prime Minister?" Mara asked

"You're taking a big risk coming

here," said Leia. "No, there's a triumvirate of the three main party leaders running

Corellia until they find a new target-sorry, I mean candidate. Two dead inside a few

months tends to dampen the applicants' enthusiasm."

"Well, we score for efficiency. At least we can run the GA on two."

"How very Sith."

Mara nearly choked. It wasn't funny at all. Did Leia know something?

"Mara, are you okay?"

"I think my encounter with Lumiya made me allergic to the word." With a scarf

around her hair, Mara was just another middle-aged

female human enjoying the resort

with a friend. The two walked around the colonnade of exclusive stores and beauty

salons, and Mara still found it disconcerting that anyone could be leading a normal life

when hers-and that of so many others-was caught up in the turmoil of war.

Normality seemed somehow obscene. "I had to see you face-to-face. You don't want

Jacen to arrest you for setting foot on Coruscant, and you know he would. Where's

Han?"

"He's gone on an errand with Lando. Where's Luke? Seeing as it's just us girls

talking, I smell a delicate problem."

There was no point tiptoeing around it. Mara had as

There was no point arguing about it. There was as much evidence as she needed,

but this was Leia's son under discussion. Leia had already lost Anakin. Mara had to be

absolutely, completely certain. Ninety-nine percent sure wasn't good enough.

"Jacen," she said.

"Always is."

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"I don't know how to say this to you."

"Try blurting."

"He's out of control. I mean badly out of control."

"Uh-huh. I admit it's challenging to have to keep tabs on your only son by

watching the news coverage of his latest power grab."

"How's Han taking it?"

"Not well, to say the least. He veers between wanting to disown him again and

talking about getting together to talk him around. You know, sometimes I think it's

going to kill him."

Mara found that it wasn't certainty of Jacen's guilt she was looking for: it was any

excuse to say that it was all Lumiya's doing, and that by removing her, Jacen could be

brought back to his old self.

Whatever had happened to Jacen over the years-and that five-year "sabbatical"

was still largely a blank sheet-there seemed nothing of that old self left to recover.

If this wasn't my nephew, and Leia's son, would I still be trying to find a reason

not to do something about him?

No.

"You sure you're feeling okay, Mara?"

Leia was one of the few people Mara had ever truly admired. She was pretty well

the only person other than Luke who Mara knew would never fall apart, however bad

things got. But she still couldn't bring herself to sit Leia down and give her the full

catalog of Jacen's crimes.

Yes, they were crimes. There was no other word for it.

"I'm going to ask you something, Leia, and if you never want to speak to me again

afterward, I'll understand."

"This isn't going to end in a punch line, is it? You're serious."

"You have no idea how serious."

"Then stop dragging it out."

"Okay, do you think Jacen is susceptible enough to be controlled by Lumiya?"

I should have put the list to her first. I should have told her about Nelani, and

making Ben kill Gejjen, and his little chats with his Sith buddy, and the fact that he

seems to think my son is expendable.

And apprentice-what kind of apprentice would Lumiya be talking about? Mara

faced the inevitable and hated herself for refusing to see it

earlier.

"No," Leia said at last. "He's stubborn and he's his own man. She could make the

difference between him doing something and hesitating, but she could never make him

act totally against his will. I've had to come to terms with that, but he's still my boy, and

I still love him."

It was the last thing Mara wanted to hear. She wanted to hear that Jacen was a kid

who went along with the others, who got into bad company but was a good boy at

heart. She wanted a reason to go after evil Lumiya and rescue deluded Jacen, because

that was easy, black and white, palatable.

Wrong.

If it hadn't been happening within her own family, she'd never have hesitated. For

a moment, she wondered if she was set on this-this didn't have a name yet, not a

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word, but she knew what this was-because it was her own son at most risk. My son or

yours. It could have been selfish maternal priority, just using the rest of Jacen's actions

to justify lashing out to save her child.

She tried to imagine Ben dead, and how she'd feel then. She could have stopped

Palpatine, and didn't. History had taught her a lesson about hindsight, and it wouldn't

give her a second chance; what was happening to Ben

would happen to other people's

sons, too.

"Mara, I think you should have spent a few days in bed after the fight with

Lumiya," said Leia, and slipped her arm through hers.

"You're not yourself at all. Let's

find a stupidly expensive restaurant and forget the fat content. Take it easy for a few

hours. Because I can't run on adrenaline and anxiety twenty-four hours a day like you

seem to."

Leia, I'm so sorry.

I'm going to have to stop Jacen. I have to. I'm going to have to kill your son,

because that's the only way of stopping him now.

"Okay, but my treat."

"You're on."

Part of Mara was appalled that she could even think it, and part was telling her

that this was what happened when she forgot that Force-users' highs and lows weren't

just family spats, but dynastic battles that could shake the whole galaxy. They didn't

have the luxury of small stakes.

"I like the Fountain," Leia said. "They do a dessert called the Fruit Mountain.

Takes two hungry women to tackle one."

"Sounds good."

It was surreal. They sat on opposite sides of the table, blue-white diya wood set

with iridescent transparent tableware, and a pyramid of multicolored fruit held together by golden spun sugar and dusted with real citrus-

flavored snow was placed between them. There was a point at which Mara's eyes met

Leia's as they attacked the dessert with a spoon each, and it would be a frozen moment

of horror in Mara's mind forever: Leia smiled, the look in her eyes pure compassion,

and Mara knew that she couldn't see the truth behind hers. She felt like dirt. She hated

herself.

Ton need to know there's nothing else, absolutely nothing, that you can do to save

Jacen.

Mara needed to confront him one last time. If anyone could stop him at the

brink-the final one, anyway-then it was her, because she'd crossed from the other

direction. She didn't think it would work, but she owed it to Leia-and Han.

She was planning to take Jacen from them, and they'd already lost Anakin. There

was only so much pain a family could take.

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chapter sixteen

The government of Bothawui is prepared to pay twenty million credits per month

for the exclusive services of a Mandalorian assault fleet with infantry. We would also

be greatly interested in acquiring a squadron of Bes'uliik

assault fighters and would be

prepared to pay a premium to have exclusive purchase rights to this craft.

-Formal offer to the government of Mandalore

SENATE LOBBY, CORUSCANT

"There you are," said Mara, ambushing Jacen as he stepped out of the turbolift.

"Glad I caught you." He registered genuine surprise, and that gave her more satisfaction

than he'd ever know. No, he hadn't felt her presence when it mattered. Thank you, Ben.

Nice trick.

"Hi, Aunt Mara. What can I do for you?" Jacen tried to do that act of dithering on

the spot, the carefully calculated body language that said

he really did want to stay and

talk, but duty was dragging him away. What an actor. She could act, too, but this

wasn't the time for it. "I'd love to catch up over a drink," he said, "but it's late and I've

got an appointment first thing tomorrow. Can we fix a time for when I'm free? Say in a

couple of days?"

"It won't take long, Jacen. It needs to be now."

Now it was her turn to take over the choreography, stepping in his way so that if

he wanted to pass, he'd have to make a deliberate and rejecting sidestep. And Jacen

wouldn't be that blatant, not to her. It would make her suspicious.

Too late. You've already done that, Jacen. But for Leia's

sake, for Han's sake, I

have to try this.

"Okay," he said.

There was something deeply unsettling about a Force-user-about anyone,

really-who gave off no Force presence. It was like standing next to someone who

wasn't breathing and had no pulse, a little too close to death for Mara's liking. It also

pressed all those paranoid and defensive buttons, like someone whispering behind his

hand in someone else's presence. It said guilty, unnatural, and secret. If the Yuuzhan

Vong had been the kindest and sweetest beings in the universe, Mara knew she would

have mistrusted them anyway because they didn't show up in the Force as being alive and there.

She steered Jacen over to an alcove. Psychologically, he might have felt more

vulnerable being confronted with his acts in the middle of the lobby, where everyone

could hear and see them. On the other hand, the alcove could make him feel cornered if

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she maneuvered him to stand with his back to the wall. Either way, she was going to

get a reaction out of him. She couldn't outstrip his Force powers, but the tricks of flesh

and blood put her on a more level playing field.

"You don't fool me," she said. "Not any longer, anyway."

He tried his baffled-little-boy grin. "What am I supposed to have done?"

"Remember what I was?"

"You've lost me, Aunt Mara . . ."

"This is about Lumiya. It stops here and now. You've turned into something vile,

and you're too smart to be conned into that even by her. Beyond dark. See, I've been

both sides, and I know."

"Well, I don't know what you mean. I really don't."

"Wrong answer. I'll deal with Lumiya in due course, but I know what you've been

doing. I don't buy the excuses that your poor parents make for you every kriffing time.

So I'm going to set you a test."

So I'm going to set you a test.

"Mara, are you okay? You're not well, are you?"

"Don't even think about trying that one. If you acknowledge the terrible things

you've done, and whatever's left of Leia's son is still functioning, then come with me

right now to the Temple. We'll get the whole Council together and we'll deprogram

you."

Jacen put his hands in his pockets and looked down at the floor. He still had that

silly grin on his face, but it was fading a little around the eyes.

"Mara," he said, with an exaggerated softness that made her want to punch him.

"Mara, I think you're forgetting that I'm joint Chief of

State now, and I don't have time

for this emotional outpouring, because whatever Ben's been telling you-

He was digging himself deeper into the pit. She'd really hoped he'd step back, and

she knew she was just as stupid for hoping as she'd been for turning a blind eye to his

darkness in the first place.

"There's no Ben in this, Jacen." She stopped her finger a fraction short of jabbing

him in the chest. "Leave Ben out of it. If you so much as breathe on him, I'll skin you

alive, and that's not a euphemism. Last chance. Drop this Sith garbage now, or take

what's coming."

There. She'd said it. Sith. Jacen's grin had vanished

there. She'd said it. Still, Jacen's grin had vanished completely, and he looked like

a total stranger. The Emperor had had yellow eyes, she recalled; they said he'd once

had a kindly face with normal blue ones, but if Jacen's turned yellow, he couldn't

possibly have looked any more alien to her than he did right then. There was nothing

supernatural about his ambition, callousness, and arrogance.

"Good night, Aunt Mara," he said, and walked away.

She didn't watch him go. She didn't need to.

This is all your fault, girl. You should have listened to Luke. He was never fooled

by all that sophistry, and you stopped him dealing with it because you couldn't deal

with a teenage boy like any mom has to. The least you can do is clean up this sewer yourself.

"Okay, buddy," she said, not caring if a couple of Bith Senators were staring at her. "Okay."

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There were some things she couldn't walk away from, even though they'd tear her family apart. It was better torn than destroyed, because in time it would heal. Jacen was going to die.

JACEN SOLO'S APARTMENT BUILDING,
CORUSCANT

Lumiya had never had any problem with biding her time, but Jacen was becoming

but Jacen was becoming

too caught up in the administrative tedium of his new toy-
the Galactic Alliance-for

her comfort. And her instinct told her that the Force was
restless for change.

It was late, past midnight, and he still wasn't back.

He's flesh. There's something about being wholly flesh
and blood that distracts

you from the task, and the more flesh you sacrifice, the
less heir to its limits you

become. But I can't achieve what he can. The perfect
balance: strength driven by

passion but not confined by sentimentality.

Lumiya waited outside Jacen's apartment building, taking
in the glittering night

and feeling the imminence of upheaval like the oppressive

air before a violent storm.

His accession to Sith Lord had to happen very soon. The momentum of events,

and the ease with which they'd fallen into place, pointed to the gathering pace of the

fulfillment of the tassel prophecies.

He will immortalize his love.

Lumiya no longer spent frustrating hours contemplating the meaning. It would

happen, and it would become clear.

Jacen didn't appear as she'd expected. He was hard to locate, a habitual hider in

the Force, so she went up to the apartment, bypassed his security locks, and sat down to

wait for him. It was important that he stayed focused on the spiritual side of his

progression and left the material aspect to Niathal. When he had achieved his destiny,

then he could return to the military arena with skills beyond Niathal's, and change the

course of the war.

First things first.

She almost expected to see Ben Skywalker come through the doors. Some of his

clothing and possessions were still in the apartment, but he'd gone. He was too soft to

stay the course, just as she'd always said; if he needed time off to weep and recover

every time he carried out a necessary and unpleasant task, he'd proven he was fit to be

the sacrifice Jacen would make, and too dangerously

weak to be his apprentice. A Sith

Lord could only function with a strong apprentice. Like a good government, a Sith

needed a strong opposition to keep him sharp.

Eventually the doors opened and Jacen stood in the hallway, looking as if he

hadn't wanted to find her there. He had a paper-wrapped package under one arm, and

some disturbance clung to him as if he'd had a fight or an accident.

"Has anything happened?" she asked.

"Oh, a disagreement with Mara about. . . Ben. Spare me overprotective mothers."

"Well, she might have a point. The time's coming."

"You keep saying that." Jacen walked past her and went into his bedroom. She

heard him opening doors and drawers as if he was in a hurry. "I'm anticipating events

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like a madman and looking for signs everywhere. And nothing's happening, unless you

count getting rid of both Gejjen and Omas. I think that's climactic enough for one

week, don't you?"

"Mundane politics."

"Maybe. Look, I've covered a lot of ground these last few weeks, and grasped

every opportunity I've had to force things into fruition." The banging and scraping of

closets gave way to rustling fabric, and when Jacen emerged he was carrying a small

holdall. "I want some solitude to think. Keep an eye on Niathal while I'm gone."

Jacen didn't need solitude. He was quite capable of shutting out the world anytime

he wanted to. The man could meditate in the middle of a hurricane. He wasn't running

away; he was going in pursuit of something.

"How long?" Lumiya asked, immediately ready to calculate the maximum

distance he could travel in the time available.

"Twenty-four hours, possibly forty-eight. If I stay away any longer, I don't think

Niathal will misbehave, but I think Senator G'Sil might get ideas. That third element

where only two can exist, you know?"

"I understand," she said.

Jacen had done this before. He would vanish for short periods, confide in nobody,

and come back with a sense of melancholy about him and a little of his dark energy

diminished. Lumiya had put it down

to natural apprehension about the size of the task he had ahead of him, and she'd

tolerated it, but he couldn't afford to be running off again at this critical stage.

And if Jacen was in trouble, he'd never ask for help.

It was for his own good, as well as the galaxy's. This time, it was important for her

to find out what was pulling him away just as he was on the brink of making everything

happen. She'd follow him. She had to keep his path clear

happen. She'd follow him. She had to keep his pain clear now, and remove all distractions.

"Will you have access to HNE where you're going, or do you want me to brief you on your return?"

"I don't want to be contacted," he said. "If something major happens, I'll know.

Just mind the shop."

The doors closed behind him. Lumiya wandered into the bedroom to see if he'd

left the package he'd been clutching under his arm. There was nothing on the bed, and

when she paused to feel the tiny disturbances that showed her where objects might have

been hidden, there was no trace of anything beyond

items taken: just a change of

clothing, and the small necessities men needed. Jacen seemed to like plain antiseptic

soap, a discovery that she found both touching and funny; Jacen was moving ever

closer to self-denial. He didn't have to indulge that nasty Jedi habit. She'd have to help

him be a little kinder to himself when he'd made his transition.

The apartment was more austere than it had been a few months before. Every time

she came here, there was one less comfort and fewer personal touches than the last.

There were now no holosimages of family and friends to be seen. He hadn't even stuffed

them into a cupboard to avoid their accusing glances that

asked what had happened to

good old Jacen.

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But it wasn't altogether a bad sign. Perhaps he was washing away the old Jacen

and preparing for the one he would become. So if he needed to do that by wearing

sackcloth and brushing his teeth with salt, that was fine. She shut off the lights, checked

that the apartment was secure, and made her way out of the apartment building to the

walkways of Coruscant.

She slipped through the back alley and into the disused warehouse where she'd

hidden the Sith meditation sphere. Ben Skywalker did have his uses; even insects had a

vital role in the ecology. The ship would come into its own now.

Lumiya might not have been able to find Jacen when he vanished into the Force,

but the ancient red sphere somehow could. She could feel its curiosity and even a little

excitement. It wanted to be useful again, to serve. It extruded its boarding ramp without

even being asked.

Follow Jacen Solo, she thought, and pictured him in her mind so that the sphere

didn't get distracted by Ben. It seemed fascinated by the boy. Follow the Sith-Lord-to-be.

He was going to succeed.

BEVIIN-VASUR FARM, MANDALORE

The hard red soil was baked solid like pottery clay, and it shattered at the first

blow of his vibroshovel. Fett stared at a stark white tracery of bones beneath,

highlighted by the harsh sun.

"Why did you leave me here, son?" asked Jango Fett. Where was he? There was

no face, nothing at all. But the voice was right there. "I've been waiting."

"Where are you, Dad? I can't find you."

"I waited . . ."

"Where are you?" Fett was shouting for his father, but his voice was a kid's and

the hands he could see clutching the shovel were an old man's, veined and spotted.

Panic and desperation nearly choked him. "Dad, I can't see you." He started tearing

aside the hard dirt, and the gritty particles jammed painfully under his fingernails. He

kept digging, sobbing. "Where are you?"

Fett woke with a start. His heart was pounding; sweat prickled on his back. Then

it faded and he was looking at the chrono on the far wall. In the weeks since he'd

brought his father's remains back to Mandalore, he'd had that nightmare far too often.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and tested his weight on them, waiting for

the pain to start gnawing at the joints.

It wasn't so bad. In fact, he just felt a little stiff around his lower back, as if he'd

been digging. Maybe he'd acted out that nightmare.

He bounced on his heels a few times to see what happened. There was no pain. He

didn't even feel that nausea that had been so routine, he'd forgotten what it felt like to

wake up without it.

Apart from running a temperature, he felt better than he had in days-months, in

fact. He was alive. He wouldn't believe he was in the clear until the nerf-doctor came

back with the test results, but he knew something fundamental had changed.

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So you didn't poison me, Jaing.

He went to the refresher to shower, if a torrent of cold

water from an overhead

cistern could be called that, and shaved with an ancient fixed blade that nicked his chin.

Where the Sarlacc's acid hadn't left smooth, glossy scar tissue, there was still stubble to

tackle, and these days most of it was pure white and hard to see. He shaved twice a day

anyway. These were the unguarded, naked times when he allowed himself to think of

Ailyn and other painful things, because he had to look himself in the eye, and he wasn't

a liar. Lying wasn't just bad; it was stupid. Lying to yourself was the most stupid thing

of all.

And now that he wasn't so preoccupied with his own death, he could think about

the deaths of others. There was a lot of unfinished business. He'd start with Ailyn.

She was a stranger when I opened that body bag. A middle-aged woman. Not

lovely like her mother. Old before her time, exhausted, dead. And still my baby, my

little girl. I don't care if you tried to kill me. I really don't.

Killing was his trade. He didn't enjoy it, and he didn't dread it. The only person

whose death he knew would make him feel good and not just competent was Jacen

Solo.

Better that you rot than die. I can wait. Thanks for motivating me to survive.

I'm back.

Fett checked his face in the mirror for missed beard, double-checked with his

fingertips, then lowered his helmet over his head. The world became sharp and fully

comprehensible again with all the extra senses built into his armor. At a time when

other men had failing eyesight and unreliable hearing, Fett could see through solid

walls and eavesdrop kilometers away. There was a lot to be said for smart tech. He

flexed his fingers in his gauntlets, finally feeling complete and girded against the

world.

Yes, I really am back.

He rode the speeder bike into Keldabe and hammered on the doors of the vet's

surgery. She had her name on a durasteel plate: HAYCA MEKKET.

A man leaned out of the open upper window, looking bleary-eyed, and stared

down at Fett. He disappeared again. "Sweetness," he bellowed. "It's your special

patient."

The vet appeared at the window. "I suppose I've got to open early, especially for

you."

"Haven't you got any letters after your name?"

"Nerfs can't read. Why bother?"

"Got my results?"

"Yeah."

"A..."

"And?"

"The cell degeneration's stopped. But the lab tech over on Dawn said we shouldn't

breed from you." Somehow she was easier to deal with than Beluine. "You know that

needle was for banthas?"

"Felt like it."

"You're a hard man, Fett. I'm glad you're not dead."

"How much do I owe you?"

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"A quilt. A nice, thick red one."

Fett went back to Slave I and caught up with the news. Murkhana and Roche were

heading for a showdown: it was a good opportunity to show what a single Bes'uliik

could do, if the Verpine wanted to invoke the treaty.

Fierfek, I did it again. I'm going to live.

If nothing else went wrong, he'd have another thirty years, maybe more. Most

people would have been overjoyed at the reprieve. But Fett found he was actually glad

that he'd come so close to death again, because it had a way of sharpening him up and

making him think harder. He liked the risk; he liked beating the odds.

I suppose I should tell Mirta.

Now he felt he could ask her what Ailyn had taught her over the years to make her

hate him so much. What he really wanted to know, though, was where Ailyn had

learned her hatred. Most kids from divorces didn't pursue a homicidal feud across half a galaxy.

But it could wait an hour or so while he had a decent breakfast.

He'd enjoy it today. He was going to live.

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chapter seventeen

I find it interesting that Taun We has never held it against Fett for attacking

Kamino. Either he's her favorite unfinished project, or there's something else we don't know.

-Jaing Skirata, musing on the motives of Kaminoans

ION: SLEVIN'S APARTMENT DOPT QUARTER

LOIN SHEVU'S APARTMENT, FORT QUARTER, CORUSCANT

"It's really kind of you to put me up, sir." Ben tried to take up as little room as

possible on Captain Shevu's sofa. It wasn't just awkwardness about intruding on

someone's privacy; Ben found himself trying to hide-not in the Force, but from it.

Ideally, he'd have gone home with Mom, but that meant Dad, too, and he simply

couldn't face him yet.

"You're not really afraid of your dad, are you?" Shevu handed him a plate of

breadsticks filled with fruit preserves, which was a weird

combination but he seemed to leave the proper cooking to his girlfriend. "He

seems such a nice guy."

"He is," said Ben. "But did you ever think your parents knew everything you were

thinking, and everything you'd done wrong, just by looking at you?"

"All the time."

"Jedi parents really can-well, nearly."

Shevu's opinion of Jacen showed on his face now that he was off-duty. "I think

Master Skywalker would be angry with the person who made you do it, not you."

"Oh, he's angry enough with Jacen."

"Sorry, I shouldn't put you on the spot about your family. It's not fair. Forget I

said it."

"I think I did the right thing for the wrong reasons."

"Well, beats doing the wrong thing for the right reasons-classic excuse, that one.

I was a cop. I know . . ."

"Do you want to stay in the GAG?"

"I miss CSF, actually. I miss catching real criminals and showing tourists the way

to the Rotunda." He wandered into the kitchen, and there was a banging and clattering

of dishes. He came back with a glass of juice and drank it in two gulps. "You sure

you're all right?"

"Oh, yeah. Look, I'll be out of your way as soon as I can."

"No rush. Shula thinks it's great that you wash the

dishes."

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Shevu's girlfriend said he was a "nice polite boy." Ben thought that providing a

safe haven for him was worth help with the chores, at the very least. "I can Force-dry

them, too."

Shevu laughed and handed him the remote control for the lights. Ben got the

feeling that Shevu was happier keeping an eye on him in the aftermath of the

assassination because he didn't approve of the Jedi habit of letting "children" carry

weapons and fight. As far as he was concerned, Ben shouldn't have been serving in the

front lines before he was at least eighteen. He was iust

too polite to say that he thought

Jedi made bad parents.

Poor Mom.

Ben slept. He had a few odd dreams about Lekauf that woke him up, and the grief

when he woke up properly and remembered his comrade was dead was painful. He lay

wondering about Lekauf's folks, and how they were coping, and then he thought he

drifted off again because he could hear

-no, he could feel a voice in his head asking

where he was.

He sat up. He knew he was fully awake, because he could see the environment-

central light on the wall, twinkling faint red every ten

control light on the wall, winking faint red every ten seconds. It took him a while to

work out why he knew the voice but couldn't put a face to it when he shut his eyes

again.

It was the Sith ship. He didn't know where it was, but it was calling him. It wanted

to know where he was.

Sith sphere, color orange, no index number, last known registered owner:

Lumiya. Ben decided to treat it like a stolen speeder, the way Shevu would. I owe Jacen

this. He'd never have done these things without Lumiya twisting his mind. Shows he's

not half as clever as he thinks he is.

Mom would probably try to talk him out of it. But they'd

reached an

understanding now that he had to do things his own way, because she couldn't expect

anything else from him, given his pedigree.

Ben pulled on his clothes, left a scribbled flimsi note for Shevu, and set off for the

GAG compound to liberate an unmarked long-range speeder.

The nice thing about being the secret police was that provided you signed out the

kit, nobody asked you what you planned to do with it. And it was legitimate police

business to catch criminals.

It was only when he fumbled in his pocket for his ID that he realized he'd left his

sketchbook at Shevu's. He hoped he wouldn't need his

videobattle at Shrivus. He hoped he wouldn't need his mom's luck tonight.

SKYWALKERS' APARTMENT, CORUSCANT

Luke was asleep when Mara got back, and she was relieved. It saved a lot of

awkward questions. She peered through the doors, counted the seconds between

rasping snores, and decided he was out cold. Good. She slipped past the bed and

selected her favorite working clothes: dark gray fatigues with plenty of pockets for

storing small weapons and ammo. She had no idea how long it would take to run Jacen

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to ground, so she opted to pack for a mission-as much as she could cram into her

backpack.

I've got to stick on his tail now. I've got to strike when I can.

She could track Lumiya, and he was still in touch with her. If she hung around

Lumiya, then she'd eventually get Jacen where she wanted him-away from the

genteel, constitutional way of doing things on Coruscant. Jacen had said he had an

appointment, too, and while it might have been another of his lies, the chances were

that he'd want to tell Lumiya that Mara was on to them.

I'll save you the trouble.

She made a conscious effort not to see Leia's face in her mind's eye, and somehow

she'd erased poor Han from this altogether. It wasn't that

she'd erased poor Han from this altogether. It wasn't that fathers' feelings didn't matter,

but she had a better idea of the pain Leia would go through; however old kids got, the

memory of them as newborns never faded.

It might be true for dads, as well. But Mara only knew what a mother felt, and that

was bad enough.

She checked her datapad for the transponder trace. Ben's showed he was still at

Shevu's, and so he was one factor she didn't have to worry about. Lumiya's transponder

indicated she was heading for the Perlemian node just off Coruscant. If Jacen wasn't

with her, Mara thought, she might well get a lead to one of her bolt-holes; in the

assassination business, every scrap of data on a target's habits and movements was

valuable. It would be worth the journey, and the technician at the base was used to Jedi

booking out flight time in StealthXs. She didn't have to fill out any forms that said her

mission was to kill the joint Chief of State.

Mara closed the inner doors to keep the light in the hallway from waking Luke,

and paused at the apartment's front entrance. Okay, I'll risk it. If he wakes up, though . .

. it'll be another argument.

She put down her pack and tiptoed back into the bedroom, leaned over Luke-still

snoring like a turbosaw-and kissed his forehead as lightly as she could. He grunted.

"Sorry I never spotted it," she mouthed at him. "But better late than never."

Luke grunted again, and his eyelids twitched. Mara debated whether to give him a

little Force-touch deep in his mind and see if she could get him to smile in his sleep,

but decided she was pushing her luck, and Jacen probably had a head start on her.

Lumiya definitely did.

Mara paused at the doors and left a flimsi note stuck on them.

Gone hunting for a few days. Don't be mad at me, farmboy . . .

There was no need to say who the quarry was. She'd have a hard enough time

explaining when she returned.

SITH MEDITATION SPHERE, PERLEMIAN TRADE ROUTE

Hush," Lumiya said aloud. "I have no idea if he can hear you." The meditation

sphere had developed an annoying habit of asking her questions. It wanted to know

why there were so few. Lumiya wasn't sure where to begin with such a vague question.

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The ship had been buried on Ziost for more time than it wanted to remember, it told

her, and now it was curious to know where all the dark ones had gone.

"It's a long story," Lumiya said. "We haven't been in the ascendant for a long

time. Even Solo will change all that."

time. Jacen Solo will change all that.

What about the others?

"Oh, Alema?"

She comes and goes, broken, but sometimes very happy.

It was a good description of Alema's almost bipolar
moods-murderous, bitter

obsession punctuated by highs of . . . murderous
triumphant obsession. The sphere was

very attuned to feelings, it seemed. Maybe it could sense
darkness anywhere, like a

homing beacon, so that it could go to the aid of Sith in
difficulty. "I told her to tail

Jacen, but I should have known better than to rely on a
psychiatric case. But who else is

there? Apart from me, that is."

Plenty of little darknesses. The two with my flame.

Lumiya repeated it to herself. Flame. "Ahh . . . red hair? Mara Jade Skywalker.

She was the Emperor's Hand, an agent for the dark side, just like me. The boy is her

son."

You darknesses should never fight. So few of you. I stopped her fighting.

"You certainly did." It was fascinating that the ship could still sense the dark side

in Mara, even though she'd abandoned her roots. But to taste it in Ben, too ... it might

have been in his genes, or perhaps the ship was reacting to his new career as a state

assassin. Like mother, like son; Lumiya almost thought she'd written off Ben too soon.

"Do you sense dark ones near?"

The broken one is looking for the Lord-to-be.

"If she looks as if she's going to interfere, remove her-dark or not." Lumiya had

told Alema to track Jacen, but now wasn't the best time for Alema to interfere. "Jacen

Solo is our priority."

The ship went quiet. It was impossible to get an accurate sense of speed in a

vessel with no instruments in hyperspace, but she could measure the duration of the

journey on her chrono, and the ship could tell her where its equivalent location was in

realspace.

Past Arkania. Past Chazwa.

Where was Jacen going? Not Ziost, unless he was taking an extraordinary route.

He'd be brushing the Roche sector, if he dropped out of hyperspace, and for a moment

she wondered if he was simply panicking about the possibility of the Roche-

Mandalorian arms deal turning the war in the Confederation's favor, and going to the

Verpine to undermine the pact: but that was routine work for minions, for his admirals

and agents, and she'd be annoyed if he was wasting his energies on that.

He leaves hyperspace, the ship said at last.

"Where is he?"

Hapes Cluster.

"Follow him."

Perhaps he was going to enlist the Queen Mother's help. The Verpine seemed to

be troubling him; that meant Lumiya hadn't heard the full story about the arms deal.

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"This is beneath you, Jacen." She sighed. "Priorities. You really can't delegate,

can you? That's one thing that your grandfather could do."

Jacen was heading for Hapes itself. Lumiya encouraged the Sith sphere to leave

more distance between them by imagining a cord stretching to a hair's thickness.

Eventually Jacen reached the edge of the Hapans' security area, and slipped through.

He lands. He has an entry code.

Lumiya debated whether to use the code to follow him more closely, then decided

against it. She didn't know if that would attract attention. "Maintain position until he

leaves."

She decided to sit it out, and hoped she wasn't misjudging the situation and that

Niathal and G'Sil weren't now declaring the Glorious Third Republic or some such

nonsense. The trouble with the small people was that they often left little in the Force

for her to feel at this distance, and Coruscant's citizens were so passive and compliant

that there would be no great disturbance for her to detect even if Niatfial declared

marital law in Jacen's absence. It was nothing that couldn't be put right on her return,

but she'd have to explain why she'd been goofing off as Ben might call it, and Jacen

would become petulant and uncooperative.

Jacen's like a moody teenager at the moment. When he makes the transition to

Sith Lord, he'll settle down fast.

And she'd be no more use to him after she found him a replacement for Ben

Skywalker. Lumiya accepted that her days were numbered.

She lost herself in meditation, wondering who might be Jacen's apprentice to

come, when an explosion of feeling shook her as if she'd

been grabbed by the shoulders

and kissed by a total stranger. The Sith sphere reacted, too, a great soaring excitement

that seemed to bounce between her and the ship's bulkheads.

"What's happening? Ship? What is it?"

But she already knew: it was Jacen, slipping out of his permanently repressed

Force state and allowing himself intense, overpowering emotion for the first time in

ages. The image the ship threw into Lumiya's mind was one of gulping down an icy

glass of water after weeks in a burning desert. The sensation was intense enough to

bring Lumiya to the point of gasping.

He has love, said the ship. He has loves there.

So Jacen Solo had a lover.

Stupid boy.

He could have had any number of lovers-after he achieved his full power.

Passion was fine, attachment could magnify strength, but running around the galaxy for

a secret assignation smacked of a teenager's total surrender to hormonal crisis.

Jacen, you're thirty-one, thirty-two, and a grown man doesn't have to sneak light-

years away for a little romance, not even one in your position.

Unless . . .

Lumiya could think like Jacen now, even if his more vulnerably human side

caught her wrong-footed.

Hapes. This was Hapes. And it involved something he'd kept secret even from her.

His lover was part of the Royal Court, then, the epicenter of paranoia when it

came to alliances of any kind, because indiscretion often meant a blade between the

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ribs or a sprinkling of poison in the wine. That would explain a secret dash across

hyperspace at sporadic intervals.

And Queen Mother Tenel Ka was a Jedi to whom Jacen had been close for years.

It was conjecture, but Jacen wouldn't consort with a palace maid. He was conscious of

his lofty station in life; he would be drawn to a Jedi queen.

Lumiya risked searching the Force more closely for him to try to get an

impression of exactly where he was. The sphere said he was in the palace itself, and

although the tidal wave of emotion that had burst through had ebbed, it was still

powerful enough to focus on. She shut out everything else—even her constant

obsession, Jacen's destiny—and just opened her mind to the most basic impressions.

His Force presence could be strong enough to drown out everyone else's around him.

Now that he thought he was unseen and undetected, his presence was as deafening as a

SHOUT.

Lumiya couldn't even feel the ship around her.

The sense she was wrapped up in now wasn't taste or sight or sound, but. . . touch.

There was something soft, silky, and furry in her hands-Jacen's hands-and it

yielded when he closed his fingers. It meant nothing to her, and then-then she

understood.

"Ship, you said loves."

Two, the ship said. Yes, two.

The ship could detect Force-users, and it felt there were two more on Hapes, two

more whose link with Jacen Solo had to be kept secret at any cost, and who would have

an emotionally overwhelmed Jacen clutching something soft and covered in silky fur . .

.

A toy. A soft toy. Jacen had come back to the apartment with a plain package

gripped tight under his arm, and left with it. He'd bought a cuddly toy for a child he

loved with his entire being.

Lumiya snapped herself out of the connection, and managed to stop short of

beating her fists on the stark red deck of the sphere in sheer frustration. The ship might

have taken it the wrong way.

Oh, Jacen, you had a child with Tenel Ka.

Lumiya now understood his fear and desperation. She thought of all the

thought of all the
conversations she'd had with him about immortalizing his
love, and suddenly realized

who was in his mind when he looked so utterly tortured
and desperate as she explained

that he had to destroy what he loved most.

It explained everything. Lumiya never thought she could
pity someone again

enough to weep, but she found her vision blurred by
tears that threatened to spill down

her cheeks.

She settled in for a long wait in a state of mental silence,
not even wanting to

occupy herself with getting to know this extraordinary
ship. She'd need to be there for

Jacen after this. It seemed insultingly banal to kill time

when he was about to make a

sacrifice that almost no mundane being-or Jedi-would understand or forgive.

Yes, it was a very high price indeed.

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chapter eighteen

The Roche government has given Murkhana twenty-four hours to cease

production of weapons command systems that are allegedly in breach of patents, or

face what it describes as "immediate enforcement." GA Chief of Staff Niathal tonight

warned Roche against military action and said GA fighters would be patrolling the

system in a peacekeeping role.

-HNE news update

HAPES

Mara dropped out of hyperspace still putting together scenarios to explain why

Lumiya had gone racing down the Perlemian to the Hapes Cluster shortly after a GAG

StealthX was signed out of the GA Fleet hangar by Colonel Jacen Solo.

There was no sign of the StealthX. If Jacen wasn't making himself detectable in

the Force, Mara couldn't spot the stealth fighter any better than an enemy could. But

ideas were forming in her mind.

Either Lumiya was fermenting more trouble to break the Alliance, in which case

Hapes was a wasted journey, or she was meeting someone here like Alema-sorry,

Jaina, I'll try to bring her back alive for you, but no promises, not in this mood-or . . .

she was pursuing Jacen.

Or . . . maybe she'd found the transponder and was back to playing tag.

Mara thought it was odd that the ship hadn't spat out the tiny device, given that it

was smart enough to throw a line around her neck to save Lumiya's tin backside.

It could have killed me easily enough, too. But it didn't.

Mara disliked reasoning in a vacuum. She didn't quite trust the crazier things that

crossed her mind lately. But maybe the ship still saw her as a dark sider. It would be

academic soon, but the thought that she might still have that tang of darkness about her

produced some mixed emotions.

Yeah, I'm going to kill my sister-in-law's son. On the dark scale of ten, that's a twelve.

Now that her anger had ebbed, she was beginning to wonder what she was doing

here. The Hapans would wonder that, too, if they managed to spot a StealthX hanging

around their system unannounced. Lumiya's transponder showed that her ship was

sitting in a cluster of asteroids, but she wasn't showing up on scans.

What was she waiting for?

Mara gave a discreet check on her instruments. If she

Mara ran a discreet check on her instruments. If she went active on sensors, she'd give away her position, so it had to be a case of passive detection only.

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She was watching, or waiting, and how the Hapans hadn't taken an unhealthy

interest in the sphere was anyone's guess, but Lumiya had a talent for evasion.

Follow the credits. But in this case, follow the Sith.

Mara shut down as many systems as she could afford to do without and waited.

The temptation to launch a spread of proton torpedoes took some resisting, but until

Mara worked out what Lumiya was waiting for, the Sith had a stay of execution.

It had to be Jacen that Lumiya had followed, although how she'd managed that

Mara wasn't yet sure. Maybe Tenel Ka had summoned him, to intercede and get him to

drop that stupid warrant on his parents. That didn't explain Lumiya riding escort,

though, or why she'd tailed him for eighteen solid hours.

It was staring Mara in the face, whatever it was. She knew that. She was missing a

piece again. But all she needed was to locate Jacen, not work out his pension plan.

I could just comm Tenel Ka and ask . . .

However tightly the Hapans controlled access to their space, a thirteen-meter

piece of stealth technology drifting between planets was just a speck of dust. Mara was

effectively hidden, and so was Jacen. If he was on the surface, she might-just might-

detect him when he took off for a moment, but that meant going active and attracting

attention.

Think. Think.

She could wait until he reentered the Perlemian Trade Route, but that made the

assumption that he was returning to Coruscant the way he came. I don't have infinite

oxygen, either . . . There was an easy solution, but it would blow her cover.

An hour later, she was ready to use it. She opened the secure com-link and

readied herself for a little social engineering.

"Hapan Fleet Ops, this is GA StealthX Five-Alpha requesting assistance." That

would cause a flap, but it had to be done.

"Five-Alpha, this is Hapan Fleet Ops. We don't like surprises, even from allies."

Oops. This was paranoid country. "Apologies, Fleet. I'd like to stay off the chart,

but can you confirm that Chief of State Solo is unharmed and that his vessel is

undamaged?"

There was a brief silence. Knowing Hapan Fleet Ops, they were checking her out

to be sure she was a GA pilot and that her transponder-now obligingly active-

matched their security code list.

"Confirmed, Five Alpha. His ship landed in the Fountain

Continued, Five-Alpha. This ship landed in the Fountain Palace compound

without incident. Should we be aware of any special security issues?"

Ahh ... definitely visiting Tenel Ka, then. Probably explaining himself. Believe

me, Tour Royal Highness, I had no choice, I had to depose Omas . . .

"Fleet, he's not aware that we have concerns for his safety and that we've put close

protection on him in transit. He thinks he can handle it himself. Discretion on your part

would ensure he doesn't try to shake me. I've detected a vessel following him but I lost

it in your space. Unknown origin, ten-meter red sphere with distinctive ocular front

viewscreen and cruciform masts and vanes."

Mara's warning displays were lighting up: Now that the Hapans had a fix on her

transmission, they were checking out the StealthX with sensors while they had the

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chance. She could have blocked them, but she let them probe around to keep them

happy.

"Understood, Five-Alpha. We'll give you a heads-up when he makes a move. If

we detect the sphere, do you want us to detain or neutralize?"

"Your space," she said. Have this with my very best wishes, Lumiya. "I have no

orders to detain. Feel free to neutralize."

"Copy that, Five-Alpha. Unless you flash us in the meantime, we won't ping you

until the Chief of State takes off."

They were such nice, helpful people, the Hapans, even if they were paranoid. And

they understood plots, assassins, and keeping their mouths shut. Mara shut down all

noncriticals and meditated in darkness, marveling anew at how very vivid and

exquisitely beautiful starscapes were without the gauzy filter of an atmosphere.

She allowed herself one quick glance at her datapad to reassure herself that there

was one thing she didn't have to worry about.

Ben's transponder said he was still safely on Coruscant.

GAG SHUTTLE, TAANAB SPACE

Ben had learned a lot from his GAG comrades about tailing suspects discreetly,

and one basic trick was to overshoot an exit and double back. He dropped out of

hyperspace and headed back Coreward to Taanab, not Hapes, even though he was sure

the Sith sphere was there.

He could feel it, but he couldn't detect it conventionally; he could have spoken to

it, but he stayed shut down in the Force to avoid Lumiya's attention. He tried to work

out why she was interested in Hapes, and failed, but there was nothing of Jacen that he

could feel, just a trace of his own mother. The closer he ventured toward Hapan space,

the more powerful her presence became. Don't tell me we're both following Lumiya.

He'd have some explaining to do. But it didn't matter: he'd happily take being

grounded for a year and even sent to Ossus as long as he could keep an eye on his mom

right now. He set a course for the freight corridor and dropped out into realspace again,

merging with the convoys of transports then with a group of ore haulers. Running a

loop had also served another purpose: almost like listening to the source of a sound,

Ben made a mental map of the silent voice of the Sith sphere and got a good sense of

where it was in physical space. It was close to Hapes itself.

And-he felt it now-so was his mother. She'd found Lumiya, then. She'd beaten him to the target.

Ben savored a brief fantasy of emptying the shuttle's cannon into the sphere, felt

strangely sorry to destroy the ship just to finish Lumiya, and wondered if all boys went

through a stage of feeling aggressively protective toward their mothers. Maybe that

went with finding it so hard to deal with fathers as you grew up. It was that alpha-male

thing.

Come off it. How many guys your age-or any age-have to worry about their

family being attacked by Sith and insane Dark Jedi? This isn't normal life. The rules

are different.

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Ben got as close to the Sith sphere as he dared. As far as he could tell, it was

holding its position, but when it moved-he'd go for the kill. Then his mom would

know he was there whether he made himself detectable in the Force or not, because the

GAG shuttle was about as stealthy as a brick.

If he could avoid killing the Sith ship, he would. For some reason, it bothered him

more than killing a real human being, which he'd done too many times now.

FOUNTAIN PALACE, HAPES

Jacen said good-bye to Allana, finding it freshly painful

not to be able to call her

his little girl.

"Nice fur," she said. She refused to be parted from the stuffed tauntaun and

hugged it to her with both arms. "What's his name?"

Jacen squatted down level with her. She was Force-sensitive and smart, but if

she'd realized who he actually was, she was too well

schooled in survival to say. He liked to think that it was a knowledge they both

shared, and that she understood why he couldn't be Daddy-not yet, anyway. It was a

sobering thought for such a little girl.

"What do you want to call him?"

"Jacen."

"That's lovely. Why Jacen, sweetie?"

"So when you don't come to see us I can talk to him instead."

A father's guts were made to be twisted. Jacen reached the stage of wanting to just

turn and run when he took his leave of her and Tenel Ka, so he could avoid that

hesitant parting a step at a time, looking back over and over again and thinking: What if

this was the last time I ever saw them? He did think it. It was morbid, but a measure of

how important they were to him that he tested just how devastated he'd feel without

them. At least as Chief of State, he had a much better reason for more frequent contact

with an allied monarch.

And he'd come through this visit without his destiny bursting in and creating a

moment that told him he had to kill them. He listened for that whisper of fate, dreading

it, but there was only silence.

It would only have caused him pain, nothing more. Sith ways were logical; never

pointlessly cruel. Whatever sacrifice he still had to make, it would have productive

meaning, however hard.

Jacen, the tauntaun, who was there for Allana when he wasn't around, would

always hurt a little, though.

Tenel Ka walked with him in silence to the StealthX in the compound.

"You're not happy about Omas, are you?" he said.

She did that gracious tilt of the head, the one she must have learned to cover her

real reaction when she was being bored senseless by guests at a diplomatic reception.

"It's very different, being the focus of government after you've enjoyed the

relative freedoms of being a deputy," she said. "I hope it doesn't turn out to be a

mistake for you."

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"I can always steer the attention to Niathal."

"Make sure you both have different ambitions. It's far safer than both wanting the

same thing."

same thing.

"That sounds like the kind of advice I should wake up sweating about in the small hours."

"I think the phrase is lonely at the top, Jacen Solo." She indicated the blaster,

lightsaber, vibroblade, and toxin darts in the belt around his waist. "I see you're getting

used to the Hapan level of mistrust. . ."

"Like you say, it's lonely."

He didn't look back this time. Now that his brief respite was over, the fresh

memory of Mara haranguing him-had he handled it right, did she have enough on him

to destroy all he was working for?-flooded back in along with Ben's face.

I want it over with. I can deal with it. I just can't stand not knowing where and when and how.

The StealthX lifted clear, and Hapes dwindled into a sumptuous quilt of gardens

and canals again. He had a good idea now of what he'd face when Ben was gone: Mara,

an animal robbed of her young with all the primeval wounded rage that went with it,

and Luke-he had no idea how Luke would react, only that a man who could bring

down the Empire, and whose blood was closer to Vader's even than his own, wouldn't

be paralyzed by grief.

Jacen was now more afraid of the Skywalkers discovering Allana's parentage than

discovering Allana's parentage than

of the Hapan nobles. He could probably protect her from the Hapans if he had to, but it

would be far harder to protect her from the vengeance of Luke or Mara. Allana was his

weak point.

But nobody knew, and it would stay that way until he was certain he'd eliminated

every threat she might face. He wasn't taking chances. He was going to create two of

the most lethal enemies any being could have.

"Hapan Fleet Ops to StealthX One-One, safe return," said the voice on the comm.

They had never said that before: being Chief of State had obviously upped their anxiety

status to triple-red or something. But he was perfectly

safe here. He was still visible in

the Force, still all warmed bittersweet feelings, and for a little while he could afford not

to care.

As Jacen accelerated toward the hyperjump point, he could have sworn a vessel

was close to him. He felt something in the Force for a moment, but it was gone again.

He checked his instruments: nothing. If the Hapes Cluster hadn't been such a maze of

hazards, he'd have jumped the moment he passed the planet's upper atmosphere.

It must be something in the Hapan water. You were never this jumpy.

But there was something out there, and while he hated the imprecision of the

phrase something dark, that was the best he could do:
something hostile that was trying

hard not to be. He hoped it was Hapan, and that they
were just trying in vain to track

him out of their space. He should have been able to
sense that clearly, though, an

ordinary vessel flown by ordinary people.

This wasn't ordinary. He planned for the worst.

If he angled the StealthX right and shut down the head-
up display, he could see a

panoramic rear view reflected in the viewscreen.
Sometimes he needed to see with his

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eyes to be certain. He killed the display and shifted his
focus, and for a moment all he

saw was velvet void.

Then the stars winked out.

"Lumiya?"

Silence.

She could hide in the Force, too. She thought he was letting his concentration

wander. She probably couldn't resist finding out where he was going.

If she'd followed him here, then she knew about Tenel Ka. She'd use it.

"It's okay, Lumiya, I know it's you."

But there was still no response. That wasn't like her.

"Lumiya, I can't let you live now, you realize that?"

For a moment, even in this crisis, he found himself measuring her death against

his prophecy. Was it Lumiya after all? Was she the sacrifice? What could there

possibly be about her death that would kill something he loved?

"Lumiya, last chance . . ."

Then a searing white beam flooded his cockpit and blinded him for a second; he

rolled instinctively to break, suddenly aware it was a landing light so close on his tail

that the vessel must have nearly collided with him. How did the proximity sensors miss

it? How did he miss it?

His Force-senses were flooded instantly with someone else's ice-cold anger. The

comm crackled.

"Game over, Lumiya," he said, targeting his aft cannon.

"You bet it is," said Mara.

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chapter nineteen

She logged out Five-Alpha at 0036 hours, sir, and she didn't file a flight plan.

-GA StealthX technician, Coruscant, to Luke Skywalker

HAPES CLUSTER

Jacen couldn't fire. It wasn't regard for Mara, because his first instinct was to lock

on and press the button, but she was so close that the detonation would have taken him

with her. StealthXs had sacrificed shielding for sensor negators. It was only at times

like this—times that should never have happened, would never have happened—that it

was a problem.

He jinked left, and she matched him, and right, and left, and still she was so close

on his tail that he braced for impact out of reflex, arms locked out on the yoke.

There was no advantage: same starfighter. No edge: she was as

good a pilot. No refuge: they were in open space. It was down to who hated more,

and who was more prepared to die to take out the other.

All Jacen could think of was that now it was Mara who'd followed him here and

knew about Tenel Ka. Her threats over Ben seemed irrelevant. He had a whole new

problem.

His comm crackled again. He braced for a stream of vitriol from his aunt. But it

was someone else's voice.

"I have her, Jacen."

Lumiya. Savior, maybe, but she shouldn't have been here either. So Lumiya and

Mara probably knew about Tenel Ka and Allana; and Lumiya certainly knew that he

couldn't let either woman live with that knowledge. Now he had two assassins on his

tail, and he couldn't trust either of them not to kill or betray him.

Laser cannons flared across his port side and he felt the impact in the airframe, but

he was still in one piece. He smelled smoke. Brilliant white light filled the cockpit.

Lumiya-if she was targeting Mara, if she wasn't trying to kill him in some bizarre Sith

test-had the same problem: Mara was flying so close that any explosion put him in

her blast radius, or would send her debris punching through his shields at this range.

Jacen did what he'd done many times: he simply dropped away by looping

through ninety degrees. He needed to put a second of space between them, and he also

needed to come back at her with an advantage.

Mara might have sent a message to Luke by now, revealing everything. She

wanted maximum damage. His secret was as good a missile to be used against him as

missile to be used against him as

any ordnance.

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As he climbed out of the loop, Jacen looked up through the canopy, desperate for

any reflection or hint of movement. StealthXs had never been designed to fight one

another. Their almost complete lack of sensor trace made tracking Mara impossible.

That was why she was so close on his tail, too. They couldn't detect each other reliably,

except through the Force, or by spotting silhouettes against the starfield.

And Mara seemed to be able to dip in and out of the Force, just like him. Just like

Ben.

He should never have taught Ben to do it.

The fact that Mara hadn't said more than four words was the most disorienting

thing of all. Now he needed to get her onto ground of his choosing. He could feel

Lumiya somewhere off to starboard, moving at high speed, and he had no idea what the

Sith sphere was capable of in her hands. All he knew was that it was obsolete-and old

tech and brute force could often bypass more complex systems.

"Canopy," he yelled. Ben's report had said he'd used a magnetic accelerator in the

Sith sphere. "Lumiya, crack her canopy. Weak shields."

He didn't have to explain it to her. Suddenly he could see an orange ball

accelerating toward him on a collision course and he flipped ninety degrees just in time

for it to pass under him. The next thing he heard was Lumiya's voice saying, "Hull

breach, she's venting atmosphere."

As Jacen came around again in a loop, orienting by feeling Mara in the Force once

more, he could see a thin white trail moving at high speed toward the center of the

cluster. Mara was hit, a slow leak either in the canopy or straight through the skin into

the cockpit, and she was trying to land before a crack spread and became an explosive

decompression. Even with a flight suit, her chances of surviving that were slim.

She was heading for Kavan. That suited Jacen fine. Once he had her on the

ground he could take her, because even if she called in support, who would respond to

someone in a battle with Jacen Solo? Not the Hapans. Who would believe her? People

many hours away.

He felt no violence or malice at all, but then he never did in combat. He just felt

an overwhelming desire to win and survive, and all other emotions were pushed into

the background.

He turned his attention to Lumiya.

"It's okay, Jacen," she said. "I know what you have to keep secret. I'll make sure it

stays that way."

"You certainly will," he said, and locked all eight proton torpedoes on the Sith

sphere. "This is what you taught me to be."

Jacen fired on her, and felt no triumph or shame, only temporary relief.

But he saw no explosion, no white-hot ball or glittering cloud of slow-tumbling

debris. His onboard sensors picked up nothing.

Where was she? Was it a kill or not?

He'd have to trawl for wreckage later. Right now, his priority was to silence Mara

Jade Skywalker.

HAPAN SPACE

Ben couldn't feel his mother, but he knew she wasn't dead. She was hiding, just as

he'd taught her. Lumiya was here in the Sith ship, though, streaking away on his

starboard side, and he wasn't going to break off the pursuit now. She was the key to

this. She'd be the key dead or alive. Ben knew he was capable of doing either.

The ship was speaking inside his head, just as it had before. It might have been

talking to itself or addressing both him and Lumiya, but it was deeply unhappy.

He has tried to cause irreparable damage.

"Ship, shut up," Lumiya said. Ben could hear her, too, as if the ship's thought

processes were an open circuit. "He has to survive. We

don't."

The rule of ages is that I must not be targeted.

The sphere had clearly decided enough was enough, and looped back in the

direction from which it had come. Ben could see it in his forward screens and on

sensors, but he could also see it in his head. The general impression was that it was

rolling up its sleeves and going back to knock ten bells out of whoever had fired on it.

"Ship, break off."

I do what I must.

"Ship!"

Ben's drives were screaming trying to keep up with it. There was no real up or

down in space, but it was like plummeting in the slipstream of a raptor.

"Ship, my mom's down there," Ben pleaded. "She didn't fire on you."

Masters may use their ships to fight but not involve apprentices.

"Ship, Jacen made an error. Do it for me, so I can find my mom again. Please-

don't fire."

The sphere decelerated dramatically.

Who is the enemy? the ship asked. Unless I know, I can do nothing except evade

and protect.

"That's right," Ben said. Shevu had told him that humoring nutters, as he called it,

was an essential police skill. Keeping them talking was what it was all about-and if

Ben had the ship, he had Lumiya. "Ship, what's your task?"

Once I fought. Now I educate and protect apprentices.

"What do you believe I am?"

Apprentice.

"Who's the one within you now?"

Apprentice also.

Ben was starting to form a picture of the sphere's view of the world. It had been

buried on Ziost for centuries and possibly millennia. It had reacted to him when he was

being targeted from orbit and running for his life with a terrified little girl.

"Ship, what do you mean-educate?"

I teach apprentices to fight.

Ben could sense Lumiya communicating with it. The ship was responding

strongly in his mind, but there was a second stream of soundless words running almost

like interference on a comlink from overlapping frequencies. She was urging the sphere

to fire on Ben, to ram his shuttle, to kill him.

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Yes. I am now for apprentices, so they learn and come to no harm. I used to be for

Masters at war.

It made sudden sense to Ben. "You're a Sith training vessel." It would see him as

an apprentice because he was one, in a way, but Lumiya confused him. "Why do you

think the woman in you now is an apprentice?"

Because she knows so little of me. Like you.

Ben accepted he wasn't an intellectual like Jacen, but he could grind through

options, eliminating things as he went, just like his mom. He could work out anything

by just asking question after question.

"The woman apprentice in you had us shot at when we left Ziost."

We shot back.

The ship recognized him, and it decided that both he and Lumiya were novices

who needed its advice and care. It had stopped his

mother from killing Lumiya on

Hesperidium because that was its job: teaching apprentices to fight. Ben wondered how

many chances it gave Sith apprentices before it decided they were weaklings who

deserved what they got.

There was no way he was going to talk it into killing Lumiya—he wondered how

it would do that—and she was having no luck getting it to attack him, either. Ben was

in no real danger. But his mother was, and not from that ship. Someone else wanted her

dead.

He needed to find her. He dropped toward Reboam, and the Sith sphere escorted

him, with Lumiya impatient within.

him, with Luthiya impotent within.

Ben had caught a Sith. And now he had no idea how to use her to his advantage.

KAVAN, HAPES CLUSTER

Mara set the StealthX down in the middle of nowhere and reminded herself that

being the target or the assassin was simply a state of mind.

No doubt Jacen thought he'd forced her to land so he could finish her off. She

thought she'd ditched to get him where she could use her fighting skills to better

advantage.

It was a matter of who found who first.

I can stop this anytime I want.

After all she'd seen and heard, there was still the Mara within who couldn't really

believe her nephew was dangerously and irredeemably evil.

If you don't do it, who will? And who'll blame you for not acting while he could be

stopped? Palpatine, Palpatine, Palpatine . . . your lesson in twenty-twenty hindsight.

So here she was, telling herself that she was going to go through a very bad time

after she killed him, but it had to be done. And Jacen was probably thinking the

identical thing. They were the same. No moral high ground; just a leftover equation that

said all other things being equal, Mara preferred to see Jacen dead than Ben, or Luke,

or herself. Survival: there was nothing wrong with

of herself. Survival there was nothing wrong with surviving.

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Luke now kept reaching out to her in the Force, increasingly anxious, trying to

find her, but she didn't dare reach back. There was no telling what Jacen could detect.

When she wanted to be found by Jacen-he'd know all about it.

She grabbed her bag and everything from the cockpit that could be used as a

weapon, then found some cover while she consulted her datapad for charts and surveys

of Kavan. It was honeycombed with ruined monuments and tunnels. Fine. If I get him

in a confined space, he can't use all his Force skills, but I can make the most of what

I've got. She decided to make her way into the maze of buried passages and get Jacen to follow her.

She was nowhere near any centers of population, so she was also a long way from any help. She didn't intend to summon any, anyway. Not until it was time to remove the body.

She secreted all her weapons in her jacket, belt, and boots, and sprinted for the first tunnel she saw. It was getting easier by the minute to disappear into the Force for as long as she needed. But now she needed to be visible, a beacon for Jacen to lure him onto the rocks.

Come and get me, Colonel Solo.

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chapter twenty

From: Sass Sikili, negotiator of Roche

To: Boba Fett, Mand'alor

Murkhana has failed to respond. Because they have failed to respond, and we fear

this will encourage others to ignore our patents, we request your support, so that the

point may be made that we take our patents seriously. I would very much like to see the

Bes'uliik in action; our metallurgists have been looking at ways to produce lighter

beskar structures, so when you pound the Murkhana factories to dust, we will be

inspired to be more inventive. This is very good for business.

JEDI TEMPLE, CORUSCANT

Luke met Jaina on the steps of the Jedi temple. He was dashing out as she was

dashing in. He caught her arm and steered her back down the path.

"Where did she go, Jaina?"

"Uncle Luke, I swear I'm not covering for her. I don't know and she's not

answering any of her links. Why are you worried?"

Luke held the crumpled flimsi in his fist. Gone hunting for a few days. Mara had

signed out a StealthX just after midnight two days before. He shoved the note in his

pocket. The feeling of dread overwhelmed him.

"Come on," he said. "I have to go look for her. Something's wrong. And Ben's

gone, too. I've had the worst feeling, like she's walking into a trap."

Ben wasn't just missing; Luke could no longer feel him in the Force. And now he

couldn't feel Mara. He'd called everyone, including Han and Leia, and he didn't kriffing

care if the GAG detained him for contacting Corellian agents with a warrant out for

their arrest.

He expected Jacen to show up to issue a warning, but Niathal said Jacen was away

on "business." The GAG StealthX was gone again. The man came and went as he

pleased, it seemed.

I can imagine. Jacen was permanently invisible in the Force now, that was for

sure. Luke hailed an air taxi, and they headed for Starfighter Command.

"I've spent more time there since I left the military than when I was in uniform,"

Jaina said.

"Can you feel her, Jaina? Can you feel Mara?"

She looked slightly to one side of Luke, defocused, and shook her head slowly.

"Nothing."

"I haven't felt her now for hours."

When they reached Starfighter Command, they headed for the chart room. Luke

found that he could look at charts and pick up strong correlations in the Force-

something Ben had proved to have a talent for, too. He stood in front of the banks of

holocharts and tried to relax enough to let the Force steer his attention. He made an

effort to put out of his mind where he thought she might have been heading.

After a while, when the glowing lines and clusters of dots began to blur and lose

their perspective, he found himself drawn to one sector in particular.

"I'm sure she's in the Hapes Cluster," he said at last.

When Luke had first felt Mara drop out of the Force, it was so sudden and

was so sudden and

uncontrolled that he thought she'd been killed. It woke him in a panic. The three

seconds of pure agonized paralysis lasted until she faded back in again, and again, and

he worked out that she was doing it deliberately.

"Ironically, it would have been better if she'd taken a regular X-wing," Jaina said.

"The starfighter techies say it's almost impossible to locate a StealthX by any of the

usual search methods."

She was right. Unless someone happened to eyeball Five-Alpha or Mara had left a

transponder or comlink active, the starfighter would simply vanish.

A visual search was all that was left-that, or finding Mara

herself. Luke headed

for the hangars, and Jaina followed.

"How do we recover StealthXs that ditch, then?" Luke asked, trying not to vent

his frustration on hardworking ground crew.

The technician stepped back from the starfighter. "Rescue beacon or the Mark

One pall of smoke and flame, sir," he said warily. "The GA asked Incom to make them

very hard to detect, and they did."

"Okay, I'll stop harassing people with work to do and go out there myself." Luke

reminded himself that Mara was hunting Lumiya, and so he had to expect her to use

every trick in the book. That didn't stop him from
warning, "After all, I'm the one who

worrying. After all, I'm the one who

shook Lumiya's hand, and not her throat. . ."

Then Mara was suddenly there, not just back in the Force but magnifying her

presence, as if she wanted to be found. She was defiant, unafraid, and spoiling for a

fight. She'd found Lumiya all right.

"Why's she doing that, though?" Jaina had her own hunt-for Alema. Now she

was keen to help find Mara. "It's like she's taunting her."

"Or she's in trouble and she wants me to find her."

"No." Jaina closed her eyes for a moment, concentrating. "Doesn't feel like a call

for help. Feels like ... a fight."

Luke decided to warn Tenel Ka that he was on his way

purely as a precaution.

Eighteen-standard-hour transit. Given the number of planets in the Hapes Cluster, it

would probably take even the Hapans a lot longer than that to find a StealthX, but the

more eyes that were out looking out for Mara, the better.

Luke tried to appear casual as he climbed into his cockpit. Jaina stood looking up

at him.

"I know I'm officially out of the service," she said, "but if someone authorizes it,

I'm happy to join in. Please."

Luke gestured to the ground crew. "Thanks."

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"It's Lumiya we should be worrying about." Jaina was

trying to reassure him. "I

can see Aunt Mara going in for braided scalps like Fett. Red ones. Does Lumiya dye

her hair, do you think? Will the stuff have icky gray roots?"

Luke knew she was trying to make him laugh, and he tried to oblige. But just

hearing the name Fett reminded him that pretty well every member of his family, Solos

or Skywalkers, was at the top of someone's must-kill-today list.

Luke didn't want or expect to be loved by everyone. He just wanted to wake up

one morning and find his loved ones left alone to get on with their lives.

When Mara came home-scalps or no scalps, war or no

war-he was going to

book a vacation for the two of them, somewhere soothingly uneventful. He balled the

flimsi note she'd left for him and wedged it into a gap in the cockpit fascia. The

StealthX's drives whined into life.

It wouldn't be Hesperidium, though.

KAVAN

Jacen had expected to have to deal with an angry Mara after he killed Ben, not

before.

He was still looking for meanings and patterns in the events around him, and he

now saw in himself a certain desperation to try whatever was placed in his path to see if

that did the trick and sealed his Sith status.

Will I notice? What does it feel like?

How will I know ?

There had to be something that changed the fabric of the galaxy-a tipping point.

Meanwhile, Mara was challenging him, pinpointing herself in the tunnels that ran deep

under the Kavan countryside, thinking she was still an A-list assassin and that she

could take someone who had complete mastery of the Force.

She was a superb assassin, but her Force skills were crude compared to his. Once

Jacen removed her, it would be easier to deal with Ben. And Luke . . . he'd cross that

bridge when he had to

bridge when he had to.

Jacen checked his belt, pockets, and holster, and decided to oblige Mara. Lumiya

and Ben seemed to be elsewhere having their own showdown. Now it all fitted. Lumiya

had to be silenced for what she knew, and Ben would do it. It was tidy. It was a food

chain.

Jacen loaded four poisoned darts into an adapted blaster and slipped the others

into slots on his belt, wondering how he could think such things so calmly. He

approached the tunnel mouth with slow care. While he could sense the layout, Mara

had vanished from the Force again. There was about a meter of headroom as he edged

carefully along the central tunnel, and he could see horizontal shafts at about hip height

branching off. It had been built to drain storm water; in harsh winters, local Kavani had

once made emergency homes down here.

Jacen stood and listened.

"Okay," he said. "I know you can hear me, Mara. You can still back out of this."

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His voice echoed. There was no response, just as he expected, so he began

walking deeper into the maze of drains, lightsaber in his right hand and blaster in the

other. The only light around him now was a green haze from the glowing blade of

energy.

"I could," he said quietly, "go back, block the entrance to this complex with

flammable material, and set fire to it." She could hear him, all right: he could hear

water dripping slowly deep in the tunnels. Sound was magnified, even if it was hard to

pinpoint the origin. "And the fact that these tunnels have vents means the chimney

effect would smoke you out, asphyxiate you, or barbecue you."

Silence.

He held his breath, listening.

Crack.

His right knee exploded with blinding pain as Mara cannoned out horizontally,

Force-assisted, from a side conduit and caught his leg on the joint with her boots,

ripping the tendons. As he lost his footing in the narrow passage, screaming, he found

himself wedged for a second and groping for support. He lashed out with his lightsaber,

shaving powdery brick from the wall. Mara dropped to the muddy floor to dodge the

lightsaber, then sprang up and sprinted away down the tunnel.

It wasn't a good start. Jacen swore and made himself run after her, willing

endorphins to numb his leg and telling himself that he knew she was setting up a trap.

She wanted him confined, pinned down, penned.

If she thought tunnels would even the odds, she was

if she thought things would even the odds, she was wrong. He'd bury her here.

Mara found the perfect trap at the end of one of the culverts. She could hear

Jacen's running footsteps and she had a good fifty meters on him.

From here, the vaulted ceiling became lower, and even Mara had to run at a

crouch. It wasn't the place to swing a standard lightsaber. The tunnels were in poor

condition, and the brick arches were starting to sag and collapse in places.

So he wouldn't oblige her by revealing his physical position in the Force. Fine.

She spotted a rusty metal sheet about half a meter wide and laid it carefully across the

tunnel floor, propped on stones so he'd tread on it and

give her an audible warning

when he reached that point. An intense Force shake of the brickwork and arches in

front of and behind the metal plate weakened them, and then she stopped them from

collapsing by Force pressure.

Hold 'em up. Wait for him to hit that plate . . .

Going after Jacen would never work. He could never be allowed to set the agenda.

He could come after her.

Trap, immobilize, kill.

It wasn't pretty, and it wouldn't capture the public's imagination like a lightsaber

display at the academy, but her training was in destruction. Jacen's was in deception.

She could hear him breathing, and the irregular vzzzm-vzzzm-vzzzm of his

lightsaber as he stalked, jumping and turning to be sure she wasn't behind him. Then

she could hear that he wasn't swinging the blade so much; the short staccato hums and

buzzes told her he was running out of room.

She was trapped too, of course, unless she counted the ventilation shafts every

fifty meters. But when she said she was leaving here over his dead body, she meant it.

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She felt the beginning of a compassionate human thought about Leia, but killed it

stone-dead. It would weaken her.

Jacen's boots crunched over bricks. He was impatient. She was in his way, holding

him up when he wanted to get on with something.

Crunch . . . crunch . . . crunch.

If she'd timed it right, he was close to stepping on that rusty plate.

Clang. . .

The rumbling began. She brought down both sections of tunnel, before and

behind, with a massive exertion in the Force that made her breathless. She didn't hear

him call out. Even in the damp conditions, clouds of fine debris filled the air and made

her choke.

Mara waited, one hand over her mouth and nose, shoto drawn and listened in the

Force.

There was whimpering and the chunk-chunk sound of the last falling bricks. She

didn't expect that weight of debris from a low ceiling to cause impact injury, but to

engulf and immobilize him. He wouldn't be dead-yet.

She waited in silence, a nonexistent presence herself, until she could hear no more

movement.

Okay. Let's see what I have to do to end this.

An arm was all that protruded from the rubble. Through a fist-sized gap, she could

see the wet, blinking glint of an eye and bloodstained face. A hand reached out to her,

fingers splayed, bloody and shaking. Other people might have felt an urge to take that

hand, the most distinctively human of things, but it was an old, tired Sith stunt, and

she'd used it herself too many times.

She took her blaster and leveled it at the eye, one-handed, forefinger resting on the

trigger. She had the shoto ready in case a coup de grace was called for.

She felt as detached and steady as she'd ever been as the Emperor's Hand.

"Tell my mom I'm sorry I failed her," Jacen whispered.

"She knows," Mara said, and squeezed the trigger.

Nu kyr'adyc, shi taab'echaaj'la.

Not gone, merely marching far away.

-Mandalorian phrase for the departed

KAVAN

They said that the human body was capable of extraordinary feats of strength

when in extremis. For a Jedi, it was something else entirely.

Jacen Solo wasn't ready to die, not now, not so close to his ascendance, and not in

a stinking drain like vermin.

He deflected the energy bolt with one last surge of the Force and sent the rubble

erupting off his crushed and bleeding body like a detonation. Bricks hammered the

walls and rained fragments, knocking Mara flat like a bomb blast. She made an animal

noise that was more anger than pain and flailed for a moment as she tried to get up.

The effort froze Jacen for two vital seconds. But he knew if he didn't get up now

and fight back, Mara would come in for the kill, again and again, until he was worn

down and too weak to fend her off.

He scrambled to his feet, staggering more than standing, and suddenly understood.

It was Mara who had to die to fulfill his destiny.

Killing her was the test: the words of the prophecy were meaningless, and at a

visceral level he knew that her death was the pivotal act. He didn't know how, and this

wasn't the time to stop and think about it. He surrendered totally to instinct for the first

time in ages. Whatever guided a Sith's hand had to guide him now.

But he was hurt, and badly.

Ben ... he didn't know where Ben fitted into this, but now he knew he did, as

surely as he knew anything. Jacen didn't care, because he knew he had to kill Mara now

and nothing else would make sense until he did that.

He fumbled for his lightsaber and thumbed it into life again. Mara was already

back on her feet, coming at him with the shoto and vibroblade, brick dust and black-red

blood snaking down her forehead from a scalp cut. She leant at him with the shoto held

capt at him with the shoto held

left-handed, fencing-style, seared the angle of his cheekbone, and caught him under the

tip of chin with the vibroblade as he jerked back.

She shouldn't have been able to get near him. He had total mastery, and she was

just athletic and fast. He pushed back at her in the Force, sending her crashing against a

wall with a loud grunt, but she kept coming at him, one-two, one-two with the shoto

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and the blade, and he was being driven back, his strength ebbing. He needed space to

fight.

He drew his dart gun and fired one after the other, but Mara scattered all four

needles in a blur of blue light. They fell to the ground. He turned and scrambled

through the collapsed brick, using the Force to hurl debris up at her from the floor of

the passage while she leapt from block to boulder to chunk of masonry, until she Force-

leapt onto his back and brought him down.

They rolled. This wasn't a duel: it was a brawl. She thrust her vibroblade up under

his chin and he jerked his head to one side, feeling the tip skate from his jaw to his

hairline as it missed his jugular. He couldn't draw the weapons he needed. He was

losing blood, losing strength, waning, flailing his lightsaber to fend her off. It was

almost useless in such a close-quarters struggle. Mara

almost useless in such a close quarters struggle. Then, manic and panting, flicked the

shoto to counter every desperate stabbing thrust.

"Ben . . . I'll see you dead first. . . before . . . you get . . . Ben."

Jacen was on the knife-edge between dying and killing. They grappled, Force-

pushed, Force-crushed: he threw her back again, trying to Force-jolt her spine and

paralyze her for a moment, but somehow she deflected it and bricks flew out of the

wall as if someone had punched them through from the other side. She almost Force-

snatched the lightsaber from his hand, but even with his injuries he hung on to it. He

wouldn't die. He couldn't, not now.

"You can't beat me," he gasped. "It's not meant to be."

"Really?" Mara snarled. "I say it is."

Then she launched herself at him-unthinking, a wild woman, hair flying-and

he Force-pushed to send her slamming against a pillar in midleap. But the battering

he'd taken and the ferocity of her relentless attack had blinded him to danger from

another quarter. As he lurched backward to avoid her, his legs went from under him

and he stumbled into a gaping crack opened up by the subsidence. He fell badly: red-

hot pain seared from ankle to knee. His lightsaber went flying. Pain could be ignored,

but the moment it took him to get to his feet again was enough for Mara to right herself

and come back at him with the shoto and plunge it into the soft tissue just under the end

of his collarbone.

Lightsaber wounds hurt a lot more than he ever imagined. Jacen screamed. He

summoned his own weapon back to his hand and Mara crashed into him, knocking him

flat again and pinning him down. Her vibroblade stopped a hand span from his throat as

he managed to grab her hair and drag her face nearer and nearer to his lightsaber. She

struggled to pull back, hacking at him with the shoto but blocked by his dwindling

Force power each time.

Her vibroblade grazed his neck. He fumbled in his belt for a dart. She jerked back

with a massive effort, leaving him clutching a handful of red hair, and the only thing

that crossed his mind as she arched her back and held her arms high to bring both shoto

and vibroblade down into his chest was that she would never, ever harm Ben.

Jacen stared into her eyes and instantly created the illusion of Ben's face beneath

her. She blinked.

It gave him the edge for that fraction of a moment. It was long enough to ram the

poison dart into her leg with its protective plastoid cone still in place.

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It was just a small needle, ten centimeters long. He stabbed her so hard that the

stabbed her so hard that the

sharp end punched through the cone and the fabric of her pants.

Mara gasped and looked down at her leg as if she was puzzled rather than hurt.

The dart quivered as she moved, and then fell to the floor.

"Oh . . . it's done . . ." Jacen said. The shoto fell from her hand and she made a

vague and uncontrolled pawing movement with the vibroblade. It caught him in the

bicep, but there was no strength behind the blow, and she dropped the weapon. "I'm

sorry, Mara. Had to be you. Thought it was Ben. But it's over now, it's over . . ."

"What have you done? What the stang have you done to me?" But she was already

losing her balance as the poison paralyzed her, and she slumped to one side as he got to

his feet, staring up at him more with shock than rage or fear.

"The prophecy." It didn't matter now: the toxin-complex, relatively painless-

was circulating through her body. "Don't fight it. No healing trance. Just let go . . ."

Mara tried to get up but sank back to sit on her heels, with an expression as if

she'd forgotten something and was trying to remember. She crumpled against the wall.

Jacen had never felt such relief. It didn't have to be Allana, or Tenel Ka, or even Ben. It

was over, all over.

"What?" Mara said. She tried to put her fingers to her

What? Mara said. She tried to put her fingers to her lips, shaking, but her hand

fell back to her lap. She looked at them as if expecting to see blood.

Jacen suppressed his instinct to help her. "It's my destiny, Mara-to be a Sith

Lord, and bring order and justice. I had to kill you to do it. You're going to save so

many people, Mara. You've saved Ben. You've saved Allana, too. It's not a waste,

believe me."

"You're ... as vile as he was."

Jacen could hardly understand what she was saying. "Who?"

"Palpatine."

"It's not like that," he said. He had to make her see what

was happening. It was

important. He owed her that revelation. She'd made the sacrifice, although he was now

starting to wonder what that meant for whatever love he had to give up. "It's not about

ambition. It's about the galaxy, about peace. It's about building a different world."

She stared back at him, and now he could see-and feel-her disgust. He wasn't

sure if it was aimed at him or at herself.

Jacen hurt. He was starting to feel the full extent of his injuries, and he needed to

heal himself. He also needed to get out of this tunnel.

Mara was breathing heavily now, one hand slack in her lap but the other still

clenching and unclenching as if trying to form a fist to give

clenching and unclenching as if trying to form a fist to give him one final punch. Her

vivid green eyes were still bright with relentless purpose. He knew he would try to

forget them every day of his life.

"You think . . . you've won," she said, slurred, but utterly lucid and unafraid. "But

Luke will crush you . . . and I refuse ... to let you . . . destroy the future . . . for my

Ben."

Jacen sat and waited, almost expecting a prophecy from her to help him make

sense of what he'd done. But after a few moments, he felt the final discharge of

elemental energy that every Force-user would notice and comprehend.

Ben was the last word she ever spoke.

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KAVAN

Lumiya felt the Force shift subtly like tectonic plates in motion. She hadn't

realized that the decisive moment would feel quite like that.

"Ship," she said, "The new Dark Lord needs me. Follow him." Then she left to

prepare for death, intending to die well.

KAVAN

Ben suddenly couldn't hear the voice of the Sith sphere. His own name-Ben,

Ben, Ben-drowned out every other sound, even though deep in his head, it was quieter

than a whisper, a summons and a farewell for him alone.
He forgot about Lumiya, and

stumbled toward the source of the voice, blinded by
tears. "Mom!" he yelled. "Mom!"

PERLEMIAN TRADE ROUTE

In the cockpit of his StealthX heading for Hapes, Luke
Skywalker felt a hand

brush his hair, and as he reached out involuntarily to
touch it, he knew his world had

ended.

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chapter twenty-two

I don't know what's happening, Mand'alor, but the
amount of secure GA comm

traffic flying around the Hapan Cluster now has to be

seen to be believed. Major panic

ongoing. Stand by.

-Goran Beviin, surveillance expert, reporting back from the nearby Roche

asteroid field prior to launch of the Bes'ulilk

GAG STEALTHX, LAID UP ON ZIOST

Jacen really didn't know where else to go. He stared at the cockpit panel facing

him, knowing that he should have been back on Coruscant at least twenty hours ago,

and that Niathal would be cursing him roundly.

He was alone, in creased black fatigues, in agonizing pain, and-hungry.

This wasn't the ascension of the Lord of the Sith that he'd expected. He wondered

what ordinary people thought happened when the course of history swung on a single

pivotal act. They probably didn't envisage that their future was now in the hands of a

tired, sweaty man who kept thinking he needed a shave, and almost unable to believe

that he'd-

Killed Mara Jade Skywalker.

Killing didn't get any easier. He was just getting better at it.

But it still didn't make sense. He rubbed his cheek, and the stubble rasped audibly

under his fingers. Mara hadn't been the most precious thing in his life. In recent weeks,

she'd changed from being his only friend to just someone else who didn't trust him and

was getting in his way.

She was his aunt. She was family. When his role in her death became known-it

had to be when, but not now, not anytime soon-the shock and hatred would tear apart

what was left of the Skywalker and Solo families. Maybe even Niathal, and all the

others who understood that securing peace was a dirty business, would be disgusted.

I just killed my aunt. I grew up with her. She was there for me. We fought a war

together.

I have to face her son. I have to face Ben.

What have I done ?

His stomach rumbled. How could he possibly be hungry

at a time like this?

He will immortalize his love.

Stupid knotted tassels, all kinds of ancient Sith prophecies that would come to

pass when the new Dark Lord was ready to take up his mantle and usher in a golden

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age of justice, order, and peace. The key had been turned-and this was what the

prophecy was supposed to mean-by Jacen killing what he most loved.

He'd killed Mara, and Nelani, and Fett's daughter, and chaotic unjust democracy,

and he loved none of those. He'd tried to kill Lumiya more than once. She seemed to

think that was part of the job description for Sith

think that was part of the job description for Sim
acolytes.

So Jacen didn't believe it. And if Mara hadn't been trying
to kill him to begin with,

he would have seen it even more as a life thrown
carelessly away.

The fabric of existence didn't seem to have changed
enough. That shift should

have been cataclysmic, and although he was too much of
a pragmatist to think he could

raise his fists to the sky and call down lightning to
energize a mighty soul, he expected

to be able to taste the spiritual and existential
transformation.

He was afraid. However certain he'd been a few hours
ago that Mara was to be the

one destined to die, it didn't make sense in the context of

the prophecy. He didn't feel

different, either. Did that mean he still had to kill someone else? He'd been so certain it

would all be over now. The sense of anticlimax was almost enough to make him sob.

Then he felt a presence. He leaned his head against the side of the cockpit canopy,

and gazing up at him from the nightmarish planet surrounding his fighter was Lumiya.

Jacen popped the seal. "I'm surprised you could be bothered to come and find me,

after what happened."

"You now need to be seen." Lumiya had a new serenity about her. As ever, she

still seemed to take no offense at him for trying to kill her again. "Your new existence

has started, Dark Lord."

"Really?" The pain in his shoulder gnawed at him like an animal tearing his flesh.

"I don't feel very lordly."

"I assure you it's done. I felt it."

She might have been humoring him. He shifted in his seat to ease the assortment

of bruises. "I'll be looking for further proof."

"Stop arguing with the Force and pay attention to what you have to do next. Luke

Skywalker arrived at Hapes a couple of hours ago and they're looking for evidence.

And Niathal is griping bitterly about your being AWOL."

"They won't find me."

"That's not what I mean. Your trip to the Royal Court, a subject I will take to my

grave by the way, needs to be smoothed out in terms of credibility. Sooner or later, it'll

emerge that you were in the Hapes Cluster, and that Mara knew that."

"How?"

"May I alarm you?"

"Can you alarm me any more? Is it possible?"

"Mara had a conversation with Hapan Fleet Ops while in Hapan space about your

presence on Hapes. I intercepted it, which is one reason why I was able to come to your

aid."

"Wonderful."

"And she even gave them a description of the Sith sphere as a possible hostile. I

think that stacks up to a scenario needing a plausible explanation."

Lumiya was right. Jacen needed a cover story, if only for Tenel Ka.

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"This is going to tax even my creativity," Jacen said.
"How widely known is

this?"

"There are no secrets in the galaxy, Jacen, only varying sizes of distribution lists.

The Bothans will have it, the Mandalorians will have it. . .
and Alliance Intel will have

it, and they don't love you at all these days."

"Well, if I weren't a Sith Lord fresh out of the box, I'd be borked."

"Don't joke. Never joke about this."

"I could say quite legitimately that I was visiting Tenel Ka as Chief of State

because of the continuing embarrassment about my parents."

"And what about your wretched physical state?"

"Ah. I'm hastening the healing trance as much as I can."

"What about Mara's body?"

"I left it where it was."

"She didn't become discorporeal? She left her remains?"

"I think so. Does that surprise you?"

Lumiya seemed to consider something, breaking her intense gaze. "I always

thought she'd become one with the Force somehow."

"Well, who knows. And here I am about to say they'll never trace the poison back

to me, but does it matter? One day soon, they'll all have to know. "

"And by then it'll be too late for them to do anything to you." Lumiya turned as if

to walk away, and then seemed to change her mind. "My ship has been noted, Ben

didn't see you on Kavan, and I'm almost certainly the prime suspect for Mara's death.

This all enables me to do the last service I can for you."

"Which is . . . ?"

Lumiya's most unnerving state was when she was being gracious. It told Jacen

that she knew something he didn't.

"To buy you time to consolidate your hold on the galaxy," she said. "By making

Luke believe it was all my doing."

"Don't you think you should be hiding from him?"

"No. You might say that's my destiny."

"That smacks of a death wish."

"My work and my life are done, Jacen. I'd really welcome a rest."

Death seemed a very routine commodity lately. Jacen wasn't comfortable with

that. He had a sudden urge to embrace life. Deep in him, for all the boy inside that still

expected a lightning bolt to mark his passage into Sith maturity, there was a feeling of

optimism, green and fresh. It took him aback.

"By the way, Alema is still prowling," Lumiya said. "If you spot her, she'll

probably be coveting the Sith ship to pursue her vendetta against your parents. I have

no doubt you'll see her around."

Jacen wondered if Sith left wills; Lumiya certainly seemed to have thought hers

through. She studied him with her head on one side for a while, eyes disturbingly green

and not unlike Mara's, and then she walked away into the icy fog.

He meditated for an hour or so to hasten the healing process, and then set off for

Coruscant-via Hapes.

FOUNTAIN PALACE, HAPES

"Luke . . . Luke? Luke." Tenel Ka had to repeat his name three times before he

could manage to lift his head to look at her. The elegant brocade sofa felt as if it were

swallowing him whole, and maybe that would have been for the best.

There was an insulating gauze of numbness holding Luke together, and it took

triple repetition to penetrate it-the first to stop him thinking that he hadn't even said

good-bye to Mara and was asleep when she left; the second to stop him racking his

brains for the last words he'd said to her, which he couldn't recall; and the third to stop

him seeing in his mind's eye her scribbled note that he'd balled up and used to plug a

hole in his cockpit console, and that he had now lovingly smoothed flat and would keep

with him for the rest of his life.

Gone hunting for a few days. Don't be mad at me, farmboy . . .

"Luke, Jaina's here."

"Thank you, Tenel Ka . . ."As long as he stayed numb, Luke felt he would

function. He would gather his thoughts, see that the rest of the family was coping, and

then he'd act-when he knew what to do. "I can't thank you enough."

"Luke, I have all my guard deployed searching the cluster."

Jaina walked in briskly, face grim and eyes a little swollen. She dropped down on

her knees and pressed herself into Luke's lap, cuddling him in silence. He hadn't really

needed to call: they'd all felt it.

"Still no sign of Ben," Luke said, stroking Jaina's hair. "And I can't even guess

where he is."

Jaina knelt back on her heels. "I can't feel him, either, Uncle Luke."

"He'll be okay, sweetheart. I'd know if. . ."

Luke didn't finish the sentence. He knew now exactly how Ben's death would feel

to him in the Force. Ben wasn't dead.

Luke waited for a call back from Leia and Han. He

LUKE waited for a call back from Leia and Han. He knew Leia had sensed Mara's

passing: after that moment when he'd felt the lightest of touches on his hair, and he

turned his head, he'd had the sensation of meeting Leia's eyes.

She'd call. He'd keep calling anyway.

Tenel Ka's regal composure flickered for a moment. "Jacen was here earlier."

"What?" Jaina suddenly regained that edge in her voice. "What do you mean,

here?"

"He paid a visit yesterday," Tenel Ka said. "I don't know where he is now, but-

"Would Hapan Fleet Ops have logged his vessel's movements?" asked Jaina. "Any

scrap of information might help."

Jacen must have felt the death like anyone else, and there was a good chance he'd

actually been here while Mara was pursuing Lumiya in this very system. But he was

"busy" on GAG business. Luke seethed in silence.

Tenel Ka nodded, all gracious calm again. "I'll have the captain get all the

available information for you."

Tenel Ka strode out. Jaina's expression was murderous.

"Don't say it," said Luke.

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"He's a total stranger," Jaina said. "There. I had to, or else I'll have an aneurysm

trying to stifle the urge to punch him out when he finally

trying to make the time to patch him out when he really bothers to show up."

Luke hugged Jaina, feeling dwarfed by the grand stateroom, and his comlink

buzzed. It was Leia.

"Hey," she said. Leia didn't just touch him in the Force, she enveloped him.

"We're coming back as fast as we can. I'm so sorry. I am so, so sorry."

It sounded as if Han had wrestled the link from her. "Kid, you just hang in there.

Don't do a thing. Leave it all to us. Is Ben okay?"

"Missing again."

"He'll be fine. Don't you worry. We're coming."

There wasn't much else Han could say, and he never mentioned Jacen. Luke put

his comlink back in his pocket.

The silence felt like pressure building on his eardrums.
His breathing seemed to

fill the room. What was the last thing I said to her?

"You know pretty well the last thing Mara and I talked about?" Jaina said

suddenly. She was doing exactly what he was-replaying
final conversations. Tears

welled in her eyes. "Nothing important, like how much I
loved her and what she'd done

for me. Just how much energy I waste in stupid games
with Zekk and Jag, like a dumb

sulky teenager."

"Don't do this to yourself."

"Takes . . . this to make me grow up." Jaina didn't seem

able to say the words:

Mara's death. "Everything's changed now."

"I know. I know."

"It's Lumiya."

"We don't know that."

"You're reasonable to the last, aren't you, Uncle Luke?"

"None of us is thinking straight at the moment." He didn't need Jaina going off on

an impulsive quest for vengeance. He had to focus-somehow. "Why don't you call . . .

Zekk? Jag?" He hadn't a clue which of the two men she'd want to turn to now. "They

need to know, too."

Jaina brushed the tip of her nose discreetly with the back of her wrist and seemed

to take an unnaturally fixed interest in the ornate carvings on a chair leg nearby. "I'll

inform them, but I'm done with all

that personal stuff. I'm going to concentrate on one thing, and that's making

Lumiya pay. If I'm supposed to be the Sword of the Jedi, then it's time I took it

seriously, and there's nothing that's worth my time more than this."

The duty captain of the guard came in later with a datapad on a bronzium platter

and held it out to Luke. When he hesitated, Jaina took it and pored over it. The

expression of I-told-you-so on her face told Luke that it wasn't going to be comfortable

news.

"You want the short version, Uncle Luke?"

"Up to you."

"Mara shows up after Jacen, in Five-Alpha, and asks Ops to keep an eye out for an

orange spherical ship with cruciform masts, because our new Chief of State might be

under threat."

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Luke always tried not to be swayed by circumstantial evidence, because two and

two frequently proved to add up to anything but four. But he didn't know if they'd find

any other evidence. He didn't know if they'd ever find Mara's body-or even if she'd

left mortal remains. He couldn't ignore this.

"Jaina," he said. "I think you have to leave this to me."

"What was it you said about none of us thinking straight?"

"I don't want anyone acting on half the facts."

"What's it going to take, then?"

"She's-she was my wife. I insist that I handle this myself."

"You shouldn't have to."

"I want to. Don't take this from me."

Jaina actually flinched. Luke didn't think he'd snapped at her. Maybe his pain was

so intense that the sudden burst of it then had touched her in the Force.

"Okay, Uncle," she said quietly. "But you just say the word, and I'll be there."

There was still no sign of Jacen by the time Luke had tried unsuccessfully to sleep

for six hours. He'd dropped off the charts, as Jaina put it. And Ben had not reappeared.

Ben, at least, had good reason.

The search for Five-Alpha resumed early in the morning.

KELDABE, MANDALORE

The fourth Bes'uliik off the production line rolled out of the hangar to meet the

scrutiny of a small crowd of silent, armored men. They'd folded their arms in that

typical go-on-amaze-me Mando way, but as soon as the fighter came alive and sent

dust pluming with its downdraft, they all applauded and yelled, "Oya!"

Yes, they thought it was okay. Fett watched it with a certain pride. The higher

frequencies in its drives made his sinuses tingle.

"Who says defense procurement drags its feet?" said Medrit. He didn't seem

bothered by the noise, even minus his helmet, but then blacksmiths had often been

deafened by their trade. "Record time."

"Only another half a million of these," Fett said, "and we'll be in business."

"It's never about numbers, Mand'alor. Never was."

There was something about the fighter-its effortless hover and tilt, combined

with the distinct throbbing note of its propulsion-that made it exceptionally attractive.

Fett doubted if it would have looked quite so pretty if it

was pounding your city to

molten slag. He planned to claim the offer of a test flight.

Mandalore was resurgent, as Beviin liked to say, and it was gathering pace. A

steady stream of Mandalorians was returning from diaspora. A few hundred thousand

in a week was nothing for a trillion-body city-planet like Coruscant, but Mandalore was

now creaking with the influx.

"You'd think a big empty planet like this could cope with a few immigrants," Fett

said.

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"Poor infrastructure." Medrit craned his neck to watch another Bes'uliik take off.

"Got to fix that. Four million was always a nice stable population until the crab-boys messed everything up."

"How many incomers, worst scenario?"

"Impossible to tell. But you asked for two million to come back, and I dare say we'll get that."

Fett still marveled at the ability of people to uproot themselves, but then

Mando'ade were traditionally nomads-and even he was happier in Slave I than with a roof over his head. "I'm always touched

when people do things without my needing to hang them out of windows."

"Sometimes," said Medrit, "you have only to ask. Go

read the Resol'nare. The six

basic tenets of being a Mando. One is to rally to the Mandalore when called."

"Handy," said Fett. "But it doesn't always happen."

Fett had begun to see the recurring parallels between Mandalore the world and

Mandalore the leader, and why the two terms had become synonymous in the outside

world. He'd always called himself a figurehead, a reminder of what Mandalorians

seemed to think they should be, social template as well as someone to hang the blame

on: but it came true. He was recovering, and so was the nation. Mandalore seemed to

move inversely to the rest of the galaxy, which was busy going down the tubes and

ripping itself apart yet again. But that was good for business if you sold arms and

military skills, so the correlation was expected.

"Time to celebrate," Medrit said. "A little, anyway. Come on, everyone's heading

to the tapcaf First round's on you."

As he walked, Fett reflected that he was as close to satisfied with life as he'd been

in a long time, except for the few nagging loose ends that had loomed large when he

was dying, and still hadn't gone away.

One of them was Jacen Solo.

It always came down to Jedi and their schisms in the end.

"It's true, I tell you. She's been murdered." Beviin was holding court in the

Oyu'baat, a tapcaf that brewed a sweet, sticky net'ra gal and never ran out of

narcolethe. "Big search going on in the Hapan Cluster. Serious trouble."

Fett visited the 'caf once a week partly because Mirta said it was good for morale,

but mainly because Beviin asked him to. Fett wanted Beviin to succeed him, even if

most expected him to groom Mirta.

"Cabinet in session, then?" he said.

The chieftains and neighbors who drank here had become Fett's cabinet, and if

there was any serious attempt at government going on-Mando'ade regarded that as a

deeply unhealthy and aruetyc thing-then it would only be tolerated over a budget and

tolerated over a buy ce gal

in the tapcaf.

"Welcome to the foreign affairs committee," said Beviin.

"Mara Skywalker's

missing, presumed dead."

"How do they know she's dead if the body disappears in a puff of smoke?" Carid

muttered. He was playing a four-way board game with Medrit, Dinua, and Mirta that

used short-handled stabbing blades. Fett watched from the sidelines, never able to work

out the rules. "They do that, don't they?"

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Fett thought of his lightsaber collection. "Sometimes."

Carid, using his helmet on the floor as a footrest, winked.

"So where's the
forensics?"

Dinua stabbed her blade into the board, and there was a murmur of "Kandosii."

"They sense it all in the Force."

"I'd joke, but I hear their son has gone missing, too."
Carid tutted loudly. "What

kind of parents are these Jedi?"

Fett wouldn't have traded places with any of the Solos or Skywalkers. They were

a tragically unhappy dynasty, and even if sympathy was something nobody paid him to

have, he understood the loss of a parent, and a child.

"Any mention of Jacen Solo?" he asked.

"That name has cropped up."

"There's a surprise."

"Mentions of a Lumiya, too. Alias Shira Brie."

Now, there was a name from Fett's past. Some things never went away. "It all ran

better under Vader."

"I'm still waiting for justice for my mama," Mirta said quietly. "Because if nobody

else can be bothered to slit Jacen Solo's throat, I will."

She hadn't mentioned that in a while. Everyone-everyone-was waiting to see

what retribution Fett had devised for the Solo brat. The longer he waited, the more

sadistically just they expected it to be. But Fett could see something different in Mirta's

eyes: if her grandfather was the most efficiently brutal

eyes. If her grandfather was the most efficiently brutal bounty hunter in the galaxy,

why hadn't he brought her Jacen Solo's hide?

The Jedi were right about one thing. Raw anger was a poor basis for action. He'd

teach her cold patience, the best legacy he could bequeath her.

"Medrit," said Fett, "I want to send Han Solo a gift."

"Nice carbonite table?"

"Proper beskar crushgaunts, so he can throttle the life out of his vermin spawn.

And maybe a couple of armor plates and a small blade."

"Gift-wrapped, signed Please kill your son before we have to?"

"Just With deepest sympathy."

It was as deep as Fett could manage, anyway. It must have been terrible to have

such a disappointment for a son.

HAPES CLUSTER

Luke thought it was prudent for Corran Horn to take over the Jedi Council in his

absence. He wasn't sure he could trust himself. It all felt very academic, even on a good

day, and today was as far from one of those as he could imagine.

But apart from the fact that he was now minus everything good in his heart except

Ben, Luke felt like his old self for the first time in years. He felt clarity. He knew what

he had to do, and there were no gray areas or ambiguities about who was right and who

was wrong. For all his pain, the sense of clean focus gave him something to cling to.

And old voices called to him.

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He cruised the Transitory Mists in the StealthX, wondering if it had been a

phantom effect of the region's ionization and sensor-scrambling phenomena that had

guided him here. He magnified his presence in the Force again.

The comm alert broke his concentration for a moment.

"Luke," said Corran's voice. "This is land of hard to ignore. Everyone's getting

anxious to saddle up and lend you a hand."

"There's only one person I need to respond, my friend.

And she's coming. But . . .

thanks."

"What do you mean, She's coming!"

"Lumiya. I can feel her strongly now."

"It's a trap, Luke."

"For me and her, then."

"She's making it too easy."

"Corran, don't worry about me . . ."

"You know any one of us would gladly do it for you."

"I do. And that's why I have to."

Lumiya was here; Luke could feel her because she wanted him to, he knew that.

He wondered how many times she'd passed by him unnoticed and undetected, and

congratulated herself on her stealth. He thought of the hand offered to him after they

last fought, and how he hadn't detected any ill will. That level of skilled deceit would

have been impressive if he hadn't felt so sickeningly betrayed by it—betrayed by his

own gullibility.

Mara used to say he bent over backward to see the good in everyone.

"I won't be trying too hard today," he whispered. "In fact, not at all."

He didn't even miss Mara right then. To miss someone, he had to accept that they

were gone so he could yearn for them. Mara was still there, just frustratingly silent and

unseen and he dreaded the moment when he finally said

unseen, and he created the moment when he finally said
to himself, Yes, she's gone,

she's really gone, and she isn't going to walk through the
doors and complain how

crowded the sky-lanes are these days.

The Transitory Mists were bandit country, rife with
piracy, and Luke didn't care.

He maintained a steady circuit off Terephon. Eventually,
the feeling of someone

darting through his peripheral vision became one of
someone in the same room. He

rotated the fighter 360 degrees in each plane, ignoring his
sensors and his Force-senses

for the moment because he wanted to see this thing
coming, to look it in the eye and

take in the entirety of it in the fundamental way of a
grieving husband, not a Jedi

Master.

"I knew you'd find time for me," he commed.

Had she heard him?

His comm crackled. Lumiya's voice had never aged. He hadn't noticed that before.

"I saw no point in running, Luke. Let's finish this."

The ship was exactly as he'd imagined: rough-skinned, red-orange, so organic in

appearance that it might have suited the Yuuzhan Vong. The angular masts and webbed

vanes at its cardinal points lent it an edge of predatory grace.

"I had to make sure she died," said Lumiya. "But you'll understand that, sooner or

later "

She didn't open fire, and the sphere didn't move. Luke considered taking one kill

shot, but he'd done that before, and a pilot called Shira Brie had survived the appalling

injuries he inflicted to become the cyborg facing him now. No, she had to die for

good.

The sphere rotated to face Terephon and began to pick up speed, on a straight

course for the planet. Luke set off in pursuit and the two ships accelerated, pushing

their sublight limits in what Luke started to feel was a crash dive.

Oh no, Lumiya, you don't get away with a. suicide run.

You're mine.

He stayed within his thoughts: he had next to nothing to say to her now. The

sphere was streaking ahead of him, pulling away. He hung on it, closing the gap,

calculating how long he had to intercept before it hit the upper atmosphere and

plummeted to the surface, robbing him of every closure he needed.

And justice. Don't forget that. It's about paying the price for Mara's life.

The StealthX edged nearer its manual's recommended safe velocity. Luke brought

the fighter alongside the sphere, dipping one set of wings in warning to make it clear

he'd intercept her. Maybe she didn't realize that he had tractor capability; she would

tractor capability. She would

now. Luke dropped back behind her and applied enough traction to slow her and get

her attention. He could have sworn something protested. It was the ship, complaining

deep in his mind about the rough handling.

Lumiya seemed to get the idea and decelerated. Luke broke contact before they hit

atmosphere, and followed her down, buzzing her to force her to land on a flat-topped

mesa overlooking a typically spacious Hapan-style city nestling among trees and vast

gardens.

He jumped out of the cockpit and waited for her to leave the safety of her vessel,

standing with his lightsaber in both hands. Eventually an

opening formed in the side of

the sphere, and she emerged. Would the ship attack him as it had Mara? It made no

move. He couldn't even feel it now.

"Come on, Luke, try to finish the job. Mara would have wanted that, yes?"

Lumiya reached up to her face and tore away the veil that covered everything but her

eyes. Then she reached behind her back and slowly drew out her lightwhip. "And this

isn't to make you feel shame for the extent of my injuries. I just want you to see who

you're fighting."

"I'm seeing." Luke drew his lightsaber and temporary comfort flooded him. "And

this ends here."

THE CRACK HERE.

He knew the lightwhip by now. He'd relied on the shoto as an extra weapon in the

past to counter the whip's twin elements of matter and energy, but he was flooded with

a new confidence that he could take her with just the lightsaber that had always stood

between him and darkness. Holding it two-handed over his head, he rotated it slowly,

stalking around her.

Lumiya raised her arm to flick the whip and get the momentum for the forward

stroke. And then she cracked it, sending forks of dark energy crackling into the ground

at his feet, making him jump back before he sprang forward again and brought the

lightsaber around in a right-to-left arc that she parried with the whip's handle. He leapt

out of range of the whirling tails again and again, then she paused and he edged closer

again.

"You hate me that much?" he asked.

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"I don't hate you at all."

"You killed her. You killed my Mara."

"Nothing personal." She looked as if she was smiling, but the movement was

around her eyes rather than her cybernetic mouth. "Just doing what I swore an oath to

the Emperor to do. To serve the dark side. Oaths matter, Luke. They're all you're left

with in the end."

She drew back her arm and brought the lightwhip crackling through the air,

missing Luke by centimeters. He lunged at her again and again, driven back each time.

She'd slow sooner or later.

But so would he.

Then, as she began to raise her arm again, he ran at her, so close in that she

couldn't get the whip traveling at its maximum lethal speed. He forced her back, step by

step, as she tried to maintain the distance she needed.

One-two-three-four; she blocked him, handle held this way, then that, using

the whip like a short lightsaber to deflect him, but Luke

didn't pause or shift direction

to wrong-foot her. He drove her like a battering ram toward the edge of the mesa,

pushing her within meters, then a step, of the edge.

Lumiya held the whip handle in both hands like a staff and blocked his downward

sweep. For a moment they were locked in a stalemate, pushing against each other and

grunting with the effort, with only the sounds of exertion because they had nothing left

to say to each other.

Her rear foot began to slide backward as she struggled for purchase. The edge of

the mesa was cracked and fissured. The smooth glittering stone began to crumble.

Luke reached out and caught her hand as she fell, whip

tumbling and bouncing

down the steep rock face into oblivion. He leaned back,
all his weight on his heels,

knuckles clenched white with the strain of holding her
weight, and for a second he

wanted to see her face dwindling as she fell to her death,
mouth open in a scream, but

that wasn't the way to end this.

"I'd never let you fall," Luke said, and pulled her back to
safety. As she

straightened up, he looked her in the eyes-calm, eerily
calm-and swung his

lightsaber in a single decapitating arc.

Now he could breathe again.

KAVAN: STORM WATER TUNNELS

Ben sat in the tunnel with his mother for a long time, and that fact in itself was the start of his investigation.

At first, he deluded himself that she was in a deep healing trance, even though the

Force never lied, and the void that had opened in it would have been felt and

understood by every Jedi.

He'd run straight to her side, through country he didn't know, and found her. He

wanted to think she wasn't dead because she was there, still much as he'd last seen her

except for the blood and scrapes of a new fight.

So he sat with her, waiting.

He wanted to clean her face and make her beautiful again, but his GAG training

said not to remove evidence, not to tamper with a crime scene.

Ben the fourteen-year-old son, lost and grief-stricken, willed his mother just to be

in a deep trance. Ben the lieutenant knew better but didn't mention it to his child-self,

and was careful to note everything around him, take holosimages, make notes of smells,

sounds, and other ephemeral data, and begin to form a logical sequence that would tell

him how his mother had met her death.

He was still sitting there, taking in every pore of her skin and every speck of brick

dust on her jacket when he heard someone nicking his

clutched on his jacket, when he heard someone picking his way over debris toward him.

He couldn't feel the person in the Force.

"Hello, Jacen," he said, and turned to look at him.

Jacen's mouth opened slightly while he stared first at Mara—a long, baffled

stare—and then at Ben. He reached out his hand to him.

"It's okay, Ben. It's okay. We'll get whoever did this. I swear we will."

Ben was still shut down, hiding his Force presence, but Jacen had found him. It

was time to go to his father. He wanted to be with him now.

Maybe the killing of his mother had left a mark in the Force that Jacen had

followed. Ben considered the possibility that he was too

upset to notice it himself.

He made a careful note of it anyway.

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chapter twenty-three

Lawyers for former GA Chief of State Cal Omas have slammed the Justice

Department for the delay in bringing charges against him. Omas, currently under house

arrest, is said to be pressing for a public trial. A GAG spokesman said today that

investigations were still ongoing.

-HNE news bulletin

THE OYU'BAAT, KELDABE, MANDALORE

Venku-Kad'ika-came up to Fett and Mirta in the tapcaf and gestured over his

shoulder. "He says he'll do it," said Venku. "He didn't want to tell you he could read the

stone there and then, in case he couldn't. He hates disappointing people."

The old man who'd come to stare at Fett with Kad'ika the other day walked slowly

across the tapcaf. He peeled off his gloves and held out a frail hand dappled with age.

"I can do it," he said. "Let me hold the stone."

Mirta looked hesitant, then took off the necklace to hand it to Fett.

"You're Kiffar by origin, then," Fett said. Mandalorians came from any number of

species and planets, but adopting the culture didn't erase their genetic profiles. "Saves

----- :-----"

me a journey."

"I . . . know the planet."

"What's your price?"

"Your peace of mind, Mand'alor. Nobody should search in vain for the resting

place of loved ones."

Fett wasn't expecting that. The hand still held out in front of him was surprisingly

steady. Fett held the heart-of-fire by its leather cord and lowered it into the man's palm

before sitting down and trying to seem unconcerned.

The old man folded his fingers around it and stood staring at his fist, his breathing

slow and heavy.

"She was very unhappy, wasn't she?"

It was a good guess. It was inevitable, in fact. The old man probably said it to all

the wounded and lonely souls he came across. Charlatans and con men relied on the

reactions of others. Fett said nothing to help him take a lucky guess, and there was no

expression to betray him.

"And she found it hard to ever trust another man."

Fett still sat in silence, one boot on the chair. Sintas had never trusted anyone.

Bounty hunters weren't the trusting kind, so it was a safe, easy deduction dressed up as

revelation.

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"Her worst days were when your daughter learned to

talk, and asked where Dada

was."

Fett was starting to tire of this. He shifted in his seat, ignoring the voice that

whispered it was probably true. How would he know, anyway? He couldn't verify it.

He and Sintas had parted by then and he saw nothing more of Ailyn.

Not until I saw her dead body.

"She thought you still cared when you recovered the hologram for her."

Now that wasn't a guess. It was specific. And it was . . . true. Fett didn't dare look

at Mirta. The inn was absolutely silent: the popping and crackling of the tapcaf's log

fire sounded like battlefield explosions.

"She said you were far too young to know what you were doing, and you said you

only needed to know that she was beautiful, that she was a terrific shot, and that you

could trust her as much as you could trust any woman."

Fett's scalp tightened and prickled. It was exactly what he'd said, and it was too

stupid and juvenile a line for anyone to make up on the spot. No, he has to have

information, he has to be putting on a show, he got the information from someone . . .

but how?

The man took a deep breath and hesitated before speaking again.

"You told her that you'd make Lenovar pay for what he

did to her, and she tried to

talk you out of it-

It was too much for Fett. "Enough." He thrust out his hand, palm up. "So you can

read the stone."

Venku lowered his chin. Even without sight of the man's face, Fett knew the

expression behind the visor was fearless and protective anger.

The old Mando took a gentler approach than his bodyguard. "Just tell me what

you want to know," he said. "I know these things can be painful."

Mirta didn't give Fett a chance to answer. It was just as well: he couldn't bring

himself to say it. To onlookers, he was just being typically silent and surly.

"I want to know how she spent her last hours," Mirta said. "I want to find her body."

The old man put the heart-of-fire on the table while he removed his helmet. He

had a fine-boned, thin face and a wispy beard that was whiter than his hair, which still

showed traces of sandy blond. He was sweating: picking up the memories and traces of

time embedded in the stone's molecular structure seemed to be exhausting him.

And he didn't have a Kiffar facial tattoo. But then neither did Mirta, despite the

fact that Ailyn had embraced the Kiffar culture completely. In some lines of work a

permanent identifying mark had its drawbacks.

"It doesn't give me the memories in order," said the veteran. "It's all random, like

flashbacks. I see images, hear sounds, smell aromas, and so on. Making sense of it isn't

easy."

He laid his helmet on the table and picked up the stone again, this time pressing it

between both palms. Venku put a steadying hand on his shoulder, and Fett felt

inexplicably uneasy.

"Do you want me to . . . find acts of violence?"

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Fett glanced at Mirta, not for agreement but because he

couldn't help it. Her brow

was creased in a little frown. Dry-eyed; focused. Not a pretty girl, but a good strong

bone structure.

"You'll find plenty of that," she said. "She was a bounty hunter."

"You're not in here, Mirta . . . ," said the old Mando, eyes tight shut.

"She died before I was born. I want to know who killed her."

There were a few more people now in the tapcaf than there had been. Fett

indicated the door with a jerk of his thumb. "Out. I'll let you know when you can finish

your drinks."

I want to know who killed her, too. It's too long ago, but

I want to know.

"She wore this all the time." The old man looked almost in pain, and Venku

squeezed his shoulder. "She was angry a lot of the time. Scared, too. There are so many

people passing through here . . . but I keep coming back to a chart of Phaeda. Red

skies, and someone she was following. Resada? Rezoda?"

Mirta didn't blink. She seemed transfixed. "Grandmama didn't tell anyone where

she was going, or who she was hunting."

The man opened his eyes and took a rasping breath. "Phaeda. Whatever it was, it

happened on Phaeda." He jerked back and stared at the stone. "And she fought to hang

on to this. She fought hard."

Fett managed not to swallow. He was sure they'd all hear it. "She lost."

"I want to know," said Mirta.

Venku stepped in. "He's had enough. Maybe later." He retrieved his helmet and

tried to steer the old man away. "Come on."

"I don't know about the when," the old man said, pulling from Venku's grasp, "but

I know it's Phaeda. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

He handed the stone back to Mirta, placing it in her cupped palms with both hands

as if it were a live fledgling. Fett had never been comfortable around that mystical kind

of thing. He simply observed.

"It's okay," Mirta said. "You've told me a lot, and I'm grateful. Let me buy you an ale."

"Maybe another day, ner ad'ika," Venku said. "But thank you."

Mirta watched the door close. As she turned back to Fett, the door opened again

and disgruntled drinkers filtered back in, giving the two of them a wide berth.

"Well? Was he right, Ba'buir?"

Fett shrugged. It had shaken him, like all the painful memories that flooded back

without his permission. "On the nail."

"Well, we can follow that lead."

Fett dreaded what else the old man had seen in the

stone. Old man. He was only

ten or maybe fifteen years older than Fett. "I don't think I've ever been to Phaeda."

The tapcaf owner lined up fresh ales on the bar. "I see you've met Kad'ika, then,

Mand'alor."

"Yeah. Fascinating."

"The old man with him-don't see him around much. Gotab, I think. I used to

think that was Kad'ika's father, but apparently not."

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The name didn't mean a thing to Fett, but he filed it mentally under subjects to

investigate later. Phaeda. He'd scour Slave I's databases, maybe hack into the Phaeda

archives. Mirta was examining the stone closely.

"Must have cost every credit you had, Ba'buir."

She passed the heart-of-fire to Fett and he turned it over in his fingers, touching

the carving on the edge. Only the most skilled cutter could facet the uncut stones

without shattering them, let alone carve them.

"It's rare to find one with all the colors in it. They're usually red or orange, but the

light ones with the whole rainbow . . . they cost."

"I saw a blue one once," Mirta said.

"I was sixteen. I couldn't afford a blue one."

Fett could afford one now, any number of them, even the rarest of deep royal-blue

stones that showed their incredible range of multicolored fire only in bright sunlight.

But he no longer had a lover to give them to. It had been a very long time.

"Tell me something about Ailyn," he said. "Was she ever happy?"

Mirta chewed over the question. "I don't think so."

The only thing Fett knew about his own daughter beyond the people she'd killed

and what she'd stolen was that she had never been happy, never called him Dad, and

that she'd taught Mirta to hate him. He still hadn't questioned the girl about that. The

time never felt right.

"Were you ever happy?" Mirta asked.

Fett never considered if anyone wondered if he was

Fett never considered if anyone wondered if he was happy or not. There seemed

to be a blanket assumption that Boba Fett coasted along on a narrow path of dispassion,

never angry, never happy, never sad.

"I was happy as a kid," he said at last. "I stopped being happy on Geonosis and I

never bothered trying again."

But he'd been angry, all right: angry, grief-stricken, terrified, lonely, and hostile.

He'd run through all the negative emotions at full intensity in those days after his

father's death, crammed in the spaces between doing what he had to do to survive,

when he needed to be all cold logic. It was a switch he had to throw, off and on, off and

on, until one day it didn't switch on again, and the pain was gone. So were the joy and the love.

If he did what his dad wanted, it might come back. If he did an honorable job, and

tried to at least understand the remnant of his own family, he stood a chance of

recapturing some of what was ripped from him in that arena on Geonosis.

"Drink up, Ba'buir" Mirta said. "I want to go and do some digging about Phaeda."

GALACTIC ALLIANCE WARSHIP OCEAN.

ON STATION JUST BEYOND CORELLIAN SPACE

It's awfully good of you to join us," said Admiral Niathal. Jacen walked onto the

bridge and tasted the mix of emotions around him, ranging from vague interest to

nervousness. "I was very sorry indeed to hear of your loss."

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Jacen nodded politely. She sounded as if she really meant the condolence, but

then she was pretty good at hitting the right note. He was visiting Ocean in his capacity

as Chief of State to try out a little hearts-and-minds on a gathering of the various ally

worlds. There was nothing like a meeting on a suitably mighty warship to show folks

what was at stake. The Confederation was now planning a major push against the Core

Worlds, intelligence suggested, so Jacen hoped everyone

was paying attention.

Life was going on much as before. Recent days seemed to have been a lot of

sweat for nothing. If he needed any more answers to Sith philosophical questions, he

was on his own. Lumiya had managed to commit suicide-by-Skywalker. Jacen might

not have been part of the Jedi Council, but the GAG were very efficient interceptors of

messages.

Uncle Luke did it. He actually did it. Like my dad-you never know how far

they'll go, do you?

"So," Jacen said, "Corellia seems to have been very quiet in my absence."

"They were waiting for your return, that much on the Core

They were waiting for your return—that push on the Core looks imminent.

They'd hate you to miss anything." Niathal, annoyed or not about his extra day or so of

absence, seemed to have an air about her of someone who was suddenly more

comfortable with her new role, as if she'd taken advantage of his back being turned to

forgo fresh alliances and consolidate her power. It was almost like a fragrance; the aura

that surrounded the love of power was something Jacen knew very well indeed. "The

triumvirate is still doing the day-to-day running of affairs, but I've got our Intel folks

and political analysts reading the signs about who might replace the dear departed

Prime—" She stopped abruptly, and this time she was

genuinely rattled. He could feel

it. "I'm so sorry. That was grossly insensitive of me under the circumstances."

"It's okay." Maybe there was a gentler side to Niathal after all. If there was, he'd

exploit it to the hilt. "Can't tread on eggs and suspend all normal conversation about

deaths. The best thing we can do to honor my aunt's memory is to win for her."

"Indeed."

"Murkhana seems tense. We're past the deadline, yes?"

"We're keeping a watching brief on that. Might well be Mandalorian psych tactics.

Eight X-wings on standby to keep the peace is the price of GA harmony. On the other

hand, if the Mandalorians do threaten to prevent their

hand, if the Mandalorians do show up to support their Verpine allies by halting

disputed production in their own inimitable way, then at least we might get a very

useful look at the capabilities of their new assault fighter."

"Some might think," he said quietly, "that we'd prefer to see them attack

Murkhana than not."

"I never turn down intelligence, Colonel Solo."

"Very wise, Admiral Niathal."

Jacen wandered over to the bridge holochart that showed the entire Corellian

theater. They still had a lot of ships. There was a limited action going on on the

Coreward side of the chart. It always struck Jacen as overdetailed to show real-time

life-and-death struggles as charmingly aesthetic and silent graphics.

"Is this current?"

"Yes, sir," said the officer of the watch. "Updated once a minute."

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"I think we're missing something, Lieutenant," Jacen said, dipping his fingertip

into the maze of light to make his point. "Look, what you have here is actually a flotilla

of corvettes, and this Destroyer here will move into this position, because she's actually

operating a-

He trailed off, aware of the raised eyebrows and puzzled looks he was getting, but

bathed in the growing warmth of revelation.

I can see all this.

"Can we check that out?" the officer of the watch called to a colleague. "Colonel

Solo is rarely mistaken."

Colonel Solo, Jacen thought, had just had the epiphany of his life.

It's true. Lumiya was right. Oh, this is exquisite. I was blind before. How did I

ever think I could succeed as a commander without this?

Lumiya had promised him a battlefield awareness and judgment that made

ordinary battle meditation look like a finger painting-to sense and coordinate by the

power of his mind and will alone, a power that only came

to fruition in the Master of
the Sith.

It's me. It really is. It was Mara's sacrifice after all, I accept that now.

But I still don't understand the prophecy. And I don't like what I can't understand.

He was a Sith Lord. Now his work could truly begin.

It had happened.

And it was beautiful.

JEDI COUNCIL SHUTTLE, HAPES CLUSTER

Luke was grateful for something he still couldn't understand. He paused before he

walked through the doors to the compartment, taking a few deep breaths. Cilghal

looked up as he came in, and moved as if to leave.

Mara-no, Mara's body-lay draped from the neck down in a plain white sheet on

an examination table. Luke had steeled himself for something terrible, imagining her

horribly disfigured or her features contorted; but she simply looked as if she were

sleeping on her back, pale and peaceful, her red hair smoothly tidy in a way it never

was when he watched her as she slept.

"It's okay, Cilghal," he said. "I don't need to be alone with her."

"Oh, yes, you do, Luke," she said softly "And I can come back later."

"I don't understand it," he said. "But I get to hold her one last time, and I

wondered if I ever would. I can't tell you how grateful I am."

He couldn't see Cilghal's face now. His eyes were hot and brimming. She patted

his arm.

"You thought she would become discorporeal," she said.

"We talked about it once or twice. I thought she might choose that when the time

came. I'm glad she changed her mind."

"She certainly made sure we had evidence." Cilghal paused for a second, inhaled

sharply, and started again. "It was poison, one I've never seen before. But don't doubt

that she also wanted you to be able to say good-bye."

Cilghal turned and hurried out.

Luke couldn't speak or even look away from Mara, and he spent a long time

staring into her face. If her eyes had opened, and she'd asked how long she'd overslept,

he wouldn't have been surprised. He lifted the sheet to clasp her left hand, and it was

just the chill that made him flinch. After a while the skin felt warm from the heat of his

own body.

Cilghal needed forensic evidence for the record. But Lumiya had killed Mara, and

Lumiya had paid the price. There was no investigation to follow.

Yet that meant there was no need for Mara to remain now, and Luke was torn

between wanting never to take his eyes from her and recalling how Yoda became one

with the Force: then he might really see her again. But he understood so little of those

elements of mysticism. Right then, he was grateful to settle for watching her.

"You really did want to see me, didn't you?" he whispered, and leaned over to kiss

her. He wondered if she would vanish in the next instant. He didn't dare look away, and

knew that it was only stopping him from accepting that she was gone. Even when he

felt Ben walking toward the compartment, and heard him walk softly across the deck,

he didn't turn around. He reached out his left arm so Ben would walk up to him and

accept the embrace while Luke watched over Mara.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said to her. "It's Ben."

"I'm sorry you couldn't find me, Dad," he said. "I just had to go to her and be

there."

It was the first time Luke had spoken to Ben since before Mara had left: it felt like

the first time in ages, in fact. Luke tried to think about what it must have been like for

Ben to stand guard over his mother's body, alone and scared, but he was still too mired

in his own grief and shock.

"Dad ... I know she's telling us something. I've been thinking about it all the way

back."

Poor kid. Luke didn't quite understand what he meant, but they could talk it

through later. He was proud of his son's strength and dignity. Ben could take the other

news, too. He did a man's job now.

"Anyway, I got Lumiya."

"Yeah?" Ben sounded surprised. "What do you mean, got?"

"I killed her. I won't dress it up. I owed it to Mara to give her justice."

Ben was totally silent. Luke felt a small disturbance around him and his muscles

stiffened.

"Dad . . ."

"I know, legal process and all that, but legal process . . .

Lumiya said she had to . .

. well, a life for a life. That's all."

"Dad . . . Dad, it wasn't Lumiya."

"It was. She said

What exactly had Lumiya said?

"No, no, it can't be, because I was right next to her at the moment Mom died,

nowhere near the scene. We'd landed on Kavan, both of us. She was still in the Sith

sphere."

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Luke heard Ben's voice from a long way away, and everything was upended

again.

It wasn't her. It wasn't Lumiya.

"Dad, take it easy, okay? We'll find who did it." Ben grabbed his shoulders. "Dad,

that's why Mom stayed. She stayed so we could find evidence. We don't know who did

it yet. Forget about Lumiya. You just got to her first-I was going after her before

Mom died. You did the galaxy a necessary service."

No, he hadn't. Luke didn't feel he had done that at all. He'd killed Lumiya-evil as

she was-for something she hadn't done. That wasn't justice.

Luke found himself sinking to his knees. "I killed the wrong-

"Sith."

"I killed the wrong person. But she said "

I killed the wrong person. But she said-

Ben put his hands on either side of his father's face, suddenly years older than

Luke. "Look at me, Dad. It's not good to do this here. Let's talk elsewhere."

"Ben . . ."

"What about all the other people she killed and had killed? She's not worth your

anguish, Dad. Save your tears for Mom, 'cos I will."

Luke managed to hang on for a few more minutes. When he couldn't stand it any

longer, he strode off to his cabin, shut the hatch, and sobbed and raged in private until

he was spent. He'd thought he was bearing up well, holding in all those tears, and then

something like Lumiya added a straw to the scales and

the floodgates opened. He hated

her for that. He'd wanted to weep for Mara, his grief
untainted by anything connected

with the evil that had led to her death. He didn't want
Lumiya intruding in this moment,

and yet somehow she had.

Whoever had killed Mara was still around. He could
focus on bringing them to

justice, and that meant he had something else to hang on
to while he struggled with

grief.

But Lumiya had done it again.

She'd fooled him one last time, manipulated him one last
time, thwarted him one

last time, and it broke something deep, deep inside him.

chapter twenty-four

Message to: Hapan Meet Ops

Originating station: Terephon

Unregistered and unidentified ship notified to us by Jedi Master Skywalker has

been removed without authorization from Tu'ana City. Please advise Master Skywalker

that we regret this act of theft while the vessel was in our jurisdiction, and will meet

any claim for compensation.

MANDALMOTORS LANDING STRIP, KELDABE,
MANDALORE

Boba Fett meshed his fingers to push his gloves back tight on his hands, and

looked up at the open cockpit of the Bes'uliik. Under his visor, he allowed himself an

intensely private, broad grin.

Beviin applauded, laughing. "Mando boys on tour! Come on, Bob'ika, take that jet

pack off before you get in or you'll have a nasty involuntary ejection at altitude . . ."

Spirits were high. Fett hadn't led a Mandalorian strike force since the vongese

war, as far as he could recall. There might have been others, but that was the big one,

the one that counted.

There were cheers of "Oya manda!" as Bes'uliik prototype fighters were rolled out

from the hangar. People were taking holorecordings and pointing out the finer points of

the airframe to their kids. The mood around Fett felt like a heady blend of nostalgia and

optimism for the future, which was perhaps inappropriate considering that they were

about to violate Murkhana sovereign territory-only temporarily, of course-and bomb

a couple of its factory complexes into Hutt space.

It was all being done considerately. He'd made a point of sending a warning to

factory staff and residents in the likely blast zone to evacuate well in advance. It wasn't

as if the Mando flight was sneaking in and hammering them without decent notice.

Mando'ade weren't savages, after all. Well, not recently . . . and only to vongese, if they

were.

Besides, Fett wanted decent HNE coverage of the new fighter in action. It was

worth an armored division in terms of deterrent. There was nothing sloppier than

finishing an engagement before the media had a chance to set up and record it.

Dad would have loved this.

Fett was due to be the last pilot to embark, so he watched the other pilots getting

into their cockpits. Beviin had been looking forward to this like a kid before a birthday.

Medrit lifted up their grandchildren, Shalk and Briila, so the kids could slap their

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handprints on the fuselage in paint. It was a discreet light

gray, although Shalk insisted

a good verdyc blood-red shade would have been heaps and heaps better.

"Ba'buir," called Mirta. "Hey, hang on! Pare sol!"

Fett turned. Mirta was running across the field, datapad clutched in her hand, and

Orade ran with her. Either she thought Ba'buir was so senile that he wasn't capable of

returning alive from a simple bombing raid in the hardest fighter on the market, or she

wanted to do something unforgivably sentimental. He braced for mild embarrassment.

But she didn't look like she was about to have a sentimental moment. She

looked-distraught.

Fett automatically did a quick scan around the crowd to make sure everyone

whose survival mattered to him was still there and in one piece. Mirta was clearly

bearing bad news that couldn't wait.

Ah well. It happens.

"Ba'buir," she panted. "I want you to be really calm about this."

Fett said nothing, and just pointed to his visor.

"I'm not sure how to tell you this." She brandished the datapad as if she wanted to

show she had evidence, and that she wasn't kidding. "It's . . . I don't know . . ."

"Spit it out."

"You know I started going through the Phaeda stuff?"

"Yeah."

"I did a search of all the archive material for names like Resada and Rezoda"

Fett could see he was going to have to drag it out of her a grunt at a time. "Yeah."

"Rezodar, gangster. Dead gangster, in fact. Died around thirty-eight years ago.

That's the name stored in the heart-of-fire."

Fett noted Orade looking at Mirta as if he was more worried about her than about

Fett's wrath for once. "That's going to be a significant date, I assume."

"It is. I found he had an outstanding estate, which is what Phaeda calls leaving

stuff of value without a will or anyone to claim it. The state can't claim it, so they store

it. The state lawyer's really annoyed about still having to store stuff, and he says if we

want to file a claim, he'll be a happier man. It'll take some time."

Fett wasn't sure that news of a very dead scumbag's leavings was worth

interrupting his Bes'uliik moment. But Mirta wasn't the drama-queen kind. This had to

be something about Sintas's death that would make him very, very focused. She'd

worked out that he'd been touchy

-and then some-about slights to Sintas, even if he

had left her.

"Mirta," Fett said firmly. He rarely used her name. "Just tell me the seriously bad

bit."

She handed him the datapad. The screen was already set to show images of what

was stored in Rezodar's lockup, all numbered by the inheritance court division. Fett

thumbed through them.

"Just look for the carbonite slab, Ba'buir."

Fett didn't like the sound of that.

When he got to it, he couldn't quite make out the contours, so he magnified the

image.

Oh, fierfek . . .

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He wanted to blurt out something, but no sound came anyway, and nobody was

any the wiser with a man in a helmet. His legs threatened to give way. He handed the

datapad back to her, taking a deep, slow breath to try to control the tremor in his guts.

"What do you need from me to get this released?" Fett was sure his voice was

shaking. "Credits? Signature?"

"Is that it?" Mirta demanded.

"Just tell me." It can't be true. It can't be.

"I can do it myself." She looked hurt, which wasn't easy for a hard-faced girl like

that. "A thousand credits."

"I'll pay." Fett could hardly believe the words that were coming out of his mouth,

all in the voice of a cocky stranger. "She was alone, my ex-

all in the voice of a calm stranger. "She was-she's my ex-wife, after all."

Sintas was alive.

Sintas Vel, his first and only wife, was alive, provided nothing had gone wrong

with the carbonite process.

She was going to have quite a bit of catching up to do with the galaxy-and her

shattered family.

Ailyn, what can I say?

"Okay" Mirta was all sour grit again. "Play the hard man in front of your

burc'yase, but I know you by now."

Fett had decided to visit the refresher before the sortie. Now was a very good

time. "I bet you do."

He strode off, same as ever, because that was what everyone expected, then shut

the refresher doors and leaned his back against the wall. He slid all the way down it and

squatted there, head in his hands, shaking.

Sintas was alive.

He waited a few minutes, then got to his feet and walked out onto the landing strip

to join his Bes'uliik as if nothing had happened.

CAPTAIN'S DAY CABIN, SSD ANAKIN SOLO

I see it now. I know what I loved most and what had to be killed.

Jacen had laid on his bunk for hours, trying to slot the last piece into the puzzle

that tormented him. It was the prophecy. It didn't fit.

He will immortalize his love.

It was only when Jacen considered that he might not refer to himself that he

started down a complex path that showed the prophecy in its multifaceted complexity.

It didn't just have one meaning: it had many.

And this is why I'm now Lord of the Sith.

There'd been no pyrotechnics, and no cataclysmic shift in the Force; and yet, from

where he stood now, Jacen looked back and saw a landscape that had changed utterly.

It had changed footstep by footstep, act by act, death by death, a change so gradual and

incremental that he hardly noticed its passage until-

Until now.

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He wasn't the same Jacen Solo who was shocked when Lumiya had told him he

was destined to be a Sith Lord.

If he looked back far enough, Jacen saw its beginnings in Vergere's oddly

concerned avian eyes as he suffered physical torment that had changed him forever,

showing him that there was nothing he couldn't endure and pass beyond if his will

wanted it.

And he'd killed not a person he loved, but something precious whose absence he

was going to find very hard to handle. It was already

searing a hole in him. It had

mattered. And it still had the appearance of being alive, but it was walking dead.

What he'd loved and yet killed was Ben's admiration and devotion to him. Jacen

had grown to love that adulation-and he had loved robbing Luke of the role of adored

father and mentor.

He will immortalize his love . . . where immortalize means "dead."

And Ben-he knew Ben well enough to realize that he would never rest until his

beloved mother's killer was caught, and that she would always be that perfect icon of

beauty and courage to him.

Ben's love's immortal now. It'll last as long as he lives

BEN'S LOVE'S IMMORTAL NOW. IT'LL LAST AS LONG AS HE LIVES,
unchanging, like his vision

of Mara. And-like the hatred and vengeance he'll feel for
me when he learns what I

did. That'll live forever, too.

Jacen got up and looked at his reflection in the mirror on
the bulkhead again. He'd

studied it as if looking for changing symptoms, hour by
hour, to see if his Sith status

were manifesting itself in his flesh. He didn't look any
different.

But he kept seeing Ben's face as he walked up to the boy
in that tunnel and found

him keeping vigil over his dead mother. His eyes . . . they
knew something was waiting

to be revealed, something that would rip him apart.

Mara made Ben start wondering why she didn't become one with the Force.

Sooner or later, he'll find out. You played your part in my destiny, Mara.

And when Ben finally found out that it was Jacen who'd killed her, he'd hate him

more than he could even begin to imagine. Jacen had injected a slow poison into Ben's

love for him, as surely as he'd poisoned his mother, and seeded a terrible and wonderful

hatred. A Sith needed that magnificent well of loathing to achieve greatness. Ben

would eventually become greater than his Jedi father could ever be.

In the meantime, Jacen's war continued, now on the wider political stage as well

as in the CAC

as in the GAG.

He picked up the black GAG helmet that he rarely wore, rotated it between his

fingers, and felt an odd queasiness in his gut as he put it on. It was standard GAG

trooper issue, flared jaw section with a dispersal-gas-proof filter, the visor a single

shallow V-band of toughened duraplast, just a basic tool of the job. It wasn't much

different from the functional helmet troops had worn for decades.

But I don't need this, do I?

He stood in front of the polished durasteel bulkhead. The black outline in front of

him was smeared and hazy, a mere impressionist suggestion of what he was. He could

hardly look. He was everything his enemies said he was. He was embarrassed; yes, the embarrassment overshadowed any guilt.

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He had killed, and killed again, and killed Mara Jade Skywalker, who was both

family and friend. Friends . . . now he had none left except Tenel Ka and Allana, and

they would come to hate him when the truth was known.

I've sunk as low as I can, in the eyes of ordinary people.

But now the only direction is . . . up.

Jacen thought of a brief conversation with one of the GAG troops, a former police

officer from the Coruscant Security Force. Most murders, the officer had said, were

committed by family and close friends. The random killing of strangers was relatively

rare, even in the seediest quarters of the violent, lawless lower levels.

I'm not so unusual, then.

Jacen took a breath and stepped two strides sideways. He was now looking into

the mirror set into the bulkhead of his day cabin again; crystal clear, sharp, merciless.

He gazed at an image of all-encompassing black. He knew what people said behind his

back: that he was trying to emulate Vader.

So? I'm proud of my grandfather, but not blind to the weaknesses that brought

him down.

But that was wounded pride speaking. I have to be beyond that now. He had to be

beyond fear of small consciences and even beyond the hatred that would make Ben

Skywalker a strong, worthy, and terrifying successor to the title of Dark Lord.

But that would be years in the future. Now was the time for a man who'd once

been Jacen Solo to shoulder that responsibility for the galaxy's sake.

Jacen took off the helmet, looked into his own eyes, and didn't flinch.

"Caedus," he said. "My name is Darth Caedus."

Scanning, formatting and basic

proofing by Undead.

