

# [Legacy Of The Force] - 08

## Revelation (Karen Traviss)



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Star Wars

Legacy of the Force

# Book 8

## Revelation

by Karen Traviss

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My grateful thanks go to editors Shelly Shapiro (Del Rey) and Sue Rostoni (Lucasfilm); my agent Russ Galen; comrades-in-plotting Troy Denning and Aaron Allston; Jim Gilmer, for unerring insight and unstinting support; Ray Ramirez, for technical advice, the real Tra’kad, and generous friendship; Lance, Joanne, and everyone in the 501st Dune Sea Garrison, for bringing Mandalore to life; the Bloodfin Garrison of the 501st; and all my other good friends in the 501st Legion, who have been a rock and an inspiration.

### Dramatis Personae

- Baltan Carid; Mandalorian warrior (male human)
- Ben Skywalker; Jedi apprentice (male human)
- Boba Fett; Mandalorian bounty hunter, Mand’alor (male human)
- Cha Niathal; joint Chief of State, Galactic Alliance (female Mon Calamari)
- Ghes Orade; Mandalorian warrior (male human)
- Gilad Pellaeon; Imperial Remnant admiral (male human)
- Goran Beviin; Mandalorian warrior and farmer (male human)
- Gotab; Mandalorian warrior and healer (male human)
- Han Solo; captain, Millennium Falcon (male human)
- Jacen Solo; joint Chief of State, Galactic Alliance, and Sith Lord (male human)
- Jaina Solo; Jedi Knight (female human)
- Kral “Deuce” Nevil; Galactic Alliance captain (male Quarren)
- Leia Organa Solo; Jedi Knight and copilot, Millennium Falcon (female human)
- Lon Shevu; captain, Galactic Alliance Guard 967 Commando (male human)
- Luke Skywalker; Jedi Grand Master (male human)

Medrit Vasur; Mandalorian warrior and farmer (male human)

Mirta Gev; Mandalorian bounty hunter (female human)

Ram Zerimar; Mandalorian warrior (male human)

Sintas Vel; former bounty hunter (female Kiffar)

Tahiri Veila; Galactic Alliance lieutenant, Jedi Knight (female human)

Venku, also known as Kad'ika; Mandalorian warrior and political thinker (male human)

# Prologue

JEDI OUTPOST. ENDOR: TWELVE WEEKS AFTER THE DEATH OF MARA JADE  
SKYWALKER

My brother died in the Yuuzhan Vong War.

Not Anakin: Jacen.

It's taken me years to work that out, but I should have seen it from the start. Jacen, the brother I loved, my twin, never came home. It just looked as if he did.

I think the core of Jacen probably died in the Embrace of Pain, at the hands of Vergere and the Yuuzhan Vong. Whatever came back was another person; a total stranger.

It's the only explanation for what he's become.

So that's why I've reached the point of doing something utterly unthinkable, because the unthinkable is the last card we have left to play, the only way I can stop Jacen and his war from swallowing the whole galaxy. It was the Mandalorian crushgaunts that made up my mind. As Jag has proven, they certainly work. They're nasty weapons. Mandalorian iron-beskar-is pretty well nearly lightsaber-proof.

I almost expected the things to detonate when Dad opened the package. Since when did Boba Fett ever send my father gifts?

Since his daughter was tortured to death by my brother, actually. We've been waiting for Fett's revenge ever since, but so far.... nothing. Just the gift of crushgaunts and armor plate, all made from Mandalorian iron.

So I'm packing for a journey I didn't think I'd ever make. I'll give Jag this much: he never said I told you so. He's the one who said I needed to learn from someone who had a track record in bringing down Jedi.

If anyone can stop Jacen, then, it's me. I'm his equal, and I'm the Sword of the Jedi. But I just don't have his... training. I've no idea what he learned from Lumiya, let alone what he picked up on his travels during those five years. But he'll make a mistake sooner or later. He's way too cocky not to overestimate himself.

I just hope it's sooner. And if being a Sith made Jacen invincible, he'd have taken over the galaxy by now.

I have a chance, and Fett's going to help me make the most of it.

It can't be that hard to find him. He's a bounty hunter, so I'll hire him like any other client, except I'm not just any other client-I'm Han Solo's daughter, and I'm a Jedi, and Fett has spent a lifetime

hunting us.

And now I'm asking him to train me to hunt and capture my own brother.

For all I know, he'll laugh in my face-if he ever laughs, that is-and tell me to get lost. But I have to ask him. Swallow pride, eat humble pie, and beg if need be. Dad seems to have thawed a little toward him; I still despise him.

But if he says yes-I swear I'll be the best pupil he's ever had. Come on, Fett: show me how it's done.

# Chapter 1

When the nation is in its darkest peril, the great warrior-sailor Darakaer shall be summoned from his eternal sleep by a rhythm beaten on his ancient drum. For his final pledge was that he would come to our aid when the drum sounded, and that we should call him when we sailed to meet the foe.

-Irmenu folk legend

JEDI OUTPOST, ENDOR: TWELVE WEEKS AFTER THE DEATH OF MARA JADE  
SKYWALKER

Ben Skywalker had thought it would be a simple matter of thumbing his lightsaber into life-screaming vengeance or choked into silent grief, he didn't care which-and slicing Jacen Solo's head from his body.

He sat flicking the blade on and off, staring down the shaft of blue energy and watching it vanish only to snap back into vivid life over and over again. He saw his mother, who couldn't be summoned back again at the flick of a switch, although he would have given the rest of his life for one more chance to tell her how much he loved her.

But the image that he wanted to erase yet couldn't was Jacen Solo's face. So many people said Jacen was a stranger now, but a stranger was someone you never loved or looked up to, and so their brutality or careless cruelty was just repellent detail, the distant stuff of holonews bulletins. Family, though... family could hurt you like nobody else, and they didn't even have to torture you like Jacen did to leave scars.

The face of Jacen that Ben would recall until the day he died was the one he saw on Kavan while he sat with his mother's body, the face that promised Ben they'd get whoever did that to her. And that was why it simply would not go away; there was something wrong about that face. something missing, or something there that shouldn't have been. Ben picked away at the memory, checking his chrono every few minutes, convinced that he'd been waiting for Aunt Leia for hours.

I had the chance to kill him. Dad stopped me. Maybe... maybe I could have killed Jacen without turning dark. Will I ever get another chance?

Jedi had killed Sith before. They said Kenobi killed a Sith on Naboo, but nobody thought it was an instant passport to the dark side; some dirty jobs had to be done. Ben had thought his absolute, all-consuming need to destroy Jacen had passed; but it hadn't, and neither had his grief. It had simply shifted position. It ebbed and flowed, some days worse than others. He would not get over it. He would learn to live with the loss-somehow-but the galaxy had changed and would never return to normal; it was an alternate universe, nearly familiar enough for him to navigate, but where the most important landmarks were gone forever.

Now he was ready to pour his heart out to Leia. There were some things he wasn't ready to tell his father. Luke Skywalker might have looked as if he was dealing with his grief, but Ben knew better,

and if he told him what he really thought... Dad would kill Jacen, he was sure of it. He'd snap. Ben had to be the responsible one now.

But if I'm wrong... I'll only hurt Dad more.

Nothing added up.

I don't believe Alema killed Mom, Sith sphere or not. I just don't.

How did Jacen know where to find me on Kavan?

How did he know I was there with my mother's body?

Ben had thought it was odd at the time, even when the shock of finding her body had nearly paralyzed him. But even in shock, he'd had the presence of mind to record evidence at the scene, every bit of data he could grab, just as

Captain Shevu had taught him. Jacen had mind-rubbed him once: he wasn't going to let him rewrite history again.

And that was my instinctive reaction. Even when I found Mom dead... something inside me said that was important. I'll trust that.

Jedi would have said it was the certainty of the Force; cops like Captain Shevu would have said that Ben's investigative training had kicked in. Either way, Ben had more questions than he had answers. But he was more sure each passing day that Jacen, his own cousin, his own flesh and blood, really had killed his mother.

He waited.

Eventually he heard two sets of footsteps coming down the passage, and had a sinking feeling that Luke might have met Leia in passing and decided to tag along. But when the doors opened, it was Leia and Jaina.

"Ben?" Leia always had that calming tone that said everything was under control, even when it wasn't.

"What's wrong?"

"I've got some difficult things to say," he said. "You might not thank me, but I can't sit on it any longer."

The accusation was meant solely for Leia, and for a moment he was reluctant to blurt it out in front of Jaina as well. But she needed to hear it.

"You know you can tell me anything," Leia said. "Do you want Jaina to leave us alone?"



“No, no. As long as you don’t rush off and tell Dad, because he thinks I’m over the Jacen thing now, and I don’t want to start him worrying again.”

Jaina sat down next to him, leaning forward, as if she was ready to hug him if he burst into tears. “It’s okay. I won’t say a word, and Mom’s the diplomat. What’s so bad that you can’t tell Uncle Luke?”

Cut to the chase. The longer he built up to it, the worse it would be. Ben concentrated on calm, rational language.

“I don’t think Alema Rar killed my mother,” he said.

The words hung in the air as if he could see them. “I still think Jacen did.”

Leia just stood there, arms folded, but she didn’t react. Jaina shifted a fraction on the seat. If anything, they seemed.... embarrassed. He waited in the agonizing silence.

“What makes you think that?” Leia asked at last.

“I’m not going to rely on what I feel,” Ben said. “Even though I feel it. I’m going by things that don’t add up. You know what police look for? Captain Shevu taught me. Mo-tive, means, opportunity. And family doesn’t seem to mean much to Jacen. Look at the things he’s done to you and Uncle Han.” Ben recalled Jaina’s sudden exit from the Galactic Alliance military. “And you, Jaina. Look what he tried to do to you.”

“I know Jacen’s doing some terrible things, but let’s go through this a step at a time,” Leia said. “You’ve accused him before, but we’re all pretty messed up lately. Why is this still eating at you?”

“The way he found me on Kavan.”

“He’s good at finding people in the Force, Ben.”

“I was hiding. Doing my shutdown act. He’s not the only Jedi who can do that—he taught me to do it, and I taught Mom. I’ve even shown Dad how to do it, and he’ll tell you—once you switch out, even Master Amazing Super-Smart Jacen shouldn’t have been able to find me. And he still walked straight up to me in a tunnel on a deserted planet that’s the back end of beyond. That’s not luck, and it’s not finding me in the Force. He knew. And then there was the Sith meditation sphere that Lumiya had.”

He’d kept it to himself all this time. The longer you kept a secret, the harder it got. If only he’d disobeyed Jacen and told Dad about the thing. If only.... maybe Mom would have still been alive.

Ben would never know.

“What about the sphere?” said Jaina.

“I found it on Ziost. I handed it over to Jacen when I docked it in the Anakin Solo. Next time I see it, Lumiya’s driving.”

Leia sucked in a little breath. “Lumiya was always adept at taking what she wanted.”

“The Anakin Solo might be slack when it comes to stopping infiltrators, Aunt Leia, but I can’t see Lumiya just wandering in and stealing the sphere without someone knowing about it.”

“Okay, file all that under unexplained. How about motive?”

Jaina seemed to be holding her breath. Leia looked away for a moment as if she was weighing the evidence. It didn’t amount to much - yet.

“How about the fact that Mara was in his way, like any good Jedi?” said Jaina sourly.

“No, let’s hear Ben’s view.”

Ben was theorizing now. “I spent a lot of time telling Mom about all the things Jacen was asking me to do in the Guard, and I could see it made her mad. I’m sure she bawled him out.”

“Okay, so that’s motive, maybe. Now let’s look at means.”

“Only a really skilled Jedi could ever take down Mom. Look at all the stuff Jacen can do.”

“But poison? That’s Alema’s trademark.”

“So it’s obvious to use it to draw suspicion elsewhere, isn’t it?”

“Sweetheart, Alema had the sphere. She was in league with Lumiya. We know that. And I’m sure Captain Shevu would confirm that people stick with one method of killing that they feel confident using. Alema spent the last year trying to kill as many of us as she could.”

Ben was off and running down the behavioral path now. “Okay, Alema was crazy, but she didn’t have a motive for killing Mom. It was always about you and Uncle Han.” He shook his head. “I don’t buy it, because she’d have bragged about it to Jag if she’d done it. She’d have wanted us to know she got in one good shot, to hurt us all, to hurt you. And then there’s opportunity. She was in the area, yes, but we also know for sure that Jacen was in the Hapan system around the time it happened.”

Leia really looked as if she was taking it seriously. She hadn’t rolled her eyes or told him he was being stupid, or even rushed to defend Jacen. That wasn’t a surprise given what Jacen had done to her, his own mother.

“Well, it doesn’t clear him, “she said at last. “But it’s not exactly enough to take to a judge, is it? He could have been in the Hapan system planning to kidnap Allana.”

It was a good alibi. Jacen couldn’t have committed a murder because he was too busy planning an abduction, Your Honor. Ben strove for a rational tone. “Aunt Leia, why do you think Mom hung on in corporeal form for so long? Why do you think her body disappeared just as Jacen showed up at her funeral? Don’t you think the Force might be saying something to us? I can’t stop thinking about it. I’ve turned it over and over in my head for weeks. I daren’t discuss it with Dad. But it’s driving me

crazy.”

Leia took a few steps forward and squatted in front of him to put her hands on his knees. “Ben, you said you recorded everything you could at the scene.”

“Yeah, because nobody can mind-rub that or tell me I imagined it...”

“Have you found anything in the recordings?”

Ben stood his ground. He was sure, more sure every day now. “Not yet.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to find out exactly what happened, Aunt Leia. I have to, and I’m going to do it by the book, because I need to be certain or I won’t be able to live with it.”

“What if you find evidence that it’s not Jacen?” asked

Jaina. “Are you going to accept what the provable facts tell you?”

Ben had committed himself to take the rational, legal path rather than that of intuition and Force senses. “I don’t want to get the wrong person. Whatever I feel about Jacen for the other things he did to me, I don’t want to pin it on him if that means Mom’s real killer is still walking around. And if it really was Alema-well, fine. The result’s the same.”

Jaina looked into his face for a few long moments and then smiled sadly. With Leia still squatting in front of him, wearing that same sorrowful expression, Ben felt pinned down by their tolerant doubt. Maybe they were humoring him. Well, it didn’t matter. He’d stated his case, and he was going to prove it, because he couldn’t carry on with his life until he got answers.

And he would carry on with his life. When Jori Lekauf had been killed saving him, and he’d been drowning in guilt, Mara had told him that the best way to honor that sacrifice was to live well, to the maximum, and not waste a gift so dearly bought.

He’d do that for his mother. He’d live for her.

BASTION, IMPERIAL REMNANT: ADMIRAL PELLAEON’S RESIDENCE

Gilad Pellaeon, still healthy in his nineties and with no intention of fading into senility, was playing Theed quoits on the lawn when his aide entered the walled garden at a brisk walk.

The admiral didn’t take his eyes off the target-a short pole shaped like the flower spike of a Cezith waterlily, one of a dozen set in the shallow ornamental pond-but he could see all the signs of urgency in his peripheral vision.

“Yes, Vitor?” Pellaeon held the quoit between thumb and forefinger, resting its weight on his palm. “I hope you’re rushing to tell me that the chef has acquired Jacen Solo’s entrails and is braising

them for dinner.”

“Not quite, Admiral.”

“Life is full of disappointments.”

“A military attache from the Galactic Alliance is here to see you.” Vitor Reige had saved Pellaeon’s life in the Yuuzhan Vong War, and now he defended him from all other equally irksome visitors. Anyone from the GA fitted the description these days. “Shall I send him away?”

“Remind him that he should make an appointment if he wants an audience, not drop by to solicit me like some door-to-door tradesperson.”

“I think he might have been anticipating that. He handed me this note.”

Reige rustled. Pellaeon turned his head to look at a neatly sealed flimsi square, pale blue and bearing handwriting. It would be some sop from the strutting little demagogue Solo or one of his minions, some invitation or other public relations exercise to make his junta look more respectable. Pellaeon focused again on the lily, and tossed the quoit with a practiced hand. It fell neatly over the spike and came to rest on its base.

“Open it for me,” he said, taking another quoit in his hand. “If you think it might raise my blood pressure, throw it in the bin. If not... it can wait until I finish my game.”

Theed quoits was a pursuit that taught patience and concentration, as well as providing gentle exercise. It was al-ways played on water; careless throws meant fishing around in a pond with your hand to recover the quoit. Some said that it had once been played with carnivorous fish in the water, and began life as a hunting technique on Naboo, but Pellaeon had quite enough predators in his life without adding that refinement. He settled for nothing more dangerous than a wet sleeve when he missed the tar-get.

“Well?” Pellaeon lined up a more difficult target, the right-hand spike at the back that required an up-and-over technique to clear the middle row. “Is it going to give me an aneurysm or just provoke spluttering rage?”

“I really think you should read the message, sir,” said Reige. “If only for amazement value.” He held out the unfolded flimsi with a bemused smile, and Pellaeon took it. “You’ll be annoyed, I think.”

It was handwritten, or at least fashioned to look like it. And it was an invitation after all, but not quite the one that he was expecting.

The joint Chiefs of State of the Galactic Alliance respectfully request a meeting to discuss a mutual aid treaty with the Imperial Remnant, and the addition of its assets to the GA Fleet in exchange for substantial benefits.

A translucent green official seal was stamped across Jacen’s signature. No sign that Admiral Niathal had seen this, then; a Mon Cal should have known better than to back a little despot like Solo,

so perhaps she wasn't involved. But then Niathal had her own agenda, and it almost certainly didn't include Jacen as a valued co-worker for life.

The brat.

Pellaeon had resigned rather than be forced to work with him. It hadn't been personal when it started; Pellaeon simply objected to the creation of an unaccount-able, slightly-outside-the-chain-of-command, rather seedy secret police force, which was then put under the command of someone who had never worn a uniform in his life. The dislike-now fermented into a full-blown loathing-had come later, nourished simply by watching the holonews and listening to military intelligence reports.

Retired. No, I was forced out. And I haven't forgotten that.

"No, Jacen, you cannot play with my ships," he snorted.

"Nor can you buy them." He crumpled the flimsi in his hand, feeling the fragile seal crack, and tossed it back to Reige. "I can see no merit in aligning the Empire with a regime that has no current bearing on our interests."

"I'll return this to the attache as it is, then, shall I, sir?" said Reige, tilting his head slightly to consider it. "I think it's quite eloquent."

"A gesture is worth a thousand words, but two often suffice."

Reige walked back down the hedge-lined path without a sound to deliver the rejection to the attache. A good man; loyal as a son. Pellaeon had long suspected he was-it was all too possible-but was reluctant to seek confirmation and be disappointed, because he missed Mynar terribly. It was a dreadful thing to be unable to acknowledge that Mynar had been his son; Pellaeon felt he had denied him even in death. He wanted no more hopes dashed, and had made generous provision for Reige's future.

But if somebody didn't put a dent in Master Solo's ambitions, the future for Reige and everyone else would be bleak. It wasn't actually true that the GA had no effect on the Empire. Some things couldn't be avoided or ignored, however far away.

Perhaps I was a fool not to retire earlier, but I'm not dead yet. I still have some fight in me, and I'll be hanged before I give in to the whims of a civilian playing soldiers. It's a pity that his aunt was killed-she'd have lost patience with him eventually, and then he'd have had a good thrashing.... oh yes.

Pellaeon threw the rest of the quoits, enjoying a private fantasy about playing the game the Naboo way, with a shoal of angry blembies cruising in the water, and making Jacen Solo retrieve the misses.

He was definitely not dead yet.

CHIEF OF STATE'S SUITE, SENATE BUILDING, CORUSCANT: TWO DAYS AFTER THE RETURN OF THE ANAKIN SOLO

Darth Caedus stared at the crumpled note in the tray and wondered what Pellaeon thought of him. It didn't matter, but he was curious.

"Perhaps I didn't explain myself clearly enough," he said. "What do you think, Tahiri?"

She examined the note and shrugged. He wondered if she was trying to sense something from the flimsi, some clue about Pellaeon's state of mind.

"I think you're talking to the wrong person," Tahiri said. "It's the Moff's backing you need, not Pellaeon's. He's the last person who'd help you."

Caedus thought it was more insurance than help, because he had no real sense of being under threat; the Confederation might have looked numerically equal, but numbers often didn't equate to strength. But he planned to bring the war to a quick end, not to tiptoe along some line of status quo, and for that he needed an injection of numbers. The Imperial Remnant had not only the hulls and hardware, but-more importantly-also the doctrine and high-caliber personnel to make their assets count. They were very much his grandfather's legacy. The Remnant's shock troops were said to be as excellent as Vader's 501st, and that kind of efficiency was what he needed in his order of battle.

The only barrier was Pellaeon, now too old to bend with the winds of change. He had been a great admiral once, but even though he'd retired-voluntarily or otherwise-he was still blocking the skylane. Admirals didn't retire, of course. They were always subject to recall. Pellaeon might still be biding his time.

"Tahiri, to get the Moff's to back me, I need to be en-dorsed by Pellaeon," Caedus said. "It's more than his position as Bastion's head of state. I can bypass figurehead when I need to, but the old boy is still very much hands-on, and he has enormous sway over the Moff's. They would commit their forces to the GA for the right reward, but not as long as Pellaeon opposes it."

"And does he oppose it? I can see why he wouldn't exactly trust you."

"No, I'm not his favorite person, and I suspect he regards Niathal as a traitor in that stiff-upper-lip way of his. But this isn't a refusal, I think... just a gesture. I believe he wants to be wooed."

Tahiri's mind was calculating visibly. "So what's the right incentive for the Moff who has everything?"

"More of it, Tahiri. More. Everybody likes more."

"But more of what, exactly?"

"Territory."

"Must be a tough job finding parking for all those Star Destroyers, mustn't it, Jacen?"

Caedus had to admit she was sometimes more entertaining than Ben even if he didn't like being called Jacen. "I was thinking of Bilbringi or Borleias, actually. Maybe both if I have to. Shipyards

and banking. I think the Moff's will like that... if I can get Pellaeon to see sense."

Tahiri never asked if the worlds in question had been consulted about becoming bargaining chips, and Caedus wasn't sure if she didn't think politically or she took it as read that he would make it happen with or without their consent. "He's a pragmatist," she said. "And he wants the best for his little Empire."

"He likes his honor better." Caedus smiled and reached for the pile of datapads. There were a couple of items that troubled him still sitting in view. "But I think he needs time to consider this, and perhaps a visit from someone persuasive. Preferably in a smart suit and shoes, Tahiri."

She gave him a withering glance. "You want me to see him?"

"I hope you'll do better in this task than the last."

"I've done my best, Jacen."

"Yet you can't find the Jedi base."

"And, obviously, neither can you..."

"Show me you can complete a mission. Talk to Pellaeon."

"He wouldn't see the military attache. What makes you think he'll agree to see me?"

"Pellaeon is a gentleman, Tahiri. He'll see you. Not only because you're pretty and charming, but because someone will let the Moff's know the nature of the deal he'll be offered, and so they'll ask him questions that he'll feel obliged to answer." Caedus already had his networks set up; floating the idea through informal channels was quick and easy, but Pellaeon had to feel it was his idea. There was no herding the man. That Corellian blood made him very contrary. "Imperials need an empire, you see. It's what they do. How can he turn that down?"

"Why didn't you comm him and put it to him straight? Even if he hates you, he'd respect directness."

"I was just testing the water with the letter. Now that I know how resistant he is, I'll go to Plan B and get the Moff's excited about two shiny new acquisitions, and by a gentle process of osmosis, speeded up by your charm, he'll say yes, without being made to feel I co-opted him after ending his long and glorious career sooner than he wished."

Tahiri sat back on the edge of the desk and looked out over skylaners marked by the winking lights of speeders. "You plan every possible move, don't you?"

"I don't guess," said Caedus. "There are too many wild cards being dealt as it is. Some of which are showing up now." He picked up the first data pad on the pile. Wild cards indeed: intelligence reports confirmed that Corellia had placed an order for the Mandalorians' Bes'uliik fighter. It was faster than an X-wing, armored in virtually impregnable Mandalorian iron-beskar-and for sale to

anyone who had the credits. It was one of those destabilizing things that changed the course of wars. A subtle man, Fett; Caedus had been waiting to see what form his revenge would take for killing his daughter, thinking in terms of pure terminal violence, personal retribution, but the old mercenary was showing signs of playing a much, much longer and more destructive game. “Off you go, Tahiri. Come back to me with your timetable and strategy for getting an audience with Admiral Pellaeon and signing him up to the cause.”

Caedus would have to do something about the Bes’uliik. The simplest option was to buy a squadron for the GA, even if that rankled. But if Fett could play the longer game, so could he; the fighter was a joint project with the Verpine of Roche, part of a cozy mutual aid treaty between Keldabe and the Verpine hives. Caedus put the Verpine down on his list of beings to educate later. He would also steer clear of Mandalore for the time being. He had more urgent issues in front of him.

Fondor was still a major irritant, churning out warships for the Confederation at its orbital yards. It was a continuing threat, and it lay close to rich mineral resources in an asteroid belt; it built Star Destroyers. Assets like that couldn’t be allowed to remain in enemy hands.

So he would deal with Fondor as his next priority. He picked up his comlink and keyed in the code of his closest and most irritating colleague, Admiral Cha Niathal, joint Chief of State of the GA.

He didn’t see eye-to-eye with admirals lately.

“Admiral, “he said cheerfully. “We really have to do something about Fondor...”



# Chapter 2

Thank you for your recent payment. The outstanding estate of the late Hidu Rezodar has now been released by the Registry of Testaments and Legacies, and you may collect the items anytime in the next ten days. Now the claim process has been activated, any item not removed by that time will be auctioned by the State of Phaeda and you will forfeit all ownership. Any taxes or duties payable on the items must be settled before leaving the planet.

-Message from the Phaedan State Treasury to Boba Fett, Mand'alor, Al'Ori'Ramikade-Leader of the Mandalorian Clans, Commander of Supercommandos

BRALSIN, NEAR KELDABE, MANDALORE

The weathered helmet of Fenn Shysa still stood on a granite column in the clearing, firmly secured by a durasteel peg.

Only animals or storms would have dislodged it; nobody would have thought of stealing the relic of a much-loved Mandalore. It had even survived the Yuuzhan Vong's attempt to devastate the planet. Shysa was revered.

"Been a long time, Shysa." Boba Fett didn't make a habit of talking to dead men, except his father. It was the first time he'd visited the site. "You got your way."

The helmet had once been vivid green with a red T-section, but the paint had dulled to browner tones, and the scrapes and dents of battle were more visible. The memorial was a substitute for a proper Mandalore's grave; Shysa's body was still in the Quence sector where Fett had left it. The helmet was all he'd brought back. It was an apt memorial for a populist leader, to be commemorated in the same way as any ordinary Mandalorian. Only the Mand'alor, the head of state of a stateless people, was buried. Their nomadic warrior culture had no tradition of orderly cemeteries.

Where will they bury me? If I have any say in it, when the end really comes, I'll just set Slave I on autopilot for the Outer Rim, and keep going.

Fett had been an absentee Mand'alor, ignorant of blown people's traditions. His lessons, whether he wanted them or not, came from his newfound granddaughter Mirta, who insisted on calling him Ba'buir-grandfather-and encouraging him to embrace his heritage. Relations between the two of them were.... tepid. That was a big improvement. They'd started out as homicidal.

He stared at Shysa's helmet, remembering. The crazy barve. Was I worth it? "You'd only say I told you so, so save your breath - "

"I can't wait for you any longer."

The sudden voice in his helmet's audio-link made him jump, but it was just Mirta. She was itching to get under way for Phaeda.

“You’ll wait,” he said. “You’ve waited three months. You can wait ten minutes more.”

Fett tapped two fingers to his helmet in a farewell salute to Shysa and swung back onto the speeder bike.

If you only look after your own hide, then you’re not a man.

That was just about the last thing Shysa ever said to him before he died.

Fett set off for Goran Beviin’s farm, skimming above the silver ribbon of a tributary that flowed into the Kelita River. The landscape was changing. Since he’d first returned to a planet still struggling back to life after the Yuuzhan Vong had done their best to kill it, Mandalorians scattered around the galaxy had started coming home, thousands of them, and then hundreds of thousands, and more. The land was recovering. Farming was beginning again on tracts salted and poisoned by the vongese. It gave him a good feeling. Mando’ade showed their defiant streak by getting old farms thriving again rather than find new, easier land to cultivate.

No, the crab-boys-as Beviin still called the Yuuzhan Vong-hadn’t won.

Mirta was a persistent girl. “Ba’buir, you want me to start the drives?”

“No.”

“Are you okay?”

“Is Goran there?” She didn’t need to know how he felt right then. He wasn’t even sure himself, beyond a terrible guilty dread. “Has he got the room ready?”

“Of course he has. Goran’s never let you down.”

That was true. “Is Beluine’s accommodation sorted out?”

“Yes, but…”

“Then someone better tell him the Oyu’baat is as five-star as we get in Keldabe.”

“You’re psychic, Ba’buir.”

Fett wasn’t, but he knew his personal physician well enough to predict that he wouldn’t think a room in the rustic Oyu’baat tapcaf good enough for a fancy Coruscant doctor. Tough. I’m the customer. If the ruler of Mandalore could put up with a rickety farm outhouse with brutally basic plumbing, the Oyu’baat was fit for Beluine. It was clean and warm. As long as he didn’t try playing a round of cu’bikad with the patrons, he’d be fine.

“Tell him he can always be replaced by a med droid,” he said.

When Fett banked the speeder around the last stand of trees, he could see Mirta leaning against the

aft hull plates of Slave I, arms folded across her chest, and Goran Beviin waiting beside her in his slate-gray farm overalls.

“No good acting like you don’t care,” Beviin said as Fett opened the cargo hatch from the remote on his forearm plate and steered the speeder onto the ramp. “You might have left her, but she’s still your wife.”

Fett secured the speeder. “Ex-wife.”

“The rooms and med droids are ready, anyway.”

Fett didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. Beviin was a good man, Fett’s chosen successor if anything went wrong—like death, like illness, like just plain old age—and he’d put up with a lot of demands since they’d located Sintas Vel’s body.

Fett’s wife wasn’t dead.

Dead would have been hard after she’d been missing for more than thirty years. Dead would have been easier than finding her encased in carbonite, stored like junk among some dead gangster’s forgotten possessions, and then working out what he’d say to her.

How do I tell her that our daughter Ailyn’s dead?

How do I tell her everything that’s happened since she went missing? That’s she’s got a granddaughter?

At least Mirta could do her own telling. Fett released the hatch and she climbed into the cockpit, a battered bag over one shoulder. She was in her midtwenties, although she had a scrubbed look that made her look like a kid, and that meant she wouldn’t be that much younger than her grand mother when she was revived.

But I don’t know that. Sintas could have been captive for years, and only carbonited recently. She could be nearer my age. She was a few years older than me...

Either way, it was going to be a very hard reunion. The last time he saw her, he’d left her injured in an alley. It was an ignominious exit to add to abandoning her and their baby daughter. And now all the pain was going to come erupting to the surface again, all the memories he’d locked in his past as surely as carboniting them so he never had to look at them.

“The med droid’s got full psychiatric programming, too, Bob’ika,” Beviin said quietly.

People usually came out of carbonite in a bad way, anything from blind and disoriented to totally and permanently insane. She’d really thank him for that. If he only knew what her chances were.

“Thanks, Goran,” said Fett. “Tell Medrit I’m grateful.”

“Ah, we’ve always got room for guests. Kih’parjai. It’s nothing.”

“Okay, look after the shop while I’m gone.”

The war between the Galactic Alliance and the Confederation was forgotten for the time being. Fett settled into the pilot’s seat and waited until he saw Beviin walk clear of the downdraft before he flicked the controls, and Slave I throbbed into life. The north Mandalorian countryside receded below into a patchwork, and the sky through the viewport darkened to violet and then black as they left the atmosphere. There was no going back now.

“What if she ends up insane?” asked Mirta.

“Han Solo was carbonited and he’s strutting around just fine.”

“I’ll look after her,” she said.

“I can take care of her.”

“Pay someone else to do it, you mean.”

So Mirta was in one of her combative moods today. That meant she was scared. He understood why, but he had his own problems to deal with when it came to facing Sintas again.

How old was I when I walked out? Nineteen? And then Mirta will want to drag up the reasons why I left. It’s going to be rough.

“Whatever,” he said. “She’ll be taken care of.”

Fett wanted to blot the past out of his mind. He set course for Phaeda manually just to keep his hands busy, to stop thinking, and to avoid a conversation with Mirta; he even kept his helmet on in the cabin, his hint to her these days that he didn’t want to talk. But it was never that easy to fend off her scrutiny. She seemed to hate gaps in a story, and for her, Fett had a lot more gaps than story in his life.

“Where did you go this morning?” she asked.

Not telling her would just stoke the fire. And maybe he wanted to give in to the interrogation now, maybe it was time she knew, even though nobody else did, maybe... did he want her to think better of him?

Fett paused. “Shysa’s memorial.”

“Why?”

Here we go. “Hadn’t been there since he died.”

“Your brother said you deposed him...”

Brother? Brother. Jaing, Jaing Skirata, that stanging smart-aleck clone who was still around all these years later. “He’s not my brother. We just share a genome, more or less. And I told him he

didn't know what went on between me and Shysa."

"But you came back, and Shysa didn't."

"Long story."

"Got plenty of time. What happened?"

It gave Fett the occasional twinge of regret. It didn't haunt him, because he'd done what he had to do, and the alternative would have gnawed away even at his durasteel conscience. He debated whether to tell her, worried about his reasons for resurrecting another grim episode of his life at a time like this.

"I killed him," Fett said at last. "I killed Fenn Shysa."

FLEET HQ, GALACTIC CITY

Admiral Cha Niathal could sense the mood of a ship-of shore establishment-the moment she stepped on board And the mood of this one was shocked fear.

It was impossible to keep some things quiet, and killing a junior officer on the bridge of the Anakin Solo was about as hard to hide as it got.

It can't be true.

But the Anakin's captain, Kral Nevil, a Quarren with a solid reputation both as a pilot and a commander, had witnessed it. He wasn't the only one who'd seen the incident: it wasn't just "buzz," the fast-flowing river of gossip that circulated through both wardroom and lower deck throughout the fleet. Colonel Jacen Solo, joint Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance, had snapped Lieutenant Tebut's neck without even touching her, on the bridge of his flagship, in full view of the crew. The reason didn't matter. The enormity of the act made any reason irrelevant.

The news had leaked. It would go around the fleet like a flash signal. Even the absolute loyalty of the Star Destroyer's rigorously vetted crew didn't stop talk about something that serious. Tebut had been loyal, too, they would say to one another, and look what had happened to her.

It was just as well Niathal had reliable witnesses, because without them she would have dismissed it as wild rumor. Jacen had done plenty of dirty things on his rise to power, but this wasn't just dirty. It was deranged.

He's lost it. He's becoming a megalomaniac. What do I do now?

She strode along the corridors of the HQ building toward the wardroom. On any other day, even in the middle of a war, the atmosphere in the building was busy and purposeful; the cumulative hum of voices had a certain pitch. If a ship had been lost in action, the hum dropped in volume and pitch and the sorrow was tangible, but the pulse, the very heartbeat of the navy, was still there.

Today, the beating had stopped. The whole building seemed to be holding its breath, scared to exhale. When Niathal passed personnel, they saluted automatically as normal, but they looked at her with expressions she could read all too well: What's happening? How is he getting away with this? Surely you're going to do something about him?

Those looks, mute pleas, were agonizing. But they weren't as bad as the ones that said: You're joint Chief of State. You're letting him do this.

Niathal walked into the low rumbling of subdued conversation in the warrant officers' mess and hit a wall of sudden silence. Then everyone scrambled to snap to attention. She could taste the dread.

"At ease," she said, and tried to act as if she was doing normal Admiral's Rounds to check on routine matters like tidiness and morale. "Any complaints?"

"No, ma'am." It was a chorus of voices. If anyone had raised the most obvious concern that the GA had a maniac at the helm, she would have had no answer. She couldn't take Jacen on yet. And if she dismissed their worries, she would lose respect and trust. "Nothing wrong with the food, ma'am."

Niathal nodded and carried on to her office. Captain Nevil was waiting for her. She closed the doors and swept the room for bugs with her hand scanner, but even when it came up clean, she still whispered.

"All I can hope," she said, not waiting for him to speak, "is that when the news spreads, the crews believe it as much as I did, or think that the poor woman deserved it for some reason. Because if they do reach the conclusion that he's a monster, morale will collapse, and we've lost."

Nevil didn't respond. The Quarren usually kept his counsel, but he seemed to be even more tight-lipped today.

"What is it, Captain? I've swept for surveillance devices. You can speak freely."

His mouth-tentacles rippled as if he was measuring his words carefully. "What are you going to do about Solo?"

Niathal's instinct and training said to call in the military police immediately, invoke emergency powers and have Jacen arrested. But her common sense said that Jacen's loyal Galactic Alliance Guard trumped the MPs, that the rest of the fleet was loyal to him, and that she would end up as sole Chief of State, which-whatever she might have thought she wanted a couple of years ago-was now a poison chalice.

And she was effectively Luke Skywalker's spy. She needed to stay on the inside to arm him with intelligence. Jacen was too strong for her to confront and depose alone.

"For the moment, there's very little I can do," she said.

"Ma'am, you can put me on a charge for saying this if you like, but he needs to be relieved of duty."

“Do you trust me, Captain?”

Nevil’s tentacles became still. He was wary now. “I think I still do.”

“Then if I say that I’m as appalled by this monstrous act as you are, but that I have to make sure I’m actually in a position to do something conclusive, will you accept that without further explanation?”

Niathal hoped he understood. If she told him more, he’d be compromised, too. It was the oblique talk of coups and plots; not that she was any stranger to that kind of coded conversation, having helped oust Cal Omas. Perhaps she was now getting her just desserts.

“I believe I get the general meaning, Admiral,” said Nevil.

Niathal wasn’t sure he had. “When you fire on a target like Jacen Solo, you daren’t miss or just wound him. You have to make sure he can’t return fire. Ever.”

Nevil froze, then nodded. It was a human gesture, picked up from serving alongside humans, just as they adopted expressions from other species.

“I’d expected instant mutiny,” he said. “But our tendency-all of us-is to maintain discipline and try to carry on as if nothing untoward is happening, as if that’ll make it go away.”

“There’s a war on, Nevil. Our people are too busy staying alive.” Niathal went to the window and looked out across the city, somehow expecting to see the view radically changed just as her world had been. But life went on. Coruscant was a long way from the front, and Jacen was still the heroic colonel, crusher of terrorists and son of two heroes of the old Rebellion. Well fed and defended, with distracting shows on the HoloNet, the average Coruscant citizen wasn’t about to rush to the barricades and storm the Senate, even if Tebut’s fate was plastered all over HNE bulletins. It wouldn’t be, of course. “And it hasn’t impacted the lives of civilians here - yet.”

Nevil seemed a little more reassured that he was still talking to the officer and not the politician. “I won’t ask what you’ll say to him when you meet. But he realizes you’ll know, and you’ll have to take some position on it.”

“I shall openly question his methods, as I usually do,” she said, wondering if she had already confided too much in Nevil. “And he’ll think nothing has changed.”

“So you don’t share a philosophy.”

“I’m disappointed that you might ever have thought I did.”

Nevil waited a couple of beats as if to make his point, that he wasn’t so sure an ambitious admiral wouldn’t do whatever it took to achieve high office, including selling her honor. “My son didn’t die to put a sadistic despot in power,” he said at last. “I look to you to ensure his life wasn’t wasted.”

It was a gut-punch. Niathal rode it. “I’m sorry about Turl. I truly am.”

Nevil just inclined his head politely and left. Niathal had just had some of her worst fears confirmed. While she knew that she couldn't always be liked, and that becoming Chief of State always meant treading on a few toes, she was wounded by not being trusted-or believed.

Ironically, the man who was so convinced he could end chaos and conflict with his shock tactics was sowing more of his own. Jacen was making everyone wary and suspicious, even old friends and allies.

She needed to broker a discreet meeting with Luke Skywalker. But first, she had to be true to form and confront Jacen Solo indignantly about his latest lapse of judgment.

She summoned her chauffeur. On the journey through the unconcerned, orderly sky lanes of Coruscant to the Senate, she concentrated on being angry and indignant rather than working out her next covert moves. Jedi could sense these things. She thought of Nevil's dead son, and the outrage came naturally.

Coruscant really was very peaceful. It was hard to square what she saw from the speeder window with what was happening offworld on the battlefield, almost as if there were a portal she had passed through and back again into another dimension. But it hadn't been that long since the Yuuzhan Vong invasion; that had made the Galactic capital much more nervous than planets that had suffered far worse and far more frequently over the centuries, and so it was willing to embrace Jacen's extremes. Coruscant was scared and wanted to be protected. Niathal wondered how Jacen would have fared trying to pull his hard-line savior act on more battle-hardened, less innocent worlds.

He was in his office, watching an intelligence holovid, a recording of a fleet engagement. There were so many brush fires breaking out across the galaxy now that she couldn't say where it was taking place without checking the images carefully to identify ships and terrain.

Just another theater of war. The only positive thing I can see is that we've been saved from collapsing through overstretch by systems kind enough to stage their own local wars and excuse our attendance.

"What have I done this time?" Jacen said, not looking away from the screen. "I could feel the little black cloud of reprimand coming..."

Stay angry. Don't let him sense anything beyond that.

Niathal took a deep breath disguised as an exasperated human sigh. "Jacen, I know you're very new to the military, but here's a tip to help you fit into the culture of the wardroom. We don't kill junior officers on the bridge in front of everyone. It's bad form. At least try to do it somewhere less public in the future."

He looked up that time. She wondered if he was feeling the strain, because he looked more different by the day, a little older and less luminously youthful. It was especially noticeable in his eyes. "Ah. Word gets around."



She didn't sit down. She couldn't stay angry sitting down. "Word gets around the fleet, and fast. You're a fool."

"Really? I thought I was doing quite well."

"Morale, Jacen. It's an asset every bit as much as a Star Destroyer. We ask those we command to be ready to die for us, not because of us, and the moment we lose their confidence, we start to lose the war. We need them."

"Oh, and they need me." He let out a snort of contempt. "The pact works both ways. Tebut was careless. It's not an exercise, Admiral, it's a real war, and mistakes get you killed. We could have lost the war thanks to Tebut. I think what happened to her brought home to everyone what that means."

"Did you mean to make an example of her, or did you just lose control and it all got out of hand?"

That got a reaction, all right. She watched his eyes flicker, but not a muscle on his face moved for a second or two. "I think we'll see an improvement in security procedures after this."

"Good," she said. Ah, he's either worried he'll burn out. or he's already snapped and he doesn't want me to know he's falling apart. "I'll spend some of my very limited time repairing the damage you've done to morale, then, because if a ship's company is terrified of getting something wrong, pretty soon they stop using their initiative and don't do anything at all. Do I need to explain?"

"You care too much about being popular."

Niathal had to bite back a retort. She knew her reputation on the mess decks as a humorless iceberg. "Yes, I must keep my party-girl image in check."

"Anyway, Fondor. Time to pick them off."

"I would prefer to hit their industrial capacity first. Shut down their shipyards."

"We need those assets in one piece."

"If we want them as a going concern, then we'll probably have to occupy the planet to enforce that, because the government isn't about to capitulate. And we don't have the resources to do it."

"We might."

"Oh, do share."

"The Imperial Remnant. I'm opening negotiations."

"How good of you to involve me in this..."

"I haven't committed us to anything."

So it's us again. "If you think Pellaeon is going to kiss and make up after I took his job, you're really not paying attention."

"Well, just to give the Moff's an incentive to persuade him to forgive and forget, I was thinking of offering them some extra turf in return for joining us-Borleias and Bilbringi."

It was certainly an incentive, and would have been excessively generous if either world had been the GA's gift to give. Neither was a full member of the Alliance. "So what does the gift amount to? Turning a blind eye to the Moff's invading? Helping them do it? Helping them costs resources, and we'd never have gone to their aid had those planets been attacked anyway. So how do we give?"

"When we defeat the Confederation, we'll shape the galaxy as we see fit for the greatest benefit. They contribute to that, and they get two rich worlds for their trouble."

"Or they still get two worlds that don't want to be under their yoke and fight them for every meter of land."

"Either way, not our problem."

But sooner or later, it would come back to bite him, she was sure. "This reminds me of one of those Naboo time-share scams," she said. It was time to let him get bitten, and Pellaeon would never allow it anyway. "But I leave the high-level politics to you."

"Fondor, then?"

"Shut down their shipyards first, because that disables their war effort. Then we neutralize their armed forces."

"Very well."

"And are you going to talk to Pellaeon direct?"

"I was thinking of sending a more neutral figure. Tahiri."

"Jacen, she's not exactly a diplomat, or even a negotiator."

"All she has to do is get him to accept the principle. I can do the rest."

Niathal got the feeling that Tahiri was being groomed to take Ben's place. She was glad the boy had managed to get out of Jacen's grip; he had the makings of a good officer and was becoming his own man. "Let me know when you do, then." She turned to go to her own office, the one she'd had as Supreme Commander. It felt like a haven at times like this. "Preferably before you take action..."

"Send Shevu in, will you?" Jacen called after her. "He should be outside by now."

Niathal passed the young GAG captain in the corridor, right on time, and gave him a nod toward Jacen's door. He didn't look happy, but he didn't look scared. If Jacen toler-ated someone that

visibly unintimidated in his entourage, then Shevu had to be one of his most trusted lackeys. She would keep her distance.

“He’s all yours,” said Niathal.

THE MILLENNIUM FALCON, JEDI OUTPOST, ENDOR

“So, Dad, how do I contact Boba Fett?” Jaina asked. All she could see of Han Solo in his position under the coolant lines of the Millennium falcon were his pilot’s boots. “How did you get hold of him?”

“Usual way, kid. I stood around like a jerk, and he ambushed me.”

“I’m serious, Dad.”

Han hauled himself out from under the Falcon and got to his feet. “This is Jag’s idea, isn’t it? I should never have let him have the crushgaunts.”

“Hey, I can make my own crazy decisions. And the best person to teach me how to hunt Jedi is Fett. Am I right?”

Han wiped the hydrospanner on a rag, and Jaina could see that a light had gone out of him. Beyond the clearing, the forest was a cacophony of wild noise that somehow managed to coalesce into something tranquil. Here she was, talking in this detached and oblique way about hunting Jedi-her twin brother, her father’s only remaining son. There were days when Dad disowned Jacen and never wanted to see him again, and the next day... the next, Jacen was his boy again, and he wanted to look after him and put things right. But every day, the volume of things that needed putting right got bigger, and harder, and more impossible. Dad hurt. Jaina knew Mom was hurting, too, but she seemed to be handling it better than him.

“So Ben thinks Jacen killed Mara.”

Jaina reached out and took the rag and the tool from his hands. “It’s clean now, Dad. Yes, he does.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

“You think he’s capable of that?”

“I don’t even want to think about it yet.”

“Jaina, do you think he’s capable of it?”

Jacen had tortured Ben: who knew what kind of weird logic he was operating under? If he did something terrible to Mara, would he have had any concept of it being wrong? He hadn’t planned to

kill Fett's daughter, but she hadn't survived his interrogation. Jaina hated herself for even thinking it. Jacen was Han Solo's son. But every killer, every criminal, was someone's kid.

"No, I don't think he'd murder Mara," Jaina said. "But Ben seemed pretty rational. There's something that doesn't add up. I just hope he doesn't get too close to Jacen while he's doing this investigation."

"So you do think Jacen would harm his own family."

"Dad, he's already done plenty of harming."

"What are you going to do with him? I mean, you must have something planned or you wouldn't be going to sign up for the Fett master class."

"I'll bring him in," she said.

"Bring him in. Then what? Deprogram him? Lock him in the attic like you're supposed to do with crazy relatives? Rehabilitate him and take him back into the Jedi Order? What happens to ex-Sith Lords?"

"The alternative is leaving him to carry on, Dad."

Han Solo had never scared his kids but he was scaring Jaina now. She dropped her chin slightly. "We can worry about all that after he's out of harm's way."

"Okay," said Han. "If I was looking for Fett, I'd go to him, starting at Mandalore. He'll give you a hard time, you know that?"

"Whatever it takes."

"He might show you the door."

"Won't know until I ask."

"You think your temper will hold out?"

"I can do anything when I really want to," Jaina said. "And I want to bring Jacen in before anyone else gets to him. Maybe before Ben gets too close, too. For everyone's sake."

"Fett doesn't have all the moves, or he'd have killed Jacen by now and wearing some part of his anatomy as a trophy."

"Jacen's not invincible, Dad. Nobody is. But when I go after him, it'll have to be with skills he doesn't have. Like Fett's."

"If you run into problems, your mom and I are going to be looking for alternative sites for a Jedi base not too far from that part of the galaxy..."

“No,” said Jaina. “I won’t need rescuing. I just wanted to know if you thought there was another way to do this.”

Han didn’t have a better idea or he would have argued. He gave her a long hug instead, silent and helpless, and she knew then that the focus she’d keep in her mind when things got ugly was that she had to do this to stop her father’s suffering. The general good, the trillions of beings whose lives might be at stake, was impossible to use as a powerful motivator. She needed something that would galvanize her from the gut, from the soul. And that something was her father’s face, drained of the spirit that made him such a hero to her.

“Look after Mom,” she said, and walked away into the trees. “I love you, Dad.”

“Hey, don’t take the StealthX to Mandalore,” he called after her. “It’ll just tick them off. And I love you too, sweetheart.”

Jaina turned around a few times to check if Han was still watching or back in the refuge of the Falcon, but he waited, arms folded, then waved. It must have compounded his pain to know that when things had reached their lowest ebb, his own daughter thought that the only man who could help was Fett.

Fett knew what it was like to lose a kid and see his family torn apart. She hoped, for no logical reason whatsoever, that the man would agree to train her not because he wanted to have his revenge on Jacen, but because he understood her pain.

In the end, though, it didn’t matter at all.

# Chapter 3

Boba, how has your illness progressed? Has my data been of use to you? My offer still stands.

-Taun We, former human clone development supervisor on Kamino, now Head of Clone Adjustment at Arkanian Micro

## GALACTIC CITY SPACEPORT, CORUSCANT

It was a planet of a trillion people, and Ben knew Coruscant well enough now to vanish within it.

He shut himself down in the Force long before the flight from Bespin landed in Galactic City, more out of fear of implicating the people he intended to contact than worrying that Jacen would sense him and come after him. Knowing Jacen, he'd probably written Ben off as a weakling who couldn't take it. Ben was consigned to the also-rans, minor disappointments Jacen would deal with when he came across them.

And Ben had his sources. They said Tahiri had pretty well taken his place at Jacen's side.

At Galactic City Spaceport, the transport disgorged its long-haul passengers and Ben slipped through in the merging streams of bodies from all parts of the galaxy, a single fish in a multicolored shoal. With the easy obscurity of sun visor and a cap, he was just another young man out of millions in the Galactic City area. And maybe it was wishful thinking, but he thought he detected a faint growth of beard, more fluff than anything, but it was still.... different. He didn't look like Lieutenant Skywalker.

Ben logged his identichip at the transit security control gate-bogus, naturally, one of a dozen he carried-and was still expecting a sudden wail of alarms for a good ten paces as he headed for the open walkway. But nothing happened. All he had to do now was remember to disguise his walk to defeat the gait recognition system on security cams, and then he could wander around at will. A small pebble in each boot changed his stride enough to cheat the software without crippling him. In his bag-a reversible bag-there were various changes of clothing. He got as far as the first public refreshers by a branch of the Bank of Aargau and started adding to the deception.

That's your problem, Jacen. You taught me all this. Or at least the GAG did.

In a cubicle, he changed his tunic, cap, and pants, turned the bag inside out to show its light brown side, and repacked. He changed shoes to ones with stack heels. Then he emerged a totally different person, walking differently and dressed differently. He'd keep doing that, and the security cams would have no pattern to track.

Lon Shevu's girlfriend, Shula Palasj, worked for a haulage company. He'd start with her; no comlink calls, just in case. The GAG might be monitoring, the same way Ben had eavesdropped on Senators and politicians when he was in the Guard. He made his way to Shula's workplace, doubling back occasionally just as Jori Lekauf had-It hit him hard sometimes. Even when he was mired in grief over Mom, Lekauf would suddenly appear in his mind, and he'd feel it all over again. It wasn't any

less of a sense of loss than the one he felt for his mother, just different, and it could still make him stop breathing for a moment while he steadied himself. Lekauf had taught him about evading detection and tracking others, so this was another way of ensuring that his sacrifice to save Ben hadn't been in vain; using that training to bring down Jacen was right.

Ben swung right into a walkway lined with clothing stores and tapcafs. What do I really mean by "bring him down"? He was sure now that he didn't mean killing him. It wasn't Ben's job to be the judge. He was just getting a case together, and someone else would decide what to do with Jacen in the end.

What do you do with a deposed dictator? A Sith, too? And if Dad sorts him out and gets him back to the light side, how can I even be in the same room as him after what he's done?

First things first; and first was proving a case against him, although Ben knew there were ordinary folk who'd say that Jacen was already guilty of enough, and that killing a Jedi didn't actually take him into a new category of monstrosity. It was just a personal act of betrayal, and Ben knew he had to put that aside.

Most murders happen within families. Did I think we'd be any different?

Yes. I did. We're Jedi.

Ben alternated between speeder bus-paying by cash credits, not traceable chips-and walking between docking stations. He was finding he didn't need to affect a different walk now. The slightly higher heels had altered the angle of his spine, giving him twinges. An hour and a few changes of appearance later, he stood outside a branch depot of GalactiSend.

When he walked in, he couldn't see a face he recognized. It was a busy place; beings of all kinds lined up waiting to dispatch parcels or held datapads in their hands, checking in consignments. He intercepted a droid in GalactiSend livery skimming through the reception area.

"Is Shula around?" he asked. "Shula Pakasj?"

"She no longer works here," said the droid. Well, that was sudden; it could only have happened recently, because the last time he'd spoken to Shevu, she'd still been here. "Thanks," he said, and wandered out to amble along the walkway and rethink his strategy.

He'd have to go direct to Shevu's apartment now. He hadn't wanted to, just in case Shevu was under surveillance, but he still had the passcard, and if Shevu had changed the code.... well, that wouldn't slow Ben down much. He spent the next couple of hours taking a circuitous route to the apartment block. By the time he got to the last leg of the journey, he was tired and fed up with changing his clothing.

As in most apartment buildings in the capital, an array of crime prevention cams kept watch on the entrance. Ben visualized the sensors getting a sudden burst of intense light, using the Force to overload them for a moment to give him time to pass into the turbolift. All the monitoring system

would see was a short period of dark shapes as the cam tried to compensate for the light levels its sensor told it were there. At the four hundredth floor, Ben slipped out into the corridor and stood outside Shevu's door for a moment, trying to sense if anyone was inside.

It felt empty. Ben tried the passcard and it didn't work. It took him a couple of seconds to Force-wipe the lock to its default setting and slip inside.

He'd stayed here before when Shevu had given him a bolt-hole so he wouldn't have to go home and face Luke; there was a sense of familiarity about it that was at odds with the feeling that he was violating his friend's privacy. But Shevu would understand. The clutter of personal possessions had gone—Shula's collection of stuffed toy animals in unlikely colors, piles of holovids, the Heptalian embroidered throw that used to adorn a chair—and Ben wondered if the pair had just sold up and left, and he was now in a stranger's home waiting for the new owner to walk in to find a Jedi burglar sitting on the sofa.

A quick check of the closets and kitchen cupboards showed that Shevu still lived there. Those were his uniforms, his bolo-ball gear, the boxes of pepper-flavored breadsticks he seemed to live on. But every trace of Shula was gone, even the holopics of the couple enjoying a vacation on Naboo.

Maybe they'd broken up. That would have been a surprise, but a job like the GAG put a strain on relationships, and under Jacen the GAG was getting harder for former CSF cops like Shevu to handle. Ben settled down facing the door, and resisted the temptation to comm his old captain to check which shift pattern he was on. That didn't seem to count for much with the GAG lately, though. It was a round-the-chrono job.

Ben occupied his time by reading his datapad and speculating. Four hours later, Force senses on edge, he felt a familiar presence and rehearsed all the different ways he could start telling Shevu that Jacen was now out of control.

Do I mention Mom first, or do I work up to that?

He decided to play it by ear. Footsteps paused outside the doors. The silence went on longer than Ben would have expected for Shevu to find his passcard, and then the doors parted and Ben realized what a bad idea it was to surprise a trained cop.

The whirl of a charging blaster made him leap up just as Shevu burst through the gap and fired. Ben deflected the bolt, sending a stack of holozine pads smoking to the floor. "Sir, sir, it's me! It's Ben!" He held out both arms well away from his body. "Hold fire!"

Shevu, panting and wide-eyed, was down on one knee by the cover of an armchair with his service blaster still leveled at Ben.

"Stang, Ben," he snapped. His shoulders relaxed instantly and he shut his eyes for a moment. "Don't do that. Call ahead, for goodness' sake."

"Sorry. Sorry about the damage, too."



Shevu stepped back into the corridor and said something to a person Ben couldn't see. The neighbors had stuck their heads out of their doorways to see what the noise was about, and Ben heard a few words like thought I had a burglar, but it's a buddy before Shevu shut the doors behind him and stood looking down at Ben.

"It's lucky you're a Jedi." Shevu seemed much more shaken than he would have been on a genuinely dangerous mission. "Or you'd have been a dead buddy."

"I tried to find Shula first. I didn't want to compromise you by comming you direct."

Shevu picked up the scattered and melted holozines. Some had fused into a single lump. "You're in trouble."

"No... Jacen is."

"Oh, that's okay, then." Shevu flashed his eyebrows. "We're all in the poodoo. We've been told you're not GAG personnel any longer. Jacen didn't say why you'd left, but when he suggested that we tell him if we ever saw you, I reached my own conclusions. It's kind of hard to ignore the mayhem going on with the Jedi Council." Shevu checked himself as if he'd just made a terrible gaffe. "What kind of buddy am I? I'm sorry about your mother, Ben, I really am. That was thoughtless of me."

Ben took a breath and dived straight in. The cue was there. "It was Jacen who killed her."

"Yeah, you're right."

It wasn't the casual way Shevu said it that shocked Ben as much as the fact he said it at all. Shevu wasn't appalled. He wasn't even mildly surprised.

"You knew?"

"Come on, Ben, you know rules of evidence as well as I do. I've got nothing solid." Shevu checked the window locks and rechecked the door, as if he was used to watching his back these days. Then he went into the kitchen, and the noise of clacking plates, running water, and snapping cupboard catches drifted into the living room with the sudden scent of fresh caf. "It's got his fingerprints all over it, though-not that Jedi leave any, of course. He'd be the first suspect whose collar I'd feel, believe me."

"My folks and the other Jedi think it was Alema Rar."

"Who's she?"

"A crazy Dark Jedi with a grudge against Aunt Leia. She liked using poison darts, and we know that was.... the cause of death." If Ben avoided personalizing the crime for just a few hours while he was working, he could hold it together. I'm not forgetting you, Mom, I fust have to do this. "Alema's dead now, so we can't corroborate anything."

Shevu snorted in mock amusement. "You have to learn not to mislay suspects, Ben. It's a bummer

when it comes to squaring the custody records.”

“She slugged it out with one of the Jedi sent after her. It was her or us, really. She kept trying to kill Aunt Leia.”

“That explains why you look so much older these days.” Shevu made that huh noise again. Ben knew he disapproved of boys of Ben’s age being sent into live-fire situations, but he didn’t understand that it was different for Jedi. “Okay, Jacen is the prime suspect. A couple of days ago, he killed a lieutenant on the Anakin Solo, just like that, in full view of the bridge crew. He snapped Lieutenant Tebut’s neck without even touching her, and threw Captain Nevil across the deck.” Shevu emerged from the kitchen with two steaming cups. “See what I mean about fingerprints?”

Ben should have been shocked. He tried hard, but all he had was a sinking feeling that the only beings who couldn’t see Jacen for what he was were Jedi, and his family at that. Jacen was leaving a trail of bodies.

“He even tortured me,” Ben said, realizing it sounded self-pitying as soon as it left his lips. At least he was still alive. “Dad fought with him and stopped me killing him.”

Shevu’s face was instant cold control, as if he was reining in an outburst. “He should have let you. Jacen Solo’s a nut-ter. A psychopath.”

“Jacen’s not mad. He’s a Sith. You know what that is?”

“Frankly, no.”

“It’s a Jedi who uses only the dark side of the Force. Not a Jedi at all, really.”

“A bad guy. But not illegal. Wrong cult.”

“Yes. I suppose.”

“Okay, crazy, Sith, ethically alternative, whatever you want to call it—Jacen demonstrates a tendency to extreme personal violence, and my cop’s gut tends to take notice of that. What’s your theory on your mother?”

Ben could deal in basics with Shevu. “Jacen was in the right place, he had the means to do it, and I think his motive was that she found out he was a Sith. I don’t have evidence linking him to the scene except he found me with her body, and he shouldn’t have been able to. The only thing I can pin down is location.”

“Crime scene’s compromised now, I suppose.”

“I recorded it.”

“Good man. We’ll make a CSF detective of you yet.”

“I’ve been telling everyone Jacen did it, but with Alema firmly in the frame, they all think it’s my grief talking. I suppose it’s easier to think the perpetrator wasn’t a member of the family. So I need your help, sir.”

“Drop the sir. It’s Lon.” Shevu slurped his caf. “The vast majority of murders are carried out by people who are close to each other-family, lovers, close friends. Emotions run high, they have easy access, one thing leads to another.... you get the idea. The random homicidal maniac is still pretty rare, even in the lower levels of Galactic City. And yeah, I’ll help you. This is a murder investigation.”

Ben never expected otherwise. He’d judged Shevu right, but he was also putting the man in danger. “Can I ask what happened to Shula? Looks like you scrubbed the place clean of her.”

“I sent her back to her parents on Vaklin, for her own safety. We got married in secret and then I got her off Coruscant, and got rid of everything here linking her to me.”

“Why?”

“Because people who oppose Jacen Solo end up a bit dead, and I’m building a file on him. The situation’s going to get a lot worse. Once I got Shula to somewhere safe, my only dilemma was whether I wanted to see him impeached and charged by the Alliance, or whether it would be more satisfying to see Fett or the Jedi Council get him. I think Fett’s revenge might be more fun.”

Shevu’s dislike of Jacen’s methods had been obvious since the time Jacen had killed Fett’s daughter under interrogation. Ben hadn’t realized it had developed into full-blown hatred. “Let’s do it together, then.”

“Whatever it takes, and I’ll stay on the inside as long as I possibly can.” Shevu looked resigned. “And he likes to have me around, even on the Anakin Solo.”

Ben wondered when his father would notice he hadn’t checked in, and start asking where he was. He’d switched off the comlink, just in case Luke commed him and the signal was spotted. He’d tell Dad soon. He felt better about that now; he had ways of expressing it-just tying up loose ends, Dad, just making sure we didn’t miss anything, it’s okay, Lon Shevu’s stopping me doing anything crazy-but at that moment it made him realize that Dad would want Shevu to help, to be a spy in Jacen’s inner circle. And Shevu would agree to it, because he couldn’t get justice from the GA for the foreseeable future, and he was too decent and honest to turn to the Confederation.

Everything Jacen touched became corrupted. Ben took a deep breath, downed some caf, and concentrated on not letting his anger about that taint and all the people it was poisoning-boil over.

“Let’s pool our resources.” Shevu slammed his cup down on the low table and propped a blank holochart against the chair opposite. He took a stylus and began drawing columns on one side and the beginnings of a chart on the other. It was how the CSF detectives worked on a crime-Ben knew. “Let’s write down everything we know.... discreetly, of course.”

Ben tried to imagine how utterly miserable it must have been for Shevu and Shula to marry and then have to part. He got the feeling that Shevu had been in a rush to marry her so that if anything happened to him, she would be taken care of as a service widow. It was depressing, but folks had to think that way these days. Jacen really knew how to tear families apart.

## ADMIRAL'S PRIVATE LAUNCH, EN ROUTE FOR N'ZOTH

Niathal was never convinced that Jacen wouldn't change the locks when she turned her back on him, but she refused to be tainted with the culture of paranoia that she could see developing in the civil service and among Senators.

Even so, she broke her journey to N'Zoth and switched vessels two, three, four times, on the pretext of inspections across a number of ships from auxiliaries to troop carriers, then left in her private launch alone, without a pilot. There was healthy unparanoia, and then there was just asking for trouble. She could still manage to pilot a vessel without ten officers to carry out her every command. It was the safest way. She rather hoped that the buzz around the fleet would suggest that Old Iceberg Face was having secret assignations with a lover. It was always a handy story to float.

And she had to see Luke Skywalker.

It was the first time she'd been completely on her own, without crew on the other side of a thin bulkhead or security close to her quarters, for what seemed like years. It was probably a matter of months. She'd become wary of who she was seen talking to, who she commed, and who she ate lunch with; even Senator G'Sil, a man she had been relatively close to in political terms, just acknowledged her in the corridors and went on his way. The Security Council had no real function now beyond worrying what Jacen was going to do to it, and he certainly didn't consult it; he seemed to need reminding that he had a duty to consult her.

Well, she wasn't consulting him now. She took up position at the rendezvous point, fifteen thousand kilometers off N'Zoth, checking her scanners for vessels and wondering if it was always going to be this way. The Rebels had lived like this for twenty years trying to overthrow the Empire. It seemed daunting.

She was joint Chief of State, and here she was fretting as if she were helpless.

"Stang..." she said aloud, disgusted with herself. "It'll only be twenty years if you let it."

Luke Skywalker was late. She kept checking her scanner, increasing the range and looking for a wider spectrum of signals, and feared the worst right up to the moment the launch's proximity alarm sounded and she nearly ejected.

The short-range comlink buzzed. "Admiral Niathal, permission to come aboard..."

"Master Skywalker, you almost gave me a cardiac arrest."

"StealthX. No point taking chances."

“I’ll tell the manufacturer that they work just fine, shall I?”

The pragmatist in Niathal told her to make a note that stealth technology like that was great as long as the people you gave it to were always on your side. The fleet had even found it hard to search for Mara Skywalker’s downed StealthX; it was a two-edged sword. She waited until all the docking lights showed green and then opened the aft hatch to the tiny cargo bay.

The top canopy of the StealthX was wedged into a vacuum-tight docking skirt that made it look as if it had rammed the launch from the rear at a ninety-degree angle, canopy first. Luke dropped out of the fighter’s open cockpit and landed on his feet.

“I braked too hard,” she said, trying to lighten the mood.

“Remind me to ask Incom to fit a docking tube.” Luke grasped her hand as if he was grateful to see her. “Sorry, I just don’t take chances these days.”

“None of us do. Thank you for seeing me.”

“This is mutual, Admiral. I’ll have a favor to ask of you, too.”

“I’ll be brief, then. If you haven’t already heard, Jacen has taken to killing members of his wardroom in full view of others. Using Force methods.”

Luke shut his eyes for a moment. He looked older than Niathal recalled, with noticeable folds in his cheeks and a dull gray tone to his skin. She dared think something unthinkable about Jacen, that he might have been behind Mara’s death-no, that was an outrage too far, even for him-and waited for Luke to say something. He didn’t.

“I know he’s fairly cavalier about killing,” she said, “but I suspect I was right in assuming this would mark some threshold for you, too.”

“It does.”

“Depending on how you look at it, then, it could lead to some advantage, and poor Lieutenant Tebut’s life won’t have been spent in vain-Jacen may lose the loyalty of his troops. Or it could simply consolidate a reign of fear.”

Luke rubbed one hand across his face, brow to chin. “I think I recall how that morale-boosting technique played out in my father’s generation.”

“Well, I still have a duty to the Alliance and my personnel, and I’m still prepared to pass intelligence to you provided you can use it to remove him. I don’t care what you do with him-restraint-jacket therapy at some quiet monastic retreat, or shove him out the nearest air lock-but I want him gone.” That sounded harsh, but Niathal wasn’t sure how far humans would go to bring wayward relatives into line. “And out of office. Another coup is impossible at the moment, so the best I can achieve is to help neutralize his impact on the GA and hope I don’t lose the lives of too many good beings doing it.”

She wouldn't have been the first officer faced with a terrible choice when her leader pursued a course of mutual destruction. Her loyalty was to the common good of the GA, not to Jacen Solo.

Hang on, I'm talking and thinking as if I'm his deputy, not his joint and equal colleague. What am I doing-absolving myself of responsibility? I helped put him in power.

"I have Jedi working hard to seize him, Admiral," said Luke. "Do you think he's insane?"

"No." Niathal had no hesitation. "I've seen too many perfectly sane beings become utterly corrupted by power. Jacen's not insane. He's just had his own way once too often, and now he can't see the world any other way."

"Do you know what I mean by a Sith?"

"I've heard the term. But I know nothing about them."

"They're Force-users who prefer the dark side. Like Palpatine."

"Oh... I see. Fallen Jedi."

Luke pressed his lips into a little humorless smile and looked away for a moment. "Oddly, that's just what the Mandalorians call them. Their word means ex-Jedi, although that's not always the case."

"And does this make any difference to how we approach him? Does he have different powers from regular Jedi?"

Luke looked strangely embarrassed. She wasn't sure why. "Not really. He's just very strong, and he has an ability to use a battle meditation technique that gives him a remarkable awareness of the battlefield."

Ah, I noticed that. "He has a young woman called Tahiri Veila running his errands now."

"Which brings me to Ben." Luke moved closer to Niathal and looked into her face, which required some head tilting on Luke's part because of the set of a Mon Cal's eyes. He clasped her hand again as if he were searching for a pulse. "Apologies, Admiral, we're all scared of our shadows these days. I might be putting a man's life at risk, so I have to be certain. Ben has gone off again, and I believe he's back on Coruscant. He thinks I don't know, but he's probably trying to build a case against Jacen for killing Mara."

Niathal almost sighed with relief. So she wasn't the only one who thought Jacen could kill his own relatives. "If I see him, I'll make sure he gets every assistance to stay out of harm's way. Especially if he goes after Jacen to take revenge."

"He already tried that, after Jacen tortured him."

"Just when I thought the man couldn't get any worse..."

“Revenge isn’t the Jedi way, and Ben’s come to terms with that, but stubborn persistence is Ben’s way, and he may come to your attention. He might be with Captain Shevu. They were close.”

“You trust Shevu?”

“Yes. There’s such a thing as Force certainty, and I have it in that young man.”

Niathal revised her view of the GAG captain. His attitude was courageous dissent, then. She’d have to persuade him out of that. “A GAG insider would be helpful to us all.”

“We become exploitative for all the right reasons, don’t we?”

“We do.”

“Until next time, then.”

Luke swung back into the StealthX cockpit in a gymnastic move that would have taxed a much younger man, and braced his body using his knees while the seat restraints closed around him. Then the canopy closed, he gave her a thumbs-up gesture as if he were just an ordinary pilot taking a fighter for a test flight, and the safety bulkhead closed to release the vacuum in the docking skirt. He was gone.

Poor Ben, Niathal thought. She wished him luck, and decided she would make some for him if she got the chance.

No, Jacen. You won’t get away with this. Not in my navy.

PHAEDA, IMPERIAL SECTOR: TREASURY REPOSITORIES, DERAPHA

The slab of carbonite lay on a trestle draped in synthetic gray velvetweave, looking for all the world like a funeral bier.

Fett inhaled the musty air and held out his chip from the Registry of Testaments and Legacies, his authorization to collect the belongings of a dead scumbag called Rezodar. The lawyer’s minion took it, checked it, and stood back to let Fett and Mirta cross the threshold of the storeroom.

Fett didn’t know Rezodar, and didn’t care. He could guess the gangster’s lifestyle. This was Phaeda, after all. On a bad day it made Nar Shaddaa look classy. He hadn’t been back here since the height of the Empire, another element of his past come back to haunt him on this difficult day.

“I’ll leave you to clear the store, sir, “said the minion. “Three hours maximum. Everything must go. A droid is available if you need help loading.”

There was only one thing Fett wanted. The rest.... he’d jettison it, even give it to the deserving poor, orgiven that this was Phaeda-the undeserving criminal classes.

“That’ll be all, “he said, and took a few steps forward. The distance to the trestle felt almost as

impossibly long as the expanse of sand in the arena at Geonosis that he'd had to cross to retrieve his father's body. And then there had been Ailyn's body, and reinterring his father's remains-Fett had played pallbearer far too often in the past year. He wasn't a squeamish man, but he was coming close to the limit of his tolerance.

But Sintas is alive. And so are you, although you might as well be dead some days.

“What order do you want to do this in?” Mirta asked.

She'd been quiet since he'd dropped his bombshell on her about Shysa. She stood on the opposite side of the shrouded carbonite slab and took off her helmet, the new one that Grade's father had made for her to match armor plates she had now painted a deep saffron. When she tidied her short curly hair with one hand, there was a brief mo-moment when she looked a lot like her grandmother. It was the mouth. The eyes were definitely from his side of the family.

“Let's check the carbonite first,” Fett said. It wasn't what he meant, but it was easier than saying that he only cared about Sintas and everything else was ballast.

He took the top edge of the velvetweave. The drape of the fabric clung to the little mountains and valleys of a face, a once-familiar land. Then he drew back the sheet; and it felt like the moment he saw Ailyn's battered face when Mirta opened the body bag, the shock of the face of a stranger he ought to have known, but whose life he had missed almost completely.

“Oh....,” said Mirta.

It took a lot to shut the girl up, but it was the second time Fett had heard that choked-off gasp today.

Even in the monochrome contours of the carbonite shell, Sintas was recognizable. Worse: she was beautiful. He bent his knees slightly to check her profile against the light, but she looked much as he'd remembered-high cheekbones, long straight hair, a small pointed chin. Her arms were at her sides; her eyes were closed as if she were sleeping. He'd seen a few carbonited beings in his time and they had been frozen in some paroxysm of pain or terror, because it wasn't a pleasant way to be put into suspended animation, but Sintas looked peaceful.

Maybe the barve froze her down dead.

It gave Fett a brief sense of respite and he hated himself instantly for it. Dead Sintas wouldn't drag up the unhappy past, or hang around demented and in torment. Dead Sintas was what he thought he already had.

Face up to it, fett. You were never scared of anything. What would Dad think of you, too frightened to hear the truth again? You never could handle this stuff. It's how you ended up in this position.

“Maybe she'll be able to tell us how she ended up here,” he said, swallowing everything he wanted to say. It was fifty years too late. “Get the repulsorlifts.”

He clamped a unit on each edge of the slab and glanced around the room. There were just crates of



varying sizes, sealed and dusty. He had no choice but to take them and go through them in detail later, in case they shed any light on Sintas's fate.

Mirta checked the boxes and began attaching repulsors to them. She never needed to be told to make herself useful; she learned fast and got on with the job, uncomplaining, and did it thoroughly. It was only the emotional things, the issues about family and heritage, that seemed to provoke her into surly scolding. She walked the boxes out across the landing area and steered them up Slave I's cargo ramp with a practiced hand, then jogged back and moved the next crate. Fett stayed with Sintas's slab, unable to leave her alone in this miserable place.

"You ready?" Mirta asked, peeling off her liner-gloves and whacking them hard against her thigh plate to get the dust out. She put them back on and slipped her gauntlets over the top. "I'd ask you if you were okay, but I'd never get an answer."

"I'm okay," Fett said. "Are you?"

"No. I'm scared. I don't know how to tell her about Mama. I don't know how I'll handle it if she ends up crazy and would have been better off dead anyway. But I'll deal with it."

"I'll tell her."

"Give me some warning. How did you two part the last time you met?"

Fierfek, there's no way around this, is there?

"I shot her," Fett said. "And it was for her own good."

"Yeah, somehow I didn't think it would be a moonlit walk along a shore on Naboo and a tearful promise to stay friends."

"It was to stop her opening a booby trap." Fett flicked the controls on the repulsors and eased the carbonite slab off the trestle, aiming it at the exit doors. Mirta stepped to one side to avoid it. "Just a small blaster burn. She would have been fine in a few hours. She always healed fast."

"You didn't wait to find out?"

"She wasn't dead when I left her."

"Well, she did better than Shysa, then."

He should never have mentioned Shysa. It was a mistake; he kept making them with Mirta. He made them with all women, in fact. Sintas didn't know how lucky she was that they split before he could really foul up her life. "Shysa was a mercy killing."

Mirta turned her back on him, displaying a saffron plate decorated with gold sigils and glyphs that he'd seen on the Vevut clan's armor. She was definitely serious about Ghes Grade, then. That meant Fett would have a grandson-in-law soon, and with it a kinship to Novoc Vevut and the rest of the

clan; it was all getting too much for him, too involved, too rooted. Fett craved loneliness right then—yes, loneliness. It was a much simpler emotion to handle.

“You sound as if you’re straining out a confession a word at a time, Ba’buir,” she said. “So either spit it out or let’s concentrate on worrying about.... Ba’buir.”

“Grandmother” and “grandfather” were the same word in Mando’a. The language had no gender, not that he spoke it beyond the odd word that Mirta had forced on him. It was the first time that something had grated on him. He was Ba’buir, nobody else. That reaction made him realize that he’d become a little too invested in the name.

“I didn’t want to do it,” he said. “I didn’t even want to be Mandalore. But if I hadn’t shot Shysa, he’d have died a rotten death. I owed him better than that.”

“You could have done the decent thing and still handed over the kyr’bes to someone else.”

Fett had learned that word early in their relationship: the crown, the mythosaur skull reserved for the office of Mand’alor. “I gave Shysa my word that I’d honor his dying wish.”

Mirta paused and glanced back over her shoulder at him but didn’t say anything else. He wondered if she believed him. He found he was completely unable to go on talking, and passed off his silence in settling the carbonite slab down on a bench in the cargo hold and draping it with the velvetweave cloth.

It was one way of dealing with a painful memory—sticking a different one in its place. A change could be as good as a rest. On the journey back to Mandalore, Mirta kept getting out of the copilot’s seat and disappearing into the hold. When he went aft to see what she was doing, he found her sitting next to Sintas, one hand on her shoulder, talking quietly to her.

“She can’t hear you,” he said.

“Some say carbonited people do.”

They said Han Solo did, but Fett saw no reason to upset Mirta more than she was already. “She’ll hear you soon enough.”

Mirta carried on anyway. “Maybe I’m rehearsing a difficult speech.”

She was right, but she didn’t know that it wouldn’t be one-way traffic. Fett decided to face all that if and when it happened, and wished he’d been half the man his father had been. Jango Fett would have known what to say.

Slave I touched down at Beviin’s farm in Keldabe at dusk. A small grim-faced welcoming committee met the ship, and Fett could only feel discomfort that he had an audience to observe yet again what a shabby job he’d made of being a husband and father. Dr. Beluine was there as commanded, incongruous in his soft city clothes, his white-blond hair whipped by the breeze. Beviin and his partner Medrit Vasur looked at the carbonite slab with matching frowns. It was rare to see

Beviin wearing anything but a cheerful grin.

Medrit raised an eyebrow. “I’m no expert, of course, but that was a handsome woman you had there, Fett.”

Fett noted the past tense and the implication of his ingratitude for the lucky hand he’d been dealt and followed the slab into Medrit’s workshop. The couple’s grandchildren, Shalk and Briila, tagged along to watch the spectacle, eyes wide.

Jintar, their father, moved in from nowhere and scooped both of them up in his arms. So he was back from the war, then; his right hand was heavily bandaged. The next time he went to fight, Shalk would be old enough to join him and learn the craft of warfare. He’d be eight next birthday, Beviin had said. It seemed far too young, and yet Fett had been at his father’s side at that age, and had loved every moment. Dangerous missions had been a rare treat.

“Come on, ad’ike,” Jintar said to them. “Nothing to see here. It’s rude to stare at the Mandalore.”

“Is the lady dead?” Briila asked. “Can we have her stuff?”

“Sleeping,” said Jintar, and winked at Fett.

Medrit had cleaned up one of the side rooms in the Workshop for the carbonite removal process. It was where he recharged blaster power packs with Tibanna gas. Beluine looked horrified as the slab was lowered into the release vat.

“It’s okay,” Medrit said, looming over the doctor. He was tall enough to make a Wookiee think twice. “I’ve thawed plenty of this stuff. It’s how we used to ship nerf carcasses when I worked on Olanet.”

“How very reassuring.” Beluine opened his bag to take out a tray of pneumatic dispensers and vials of medication. “I must write a paper on that for the Galactic Journal of Endocrinology...”

Now the onlookers had thinned out to just Fett, Mirta, Beluine, Medrit, and Beviin. Medrit stood with his hand on the controls. “Say the word, Mand’alor.”

It was said that carbonite freezing was how people had traveled interstellar distances before hyperdrive. Fett’s most vivid experience of the technique had been Han Solo’s incarceration, and the consequence of Solo’s flailing around blind after being released from the block was still something Fett saw each day in the mirror when he shaved.

“Don’t worry, Bob’ika.” Beviin grinned nervously, daring to joke when everyone else looked on the grim edge of mourning. “We don’t have any sarlaccs here.”

Only Beviin could get away with that. He was the closest Fett had to a friend.

“As soon as she’s free of the carbonite, I need to get her heart rate and blood oxygen up right away to minimize tissue damage,” said Beluine. He held a hypospray as if it were a miniature blaster, and

in his other hand he had an oxygen delivery device like an aquata breather. “Stand clear.”

“Ready, Doc?” Medrit asked.

“Ready.”

Medrit pressed the switches and the ferrocrete vat erupted with cold vapor and loud hisses as gas escaped-Fett thought it was noisier than he remembered, and then he realized it wasn't the escaping by-products of the thaw but the weak panting squeals of a woman in agony. Beluine dived forward, blocking his path, and reached into the miniature storm that had formed above the vat.

“It's okay, Ba'buir, it's okay, it's okay...” Mirta leaned in, too, taking the spent hypo from Beluine's hand while he applied the breather. Sintas wasn't screaming-she'd never been a weakling, not her-but the sounds she was making were incoherent, the panic of any terrified animal with something unfamiliar pressed to its mouth by a stranger. “You're safe, it's okay. You're going to be all right.”

When the vapor dissipated, Mirta held Sintas's hand while Beluine slapped a monitor on her arm. Sintas was thrashing about, trying to sit up, and staring totally unco-ordinated, eyes rolling. She pulled her arm away from Beluine, grabbing blindly for anything. Mirta caught her arm.

“You're among friends, “she said quietly. “Easy. Udesii. Just relax and let the doctor take a look at you.”

Sintas looked right through Fett, her face all white terror made more stark by the ink-black Kiffar tattoos, the qukuuf. She was blind. He was ready for that, but he wasn't ready to look into her eyes again, dark blue, at once both everything he thought he'd ever wanted and the deserved judgment on what he hadn't given her. The last fifty years collapsed in on themselves leaving Fett nineteen again; be-sotted for a brief while, and then an older, numbed man wondering why the only thing he could manage was to walk away to leave her in some filthy alley, knowing he was abandoning his daughter again, too.

I didn't even ask about Ailyn. I just gave Sintas the hologram and told her not to lose it again.

“Well, she can move, “Beluine said. “No paralysis. Excellent.”

“Shab, he's a sharp one, “Medrit muttered. “I'd never have diagnosed that in a million years.”

Mirta and Beviin lifted Sintas and laid her on a repulsor trolley, wrapping her in blankets. She was calming down now, or at least exhausting herself into a quieter state. Fett dared to step closer. Beviin put a discreet hand on his back to steady him.

“Madam, “Beluine said. “Can you hear me?” He checked the device on her arm. “Can you tell me your name?”

She jerked her head in the direction of the doctor's voice. “I... heard...”

“That’s good. Let’s try again. Can you tell me your name?”

Sintas seemed totally distracted by the question. She settled on her back, eyes open and apparently staring at the workshop ceiling.

“I... I don’t know. Don’t know.... who are you? Where’s... oh stang I don’t know who...”

Sintas had been frozen in her midthirties. She was a shuddering wreck coming out of the agony of carbonite suspension, but she was still a beautiful woman.

I owe her. She’s not my wife now, but I owe her something for all those years I was never a husband or a father.

Fett had no way of articulating that aloud, because he’d never learned to go beyond that single, all-defining father-son relationship, but he wouldn’t abandon her this time. At least he had some breathing space now to work out how to fill in her missing history.

If she’d been in her fifties, sixties, seventies, he’d have done things differently, he swore it. But she wasn’t. She wasn’t even old enough to be Mirta’s mother. Mirta looked stricken but her eyes were dry. She was a Fett, all right.

“Let’s get her to her room, “Fett said. “Dr. Beluine needs to carry out his examination.”

“Amnesia’s really common in carbonite cases, “Beviin said kindly, following the repulsor into the main body of the house. “But how much of the past would you want her to forget for good?”

“It’s not her who needs to forget, “Fett said. “It’s me.”

# Chapter 4

Sweetheart, are you okay? Don't take any stupid risks. You're not responsible for saving the Galactic Alliance singlehanded.

-Shula Shevu, newly married, in an encrypted message to her husband

BASTION, IMPERIAL REMNANT: MOFF ASSEMBLY HALL AT RAVELIN

It was always sobering to be a spectator at your own funeral.

Pellaeon stood at the window overlooking the parade ground and watched the ornate cannon carriage that would carry his remains. Like him, it was a survivor from a different age, archaic in design but still able to fulfill its function in war. The paired bloodfins drawing it came to a halt at precisely the center of the paved expanse, remained motionless for a count of ten, and then wheeled right to follow a perfectly straight line through the archway and out into the streets of the capital, the brilliant scarlet crests that earned them the name bobbing like flames in the morning sunlight. Pellaeon was sure they were a subspecies of ghannoidal certecyes, but they had that striking red crest like the marine predator, and bloodfin was much easier to pronounce. A token platoon of Imperial Guards marched behind in their everyday number five uniforms, not parade best.

However many times Pellaeon saw the rehearsal, it was impressive. Bloodfins were notoriously hard to train in the art of dressage or precise cavalry displays. He made a mental note to congratulate the ceremonial staff; the carnivorous quadrupeds were formidable mounts, quite capable of fighting on their own even when their rider was dead, and they were not known for their obedience off the battlefield.

Bastion had to rehearse the state funeral regularly because such magnificent displays of pomp and precision didn't happen overnight. A leader might die at any time, and Bastion liked to be prepared. Pellaeon sipped his caf, aware of the hum of conversation at his back, and watched the carriage and the guard platoon vanish into Ravelin's early-morning quiet.

"Doesn't that depress you, sir?" asked Reige.

"Only if I'm taking part." Pellaeon held out the translucent cup for a refill. "I'll worry when I see hundreds of guards in their parade best." He watched the reflection of the room behind him in the transparisteel sheet of the window, and noted each Moff's arrival and whom he huddled with to chat before the meeting started. "Two minutes, Vitor, and then we begin."

It was a regular weekly assembly of the Moff Council of the Empire, nothing extraordinary or unscheduled, but in the last twenty-four hours Pellaeon had been made aware of activity on the informal diplomatic front. He could still rely on Moff Sarreti to keep him up to speed on backroom politics even though the man was retired.

All those Moffs, and so very little Empire to play in. It was bound to make them restless.

Pellaeon glanced around the table during the meeting, playing the game of working out which of the Moff's wanted to assassinate him, and which saw some advantage in keeping him alive. Luckily, the only ones who were competent to take him on were also the most militarily able, and so were his allies. Nature had her checks and balances. They broke for caf.

All you need is patience, gentlemen. I'm ninety-two. Just sit it out.

"Admiral, may I refill your cup?" Lecersen was one of the old-school Moff's, a man who believed in duty. He even kept himself combat-fit and clipped his hair extra-short to a suede-like bloom across his skull. "I think this meeting is going to last a little longer than usual."

Pellaeon sipped thoughtfully. "Did I ever tell you I was psychic?"

"I believe not."

"Oh, I am. I believe a great opportunity is going to come our way, one that will change our destiny."

Lecersen stifled a smile. "It's very general, sir."

"I'll go out on a limb. I predict that at least one of our colleagues here has heard of a wondrous potential connected to the ongoing nastiness between the Galactic Alliance and the Confederation."

Lecersen allowed the full grin to take over his face, and cast a cautious eye over the cluster of men who treated Grand Moff Quille as a center of gravity. "I must remember to ask you to advise me when placing odupiendo racing bets."

Pellaeon didn't know Jacen Solo as well as he would have liked, but one thing he did know was that the man was both manipulative and impatient, a combination that meant he tended to start playing his games early. It was only a matter of time before the rebuff of his offer to talk about joining the Galactic Alliance camp was countered with a discreet word to the Moff's about what luscious opportunities their senile leader had passed up without telling them. In fact, if Jacen didn't do it, Pellaeon would lose his faith in the enduring power of self-interest, which had kept the galaxy turning about its core since the planets had cooled enough to support bacteria. Where Niathal stood in this he wasn't yet sure; but he knew her well enough to judge that her failing was her inability to stop Jacen, not her active sanction of Jacen's excesses as joint Chief of State.

"Admiral, something significant has come to our attention," Quille said. "I wonder if we might discuss it in the wider context of the war."

"The Empire has managed to stay out of the conflict so far," said Pellaeon. "Thank goodness for that, Jacen Solo. Faith is restored, and the galactic disk still turns. What do you mean by context?"

"Threats and opportunities, Admiral. The war is sucking in more worlds, and the Jedi Council has upped sticks and moved out of Coruscant, which is a worrying development. It suggests more fragmentation in existing alliances, and that might make our neighboring sectors unstable. But it might also give us an opportunity to expand our sphere of influence."

Pellaeon took a spoonful of jhen honey and held it above his cup, letting a long ribbon of the viscous amber run off the spoon into the caf, then twirled it with a practiced wrist while he waited for Quille to go on. It wasn't the first time he'd used the silent routine on a meeting of the Moffs. They never seemed able to resist it, though, and by the time his spoon emerged shining and clean from the caf, they were getting uncomfortable and looking to Quille to fill the long gap.

"Do go on," said Lecersen.

"Our diplomatic sources say that the GA is recruiting allies from outside its usual sphere of influence," said Quille. "When the war is over, the map of the galaxy will look very different."

Lecersen smiled. It always made him look more disturbing than when he frowned. "Well, there's a big gap near Corellia where Centerpoint used to be, for a start."

There was a ripple of laughter. Quille pressed on. "Rewards may be there for the taking, gentlemen."

"In exchange for fighting Jacen Solo's war for him," said Rosset. "Is there anything we want badly enough for that?"

The discussion began rambling over the possibilities in a tapestry of voices. "Niathal's war, too..."

"Oh, let's not forget the admiral, shall we?"

"If an admiral was running it, it would be over by now."

"Solo could always lose the war, of course."

"If the GA is thinking this way, then perhaps the Confederation is, too, and maybe they've got a better offer."

"Is there an offer?"

The silence was sudden. It was an excellent question. Pellaeon thought it was time to remind them that he was not senile, that he was not a figurehead, and that he did not lack informants.

"Bilbringi and Borleias, if we commit troops and ships to the GA." Pellaeon let the names sink in. He still enjoyed that silent moment of revelation he could create in a meeting. Yes, it was vulgar theater to reveal what he knew of the offer leaked to the Moffs in that way, but it was also a shot across the bows of any Moff who thought he could best the old man. "And, of course, my question would be, what's in it for us? Both those worlds are in the GA's gift to give, but there's still a small population in both systems, and we still might have to fight to take them. If it's the latter, then all the GA is doing is turning a blind eye to any expansion on our part in exchange for our blood, and that seems to me like paying twice. If we wanted to expand, Solo would be in no position to stop us anyway while he's so thinly stretched in this war, and we would need to commit nothing to his land-



grab expeditions.”

“Then the question is whether we want to expand the Empire,” Lecersen said. “Do we?”

“I would be inclined to wait and see what’s left of the galaxy before we decide what we want,” said Rosset. “It might be the difference between snapping up a bargain at a sale, and taking on a charity case that saps our resources.”

Pellaeon felt the surge of old emotions again. This was about duty. Wars left the galaxy in tatters, and the galaxy’s wounds were freshly healed after the Yuuzhan Vong War. It would take very little to tear the new tissue apart and make healing harder next time; some worlds had recovered very little in a decade. This was the situation an empire could avoid, could stabilize, could heal, but if it meant working with the likes of Jacen Solo—no, Pellaeon could never see that lasting. He might do business with Niathal, but not anyone as volatile and mystic as Solo.

We are the Empire. We bring order and justice for the common good.

The irony wasn’t lost on him; this was clearly Jacen Solo’s ideology, too.

“My problem with Solo,” Pellaeon said carefully, knowing that his exact words would reach Jacen sooner or later, and wondering if it was worth the effort to track the route, “is that he has no background in government or the military. Jedi are very good at being in opposition, being the conscience on the shoulder of leaders and keeping them on their toes, or even playing peacekeeping shock troops when needed, but they do not run things well. They’re doers, not managers... although I suspect Princess Leia has excellent leadership skills. Sadly, she’s not the one running the junta. How different life might be then.”

“Solo seems to be winning rather a lot for a man whose first uniform was a colonel’s,” Quille said.

“There’s a Mon Cal admiral in a shiny white suit to whom he owes at least some of that, I suspect.” Pellaeon realized Jacen was not a textbook Jedi and, from the rumors he was hearing, probably dabbled in the dark side, but the principle stood. The Jedi Council was part think tank, part special forces, part mystical reassurance for the ruling class; Jedi could nudge and steer, and even block, but they were used to being a small weight added to tip the scales. Jacen was from that tradition, but trying to be an emperor. He wasn’t up to the task.

“Are we taking a vote on this?” asked Rosset.

“There’s no formal offer, and so no motion on the table.” Lecersen drew the questions away from Pellaeon. “I would simply suggest that we keep a watching brief on the situation, and if an opportunity arises to clarify what Chief of State Solo has in mind, then we look to Admiral Pellaeon to explore it if he so wishes. The admiral has unique experience in seeing history repeat itself.”

He had to hand it to Lecersen; the Moff had a superbly analytical mind, and didn’t need to hear the gossip about Jacen Solo’s parallel course with his grandfather’s to predict certain outcomes. Had

Jacen but known it, though, he was doing what every flawed and ideologically committed leader throughout history had done. His vision was all-consuming, and in time he would become so dazzled by it and so embedded in it that he would ignore and then simply not see the warning signs. There was always one more bold act, always one more final push, that would vindicate him and make everything work.

They all did it. The innovators and visionaries who had brilliant ideas and could get things moving had very different psyches to what was needed to reach and maintain stability. They simply looked for more glorious revolution to spark. It was hardwired. It was doomed to self-destruct. And it cost lives.

Sooner or later-sooner, probably-Jacen Solo would overstretch himself, and then the battlefield would be open to those who could pick up the pieces and bring back quiet order. It would be left to the Empire.

The Moffs filed out. Pellaeon hung back with Reige until the grand room was empty except for them and a house-keeping droid who hovered around clearing the splendid pleek table.

“I love it when you drop a full payload on them, sir,” Reige said.

“That’ll teach them to think I’m deaf. The bloodfins aren’t hauling me away yet.”

But this was just the opening salvo. Jacen Solo would not give up. Pellaeon wanted to see if anything of genuine substance was on the table before he made a more formal refusal. And he would not play by Jacen’s despotic rules. One Palpatine was enough for a lifetime.

There was still caf left in the pot, and Pellaeon was in no hurry now. He chatted with Reige about the temperaments of pedigree bloodfins, and whether they could ever be safe for children to ride, given their propensity to devour whatever fell in front of them in the heat of the moment. He turned aside the droid when it attempted to clear away those tasty little xirlia pastries. He felt clean and in control again.

Then his comlink chirped. He recognized the incoming code.

“Excuse me, my boy,” he said. “I must see what my Coruscant bureau has to tell me.”

It wasn’t spying; Pellaeon was welcome to return to the capital anytime as a respected veteran. He was simply keeping in touch with old friends. The message wasn’t voice, but text; and it was very short. Rumors-from impeccable sources-said that Jacen Solo had lost his temper after a skirmish and Force-choked a junior officer to death in full view of the bridge crew.

“Oh, it’s just like old times,” said Pellaeon, finding that making light of enormities preserved his blood pressure for those times when he really needed to be angry. “We’re all back in harness, reprising the glory days of our youth. Myself, Princess Leia and young Skywalker, Master Fett.. and now little Lord Vader.”

The military had adored Jacen for throwing his lot in with them and looking after them. How long

they might keep that up if he made a habit of killing underlings, Pellaeon wasn't sure. Jacen still had a fund of goodwill to squander yet.

No, Pellaeon would very definitely not be playing by Jacen Solo's rules.

ANAKIN SOLO, GANDEAL-FONDOR HYPERLANE

"Teb..."

No, she's gone.

It was the second time that morning that Darth Caedus had turned to Lieutenant Tebut for a sitrep and remembered she was dead, which left him unsettled for reasons he had to stop and ponder. Captain Shevu gave him an odd glance when he turned to the station that Tebut had normally occupied on the bridge, but said nothing. Caedus wandered across to the viewscreen to look out at distorted time and space, a respite while he grappled with his lapses. Tahiti, playing the part of a junior officer perfectly, stayed at her station with her hands clasped behind her back.

Had he genuinely forgotten that he'd killed Tebut? Or was this all part of... grieving? He'd lost count of the times he'd marked a passage in a holozine for his brother Anakin, or seen something funny that he just had to tell him, or any one of a dozen things that crashed painfully when he remembered in the next instant that Anakin was dead. Caedus could remember how terrible that was; and yet he could flow-walk back to Anakin's death and not suffer that again.

He didn't understand why, and that bothered him. He Was supposed to be past those petty personal concerns now. Perhaps this was the way it was for Sith of his status; perhaps he needed the ability to switch off and do what was necessary, however distressing, and yet not lose the passions and sorrows that gave Sith strength. If he could take terrible decisions and never feel their enormity, then he would be no better than a droid. Flesh and blood needed the protective rule of someone who understood their pain.

So... he worked through things carefully, and he always found his answer... he was spared that for the time he needed the clarity to take hard decisions, and yet he still had to suffer the reality later, when it was safe to do so. If he forgot what pain and fear were, then he would also forget his duty to the trillions of beings who would look to him to stop their suffering.

This uneasiness about Tebut was a price, then, not a failing. A reminder from the Force of what it meant to be flesh and blood, and whom he served. It made sense. He felt reassured.

"Dropping out of hyperspace in five standard minutes, sir," said the officer of the watch.

"Very good." Caedus tore his gaze from the transparisteel and strode back to his bridge position. "So, Tahiri, we'll see Fondor shortly." She was in blue uniform, no badges of rank, and proper black fleet-issue boots, the ones with durasteel-hardened toe caps for safety. Tahiri hated shoes, but a warship was a dangerous place to go barefoot. It also looked sloppy and ill disciplined. "This is the next dissident planet we take back."

“Not today, though,” she said. “We’re doing reconnaissance.”

A recce wasn’t needed, given the intelligence Caedus had on Fondor. Less than a standard year earlier, it had been a Galactic Alliance member state, and so its defensive capability and industrial output were a matter of record; worlds didn’t change into unknown quantities that fast. But Caedus was still baffled by Fondor’s decision to secede from the GA, an act he saw as inexplicably treacherous. The planet’s yards had thrived on the custom of Coruscant-based regimes for decades, and this very hyperspace lane was testimony to the volume of hulls that had been transported from the orbitals here to the galactic capital.

“No,” said Caedus. “We’re showing Fondor how easy it is to get at them. A speeder bus ride, practically.”

“Don’t they know that?”

“We often ignore the obvious. And this is partly education for you.”

Tallin’s eyes flickered a little. “In which discipline?”

“Decision making.”

The task of sweet-talking Pellaeon into listening to Caedus’s offer was something any intelligent, personable woman could do. But Caedus needed Tahiri to be more than that, and he needed her to grow so that she wasn’t performing like a circus rancor simply for tidbits of time spent flow-walking back to watch Anakin. The lure of his dead brother had been a legitimate way to get her interest, even if it was a tacky and rather cruel trick; the weight of duty to the dark side meant that very few would embrace it head-on without some self-gratification to hold them in its thrall while they learned the truth. It was a superficial means to a nobler end.

Now he needed Tahiri to understand the gravity of Sith service if she was to fill the gap left by Ben Skywalker as his apprentice. And, as Ben had been blooded by the task of assassinating Dur Gejjen, so Tahiri needed to comprehend the gravity of her role, and move beyond romantic fantasies that could never happen.

Anakin was dead, and he wasn’t coming back. The kindest thing Caedus could do—would do, one day soon—would be to force Tahiri to face up to that and live for the future.

“Okay,” she said. Her lips moved uncertainly. “I mean, very good, sir.”

Tahiri obviously wanted to do well. Caedus watched the viewport, not the view fed from exterior cams to the monitors, as the slightly misshapen disk of Fondor resolved into a sharp-edged planet ringed by orbital shipyards like a swarm of tiny moons.

“Take us in as close as you can, Helm,” he said.

“Very good, sir.” There was no hesitation, query, or even the hint in the Force of any doubt about his wisdom. The Star Destroyer moved from open space into the invisible but fiercely defended

borders of Fondor sovereign territory.

Caedus had neither rehearsed this nor warned the bridge crew. By now the early warning beacons had picked up the Anakin Solo's approach, and the ship's long-range sensors showed that Fondorian fighters were scrambling. Soon there would be a concerted attack on the ship, and he was counting on that. He wanted to test Tahiri's nerve and commitment.

"Weapons officer," he said, "when you acquire a target, do not fire. I repeat, do not fire. Shields and defensive systems-offline."

Nobody said a word, except Tahiri.

"Is this some special tactic?" she asked. "A feint?"

"No, I'm leaving the ship wide open to attack."

"But..."

"The weapons officer will give you firing solutions. You don't have to do any calculations. You only have to decide whether or not to open fire."

Caedus could see Shevu unclasp his hands from behind his back to fold his arms, but that was all. There wasn't the sense of nervousness around the bridge that might have been expected. The crew, as always, had faith in Caedus to deal with any situation. But Tahiri was rattled; she couldn't sense Caedus's intentions-he remained shut down in the Force as a matter of course now, emanating nothing to other Force-users-and now she could see the flight of Fondorian assault fighters streaming out to intercept them. She had never had control of a warship.

"That's easy enough," she said, not sounding convinced. He could feel her probing, groping around in the Force for hidden meaning, concealed traps. "If someone's working out the firing solutions."

"Are the fighters a threat to us, Tahiri?"

She was having doubts now. He'd sown uncertainty in her mind simply by asking an apparently obvious question.

"Possibly."

"How will you know?"

"When they power up their weapons."

"We have weapons online. Are we a threat to them or just ready to deal with an attack? What are your rules of engagement? What if they don't fire?"

To her credit, Tahiri seemed to be thinking logically. The fighters were closing in. Bridge crew began shifting in their seats now, a little uneasy.

“Quickly, Tahiri. You only have seconds. A second is all it takes for a missile to penetrate the hull, vent a whole compartment, kill hundreds of our comrades...”

Caedus knew the Fondorian pilots would detect charged, targeted, locked-on cannon and yet no defenses. They’d think it was a trap. They’d hesitate, assess the target, wonder what they’d missed...

In range.

“They’ve powered up but not acquired us, sir,” said the weapons officer.

“Tahiri...”

“Fire!” she said. “Take, take, take.”

Cannon fire stabbed into the flight of fighters, streams of it taking out all six of them in sudden silent blooms of white light. Naval and air engagements were always impersonal, Caedus thought, machine on machine, not at all like the urgency of facing an enemy in a trench or street and seeing a face. It took awhile to sink in at first.

“Reactivate defenses and lay in a course for Coruscant,” said Caedus.

The Star Destroyer came alive with the lights and sounds of preparation for the hyperspace jump back to the Core. Tahiri was still staring at the viewport.

“Now... was that the right decision?”

“You tell me,” he said.

“I neutralized the threat.”

“Or you fired on vessels that hadn’t targeted you, and made widows and orphans for no good reason. Which do you think you did?”

“It’s a war...”

“Wars have rules.”

“You told me to fire.”

“I told you that you could fire.” Caedus could see the crew trying to pretend the dissection wasn’t taking place in front of them. They were all suddenly blind and deaf. “The decision was yours.”

“Is that what this is all for? You brought the ship here just for a few minutes to see if I could give a command to fire?”

“Yes.”

“And put the ship at risk? And kill pilots?”

“It’s what we do. How do you feel about that? Do you think about the living beings in those fighters, or do you think about us in this ship, and can you ever be sure you took the only reasonable path open to you? I can’t answer that. To become my apprentice, you have to be able to answer that in your own mind and live with the answer. You killed today. It should never feel easy or distant like some holovid game. If it does, or it doesn’t trouble you later at some time, then you’re not up to the responsibility.”

Tahiri stood silent and wide-eyed. She looked as if she was seriously considering the implications. Like him, she’d learned from her time among the Yuuzhan Vong: She knew that there was nothing like blood on your hands to make you grow up and understand all the things you had to sacrifice for duty. Caedus retired to his day cabin and sat reading the previous day’s intelligence reports on the journey home.

When he was still Jacen Solo, Caedus had been warned that command-rule-was lonely, but now he knew what Tenel Ka had meant when she told him it was the price of being a leader.

He was utterly alone now, rejected even by his daughter, Allana.

That... that was my sacrifice.

He had convinced himself it was Mara Skywalker. Then he had convinced himself it was Ben’s adulation he’d sacrificed by killing her. Now he knew that whatever the ancient Sith tassels had prophesied in their arcane language of knots and colors, his sacrifice was an ordinary man’s precious connection to other beings-love, trust, and intimacy. He could never recover any of it. Allana was gone from him forever. His only comfort was that the galaxy would be safer for her.

Lumiya had said the cost would be high. But this was the price of order and justice. This was the price of stability, and his was just one life out of many, a price he considered worth paying however much it hurt. Tahiri would discover that, too, and she had just taken her first step on that path, a small gray area of right or wrong to most beings, but one that a Sith apprentice had to be able to handle.

This is duty.

There was a bleep at the cabin door: Shevu. Caedus felt the man coming down the passage, heralded by a sense of wariness and.... distaste in the Force. Shevu was a former police officer, a Coruscant Security Force man, and he brought his culture with him. He didn’t like Caedus and he didn’t approve of his methods; that was as clear as day. But Caedus trusted him precisely because it was clear even to a non-Force-sensitive. A man who didn’t try to hide his feelings but did the job well anyway gave Caedus nothing to fear.

This is duty, too. Shevu understands what must be done.

“Sir, shall I leave these reports on your desk, or would you prefer to discuss them?” Shevu said.

“Leave them.” Whether the man liked him or not, there was nothing to be gained by alienating him

further. He was very good at his job. “You look tired.”

“Sleepless nights, sir.”

Shevu was being brutally honest. Caedus could sense that: a little anger, a little fear, something worrying him, a yearning to see someone he cared for. Distractions like that could become corrosive.

“Problems?”

“Family stuff, sir.”

“You have a girlfriend, yes?”

“Not any longer, sir.”

“Ah.” Yes, Caedus understood abandonment by those who claimed to love and understand him. “I’m sorry. Isn’t it time you had a few days off?”

“I haven’t taken any leave, sir.”

“Burning out isn’t being a good officer, Shevu. I need you sharp. Take seventy-two hours and come back refreshed. I can’t do anything about the lady, other than say that I understand the toll that duty takes on relationships.”

Shevu’s surprise was palpable. “Thank you, sir.” His mood felt as if it had lifted a little. “Most generous.”

Caedus watched the doors close behind him and was reassured that he hadn’t turned into a monster, whatever Ben Skywalker might have thought. Different situations required different incentives, and Shevu-Shevu couldn’t be scared into compliance, or he would have been no good at an intelligence-based, dangerous job. He couldn’t be cajoled, for the same reasons. He had to be treated with honest respect.

The man was as straight as a die. There were few like that, and worth the keeping.

KELDABE. MANDALORE

Jaina dropped out of hyperspace in the X-wing and hoped that making herself slow and obvious would prevent a mis-understanding about her intentions in a Galactic Alliance fighter.

I must be out of my mind. I should have contacted Fett in advance. But if he’d said no... then I’d still be here. And I’d be in worse trouble. And it’s always harder to turn someone away when they show up in person. And Fett respects physical courage. And....

And she was a Jedi entering Mandalorian space. That was all there was to it. But she had to get past the gatekeeper to get to Fett to win him over with her straight talking, and this was no time to lose her nerve.



“Keldabe ATC, this is X-wing Amber Nine, requesting permission to enter Mandalorian airspace.” She checked again that every weapons system was powered down so that nothing, absolutely nothing, gave them the wrong impression about her intentions. Maybe a shuttle would have been a better idea, but she had no idea how she might be received, and being cannoned up made her feel better. The X-wing held its position. “Keldabe, this is Amber Nine. Are you receiving me?”

“Keldabe ATC to Nine Amber, “said a female voice that didn’t sound remotely ruffled by the intrusion of a GA fighter. Maybe they shot them down every day for practice. It was going to be a hard way to find out. “Pare sol. Wait one.”

Would they even recognize her? The X-wing was obvious enough, but she wasn’t a known face like Jacen or Mom. She was just a pilot, not even in GA orange, deliberately low-key in a somber flight suit with her hair tied back. All she needed to do, though, was to land and do the humble thing, to throw herself on the mercy of Boba Fett, and she was still gambling that saving the salient point about her real identity might get her a little farther. If she said right now that she was Jaina Solo, there was no telling if some Mandalorian patriot might fancy settling the family score on behalf of Fett.

If a bunch of Mandalorians had shown up asking for Dad.... I know how I’d react.

Jaina had never been in Mandalorian space before. Mom had, in her Rebel youth; she said the Mandalorians lived in tree-houses, and their leader, a blond man called Shysa, had been very charming. Jaina waited, cultivating a patience she never knew she had.

Her Force senses told her something was approaching, but she sensed no danger. It felt oddly benign, in fact; if she hadn’t known better, she would have said amused. Yes, there was definitely something approaching her. Nothing showed up on the X-wing’s monitors other than a medium-sized ship with a heavy drive, something like a spaceport tug or some utility vessel. Perhaps it was going to escort her in.

It was very close now. Jaina still couldn’t see anything, but it was approaching from her port side. It was only when she turned her head as far as she could, unable to sit still any longer, that she saw a black void where stars should have been, and picked out a large, unlit shape heading straight at her. Had it detected her?

It was on a collision course. Jaina got ready to run.

Then the lights came on.

The brilliant blue-white light seared her eyes for a split second, but when she blinked away the afterimage she was looking at a grim slab of a vessel that was a mass of cannon turrets, turntables, hatches, and angles. There was no other way to describe it: it was a flying tank.

“Keldabe welcomes careful aruetiise if their credit’s good, “said ATC over the comlink. “Nine Amber, what’s the purpose of your visit?”

Here we go. Just do it. “I’ve come to see Boba Fett.”

“Amber Nine, identify yourself.”

“Keldabe, I’m not GA anymore.” I sound like a criminal. They might have been detaining her. It was hard to tell. “I’ve come alone.”

“Follow your escort.”

She was still in one piece; that was something, although she would have to work out what *aruetiise* meant. The tank rotated ninety degrees in the horizontal and pulled away in front of her, dipping its starboard side like a wing to indicate to her to follow. She’d expected to be met and checked over by a Bes’uliik, and was almost disappointed not to encounter the new Mandalorian fighter. They said it was faster than an X-wing. Corellia and other planetary forces were lining up to buy them.

Aunt Mara would have had fun with one of those.

The memory ambushed Jaina several times a day. She thought it was better than forgetting, however much pain that would have saved her. She had learned that when Anakin died. Before she reached the upper atmosphere of Mandalore, the ungainly-looking tank was joined by a smooth delta-shaped fighter, and Jaina had her wish: it was the Bes’uliik she’d seen on the holonews channels. The vessel maneuvered between her and the tank, so close that she could see the helmeted pilot turn to give her a hand signal familiar to any pilot, follow me.

The tank peeled off and vanished, showing remarkably little heat signature on Jaina’s sensors. “What was that?” she asked.

“You want to place an advance order?” said a male voice. It was the Bes’uliik pilot. “MandalMotors calls it the Tra’kad-the StarSaber.”

It was an elegant name for an inelegant vessel, and Jaina Put it on her list of things to worry about much later. Land-iig on Mandalore needed every scrap of her attention. She was suddenly in busy airspace over heavily wooded country scattered with small villages. Keldabe loomed in her viewscreen, a massive, disorganized fortress set on a granite pedestal ringed by a moat-like river. She could identify the MandalMotors tower from the logo painted on it, that grim animal skull with a flare emerging from one empty eye socket.

And her passive scanners were picking up a formidable array of ground-to-air defenses. Keldabe was ready for all comers.

She brought the X-wing down in a smooth descent, tailed by the Bes’uliik. The apron area was packed with vessels from battered Gladiators and smart new KDY armed transports to-and this rattled her composure a little-old X-wings in garish paint schemes. Most vessels were disgorging passengers, all of them wearing that distinctive full-body armor in a riot of colors; red, deep yel-low, and forest green seemed to be very popular.

The X-wing’s undercarriage shivered as it landed. Jaina was past the point of no return.

“Holiday?” she asked over the comlink, trying to be casual.

“Return of the expatriates,” said the Bes’uliik pilot. “Millions of Mando’ade live on other worlds. The Mand’alor asked for volunteers to rebuild the planet. So they came. They’re getting their land allocations.”

“I had no idea you were so scattered.”

“That’s why you can’t get rid of us. It’s like trying to hammer mercury-it just breaks up and comes back together again.”

Jaina noted that for future anxiety sessions, shut down the systems, and prepped to pop the hatch, wondering if Amber Nine would end up appropriated by the locals and painted bright purple like an old X-wing sitting in a corner of the strip.

“Get down from the cockpit, aruetii, and we’ll check you out.”

Now.... do I take my lightsaber or not?

Jaina took the risk and left it in her grab-bag in the cockpit. She jumped down and stood on the permacrete, an anonymous gray flight suit in a sea of clattering Mandalorian armor. The air smelled of fresh-sawn resin trees and hot metal. “Just tell me what aruetii means.”

“Foreigner,” said the pilot. He pulled a short-stock BlasTech blaster from his belt with a casual movement and ran a hand scanner over her with the other. “Outsider. Not one of us. Even traitor. Okay, you’re clean.”

She thought he would have been far from pleased if he’d picked up her lightsaber on that scan. “What happens to me now?”

“Someone’s coming to check you out. Can’t let just any old riffraff pester our Mand’alor, can we?”

Should she admit who she was now? The man had a blaster. If he took the revelation badly, she’d have a choice of taking whatever came next, or drawing on her Force skills unarmed while surrounded by hundreds of Mandalorians, every single one of them with some weapon, even the children. It would all get out of hand before she knew it. And she needed Fett’s help badly.

“Absolutely,” she said.

Jaina was already having to think differently, to suppress all her own training that said she should have been treating this environment as a serious threat and preparing to defend herself. The feeling of helplessness was both utterly alien and disturbing. The Bes’uliik pilot didn’t say anything else to her, and just stood with his blaster resting in the safety position against his shoulder. They waited. People were starting to stare. Eventually a speeder bike edged through the crowd on the perimeter and headed straight for her.

“She’s all yours,” said the pilot. “Unarmed.”

The rider was a man in royal blue armor, and she sensed that he was agitated, but in a distracted way that said he was worrying about something else.

“I’m Goran Beviin,” he said, looking wary. A short but serious-looking metal saber hung from his belt as well as a blaster. “The Mand’alor is tied up at the moment. So you can tell me all about it. Get on.”

It was tempting just to come clean and tell him she was Jaina Solo, yes, that Jaina Solo, but a black object dangling from his shoulder plate distracted her. It was alien hair, somehow familiar. Mandalorians loved their trophies. Fett went in for braided Wookiee scalps. It was pretty disgusting, but she wasn’t here to be judgmental about their customs. She needed Mandalorian help.

“Is that Yuuzhan Vong?” she asked, trying to be casual.

“Indeed it is,” said Beviin. “Nothing I like better than killing crab-boys.”

That was the sum of their conversation until they reached Keldabe. Mom had been right: there were some tree-houses along the way. But the city was just that, a tight urban chaos of granite blocks, wood, plastoid, and durasteel, with the houses packed together like a close-quarters battle. There were still signs of war damage on many walls, and even MandalMotors’ hundred-meter tower bore scorch marks. A few new offices and other buildings looked grander, but this didn’t appear to be a rich city or even a planned one; it looked like a battered survivor.

Beviin stopped the speeder in front of what could only be a cantina, its doors parted and the smell of cooking and brewing wafting onto the street. Above the entrance was lettering Jaina couldn’t read, and-helpfully-a few words of Basic: UNIVERSE TAPCAF-NO STRILLS INSIDE-BARTEC ACCEPTED.

Jaina followed Beviin inside. He took off his helmet, laid it on the counter, and ruined another stereotype for her: he wasn’t some granite-faced thug but an ordinary gray-haired man about her mother’s age, with the kind of face that looked on the edge of a big smile all the time. And the Fett-inspired image of Mandalore that she’d nursed for so long kept crumbling. When her eyes adjusted to the light, she found herself in a cantina full of armored Mandalorians, not all human, helmets stacked under tables. They were watching a big holovid screen in intent, reverent silence, mesmerized by a bolo-ball match.

“Meshgeroya,” Beviin whispered, as if he was interrupting an act of worship. “The beautiful game. Our other national pastime.”

Something small and furry zipped past Jaina’s foot, but she didn’t dare look too closely. One of the patrons, a stocky man with white hair and a vine tattoo curling up his neck, glanced at her and guffawed.

“Throw her back,” he laughed. “You know it’s wrong to catch ’em that small.”

Beviin was looking her over suspiciously. “She’s come to see Fett, Car’ika.”

“We’re much cheaper than he is, lady,” said the tattooed man. “Who do you want hunted?”

“It’s okay.” Jaina winced at how uncomfortably close the joke brushed to reality. She leaned against the bar, wondering why she’d been brought to a cantina and not taken to some government building or even Fett’s residence. “I know where my quarry is.”

The place smelled of spice, yeast, and fried food, and most of the patrons were drinking a black ale or small glasses of a clear liquid that almost certainly wasn’t water. Her Force senses told her they were all much, much more Worried about the final score than they were about having a stranger among them. Were they really that relaxed, or did they just think that nobody could touch them here?

“I’m sorry to stare,” Beviin said mildly, “but I know you, and I’m trying to think where I’ve seen your picture. Never mind. It’ll come to me.” His palm rested on the pommel of that saber, probably just a comfortable way to stand in full armor, but Jaina couldn’t stop herself working out how she’d parry a blow from the thing using only the Force.

“But you’re not going to tell me until you have to, are you?”

“Fett knows me and my family,” she said. She assumed Fett might recognize her; she thought she’d met him once when she was a kid, but someone had said it might have been an imposter. “He’ll know why I’ve come.”

The bolo-ball provided a neutral distraction. She was al-most caught up in it, so deafened as the room turned from total silence to explosive yells of “Oya!” when the favored team scored, that the sensation that ran up her spine and made her hair bristle caught her by surprise.

Impossible.

No, that’s just not possible.

“What’s wrong?” Beviin asked. He reached across the bar, grabbed a handful of something from a bowl, and munched thoughtfully. “You think that goal was offside?”

Jaina whipped around, ready to run, and the doors opened. Something was wrong-very wrong. The Force was telling her something that couldn’t be true.

Two Mandalorians walked in, one in armor with no two plates the same color, and one in green, clearly much older and walking as if his joints were painful.

The older man eased off his helmet and placed it on the counter. Yes, he was old. He looked as if life had drained him dry. His stare cut straight through her and she found herself staring back, wishing she’d announced herself the moment she landed.

“Hello, Jedi,” he said, and drew a blaster.

# Chapter 5

In Mandalorian lore, the color blue represents reliability; green, duty; gold, vengeance; black, justice; gray, mourning a lost love; and red, honoring a father.

Mandalorians: Identity and Language, published by the Galactic Institute of Anthropology

EN ROUTE FOR THE HAPES CLUSTER

“You sure this isn’t a trap?” Ben asked.

“I told you Jacen was nuts.” Shevu was heading for the Perlemian Trade Route in a small transport bearing the livery of the geological survey team of the University of Coruscant. Ben felt confident about pulling off this ruse if they were questioned, because they really did look like a student and an earnest young lecturer in some arcane branch of the study of igneous rocks. Ben certainly wanted to look very closely at Kavan. “But he had no way of knowing that I was going to do this before he told me to take a break.”

“He had some other motive, though.”

“Well, he didn’t know we’d go to Kavan. And he won’t know we’ve been.”

“Who got you this crate?”

“Jacen’s ticked off a lot of people.”

“Yes, I think he’s off the party list at a lot of embassies now...”

“If you have to know-a lot of the Corellians he rounded up were professors and students. The uni took it badly. And.... Barit Saiy comes in handy, with that engineering company of his dad’s.”

The name slapped Ben in the face. Barit Saiy. He was Corellian, from an ordinary working family who’d lived on Coruscant for generations; but he did something dumb with a blaster, talked tough about fighting the Galactic Alliance, and Ben had turned him in to Jacen. When he vanished from GAG custody, like so many Corellians during those awful weeks, Ben had assumed the worst.

A memory came back to him, Shevu hunched over a custody record, angry at losing prisoners from the list without proper procedure.

“You found him?” Ben asked, as the memory resolved into realization.

“Yeah.”

“And you got him out.” Ben floundered, dropped from a height into an ice-cold pool of doubt. “But he was armed and shooting at cops...”

“Yeah, and you don’t have to feel guilty about informing on him. The law’s the law.”

“But you bent it. You let Barit go.”

“Ben, everything Jacen did to grab power was within the law. There’s law, and there’s justice, and sometimes they’re not the same thing. Barit was just a kid talking through his backside, like teenage lads do.”

Ben’s certainty wavered. He’d seen Barit fire at the cops during a riot. He’d deflected the bolt. He wondered if he was clinging to that to make himself feel better about turning him in. “And you needed an informant.”

“Don’t you? Isn’t that what I’ll be doing for your dad?”

The adult world that Ben had been catapulted into had no safety net if anything went wrong. Nobody would call time on it like a training session, and the weapons weren’t modified lightsabers designed just to sting. He’d woken up to that fast; he was playing by dirty, violent, grown-up rules. What still left him struggling, though, was the compromises, and he lay awake at night walking the endless maze of right and wrong, and wondering if two wrongs could make a right, and if he might have learned that at the Jedi academy. Dad always seemed to know what was right, even if he couldn’t explain why. Ben realized at that moment that you never learned a foolproof formula for right and wrong, that there was no checklist of good and bad, and that you had to keep an eye on yourself every minute of the day and ask: Should I be doing this? Would I want someone to do this to me?

“You don’t have to spy for the Jedi Council,” he said.

“Of course I do,” Shevu said. “Who else is going to be able to get rid of a Sith? You think the GA courts can bring the full majesty of galactic law down on his head? As long as we both know the score, that’s fine.”

Ben went back to his datapad, understanding how tense Shevu was. He could have told Tenel Ka what they were doing, but that would have meant official Hapan Security involvement, and Shevu didn’t trust anybody. Ben saw his point. He’d trusted Jacen, after all. Now he was back in the land of hard evidence, running through all the data he’d gathered in a stunned haze while his mother lay dead in the tunnel on Kavan.

She was, of course, in most of the holovid recordings.

Ben had watched those over and over until he could look past his mother’s body and the pain of reliving the discovery. He saw instead the position of the body, the surrounding area, what material was dislodged or broken, the unoxidized bright color of the smashed bricks that told him the damage was new; he reconstructed a savage fight, so much destruction of the tunnel complex on that abandoned world that Force-use was obvious. There were no traces of detonite, the only other explanation for that much damage, and Mara Skywalker would never have had to use that much effort against a run-of-the-mill attacker. She’d fought someone at least as powerful as herself.

Ben checked the profiles of the air samples he'd taken. There was the trace of high-energy vaporization from lightsabers and a lot of trace elements released by smashed brick, wood, and stone. He'd almost hoped for a whisper of the air from Jacen's lungs, but the datapad-sized device couldn't do magic.

What could he have missed? His mother's body had been examined thoroughly by Cilghal. Other Jedi had combed the tunnels for evidence, picking up on all the possible clues that ordinary technology might have missed, but there was nothing discarded except the sterile-pack of poison darts that were so like Alema's weapons of choice, and the echoes of dark energy, which were equally likely to have come from Alema.

But they hadn't picked up echoes of Alema herself. Was she adept enough to disguise her passage through Kavan? Jacen certainly was. He could hide in the Force, and even cloak Lumiya's presence right under the Jedi Council's nose.

But it was still all what wasn't there at the scene, not what was.

The Hapan deep-space security sensors picked up the university transport as soon as it came within range, and the only thing that seemed to concern the control center was whether the survey was looking for gemstones. They seemed touchy about that. Shevu put on a very convincing droning voice, explaining that gemstones weren't anywhere near as interesting as the Carlanian volcanic pipes and surrounding igneous rocks that would shed more light on the latest theory about the origins and formation of the Hapes Cluster. He was reading off a datapad. It did the trick. The control center stopped him midway through a riveting explanation of the outcropping of cylindrical dia-tremes, and gave them clearance to land on Kavan.

I can do this. Ben concentrated on detached calm as the windswept surface of Kavan expanded rapidly beneath the vessel. I can face this.

"You okay, Ben?"

"I'm fine."

"Think cop. Just keep thinking cop."

It was a lot less desolate than Ben recalled. The season had moved on, and the ground was covered in different plants, tussocks of tiny star-shaped red flowers with amber spikes for leaves. Shevu set the geo-survey droid to explore and drill some convincing core samples, just in case, and they walked the course-the CSF's slang for revisiting a crime scene and pacing out distances and angles in the hope of getting fresh insight. They stood at the location where Mara's StealthX had been found, looking for inspiration.

"Jacen must have landed here in his StealthX," said Shevu. "His was signed out from the GAG hangar during the relevant time frame, and we know your mother called Hapan ATC to say she knew he was in the area. So unless he switched vessels, we're looking for traces of that special Tibanna isotope."



“Cilghal’s team did the sweep.” Ben had covered every angle. He was sure of that, but he wanted to be wrong and for an unforeseen forensic revelation to emerge. “StealthXs kick so much of it around on takeoff that traces were spread over five hundred meters. If Mom landed hers anywhere near Jacen’s, which is likely if she was going after him, then she wiped out his isotope footprint.”

“Just checking.”

“Let’s do the tunnels.”

It was the hardest thing of all, but Ben thought cop as Shevu advised, and saw only what was in front of him, not what might have taken place there. Cilghal had found traces of blood on rubble that had fallen from a collapsed ceiling, as if it had hit someone below, but it had been too degraded by the energy of blasterfire to identify its source. It might even have been his mother’s.

The sequence of events seemed clear, though. Someone-at least two people-had fought their way through the tunnels, causing huge damage. Some was blasterfire, and some showed no signs of its cause, which Ben guessed might have been massive Force pushes. It’s you, Jacen, I know it, we all know it, but I have to have hard evidence. Shevu looked more and more exasperated as he rescanned walls and floors, shaking his head as he looked at the readouts. The crime scene was months old.

“I think that’s all we’re going to get, “said Ben. “Let’s go.”

“No, I’m not done, “said Shevu.

“I’ll try another route. You don’t have to...”

“If I just wanted him for murder, I’ve already got a case with real live witnesses-Lieutenant Tebut. I’m doing this for you, Ben. YOM need to know for sure.”

Did Mara Skywalker’s death matter more than Patra Tebut’s? It did to Ben, and he felt a little guilty about having so many resources to throw at his search for justice. He knew nothing about Tebut-whether she had a family and what they might be going through now, or even what story her next of kin had been told to explain her death. He reasoned that he was doing it for her, too, and all the beings who’d died because of Jacen, even Boba Fett’s daughter, criminal or not.

I should have known what he was then. I should have known when I sat outside that interrogation room and heard Jacen kill her.

“You’re right, “said Ben. “We keep going.”

They were back outside now. The sky was filling with clouds, threatening to spit light rain. Shevu went off to pace the distance from the StealthX’s last known location-seeing the terrain through Jacen’s eyes, he said-and Ben concentrated on his datapad again.

It was hard to ignore the image of Mom. He thought of all the things he’d never had the chance to say to her, and magnified the picture so that the screen showed a close-up of her face. The injuries were fresh; if only she’d gouged a chunk out of Jacen with her nails, then there’d have been tissue to

match with his, but Cilghal had said her wounds were peppered with dust as if bricks had hit her in the face.

As Ben gazed at her image, he could have sworn it shifted slightly, as if something was wrong with the datapad's display.

The screen reflected a short-lived shaft of sunlight. Ben angled it slightly to see better. And then his mother's face on the screen really did move, reflected from behind him, and he gulped in a silent gasp of air as he spun around and she was there, right there, looking straight into his eyes. She was a touch away from him. She looked just as she had in life, but bathed in a haze of faint blue-white light like a faulty hologram. She smiled, a little sad frown of a smile but a smile nonetheless, and buried the fingers of her right hand in her thick red hair to yank at it. Still smiling, she held out torn strands as if to drop them into his hands. Ben couldn't make a sound: he cupped his palm to catch the hairs but nothing fell, and suddenly she was walking slowly away from him. He tried so hard to yell at her to stop, to wait, to talk to him, to come back, that he loved her so much, but she kept on walking, and all he could say was, "Love you..."

Then she turned, tugged at a lock of her hair, and he read her lips: Love you too, Ben.

And she was gone.

Ben could hear only his hammering pulse now. His scalp felt stretched tight across his skull, and he couldn't move. "Ben?" Shevu called. "Ben, are you okay?"

Get a grip. "Did you see anything?"

"You don't look so good."

"Did you see anything?"

"No, there's nothing here that I can see that was missed the first time, and if there was.... it's weeks ago, and it's gone." He caught Ben's shoulders with both hands. "You look terrible. Come on, let's sit you down in the transport. Get your bearings again."

Ben knew that Shevu thought he was overcome by his memories. Shevu hadn't seen Mom, and Ben had no idea how to tell him that he had. Bereaved people saw their loved ones everywhere they looked when the loss was fresh, and that was probably the explanation, except she'd looked at him, and her gestures had been so clear; and she'd spoken, even though he couldn't hear the sound. He didn't know much about Force ghosts-nobody did-but that weird bluish haze... if his brain had been playing tricks on him, he'd have seen her as he remembered her, not with stuff he didn't understand added to it all.

She came back. She came back to tell me.

"I'm... fine," he said.

He thought desperately. He had to grab this while it was still vivid and every detail was fresh. The

hair. Why had she torn out hairs from her head? Why had she appeared to him here? Why here? Why not back on Endor, or at home? If she could contact him like that, why didn't she just tell him Jacen killed her?

Did she even know who killed her? She could have been ambushed. And then why didn't she know now, now that she was one with the Force-but Ben stopped there. He was off chasing the nebulous world of ghosts, when he needed evidence in the mundane world to show everyone.

"Ben, I've got a flask of caf. Nice hot cup will make you feel better."

Why here? Because we're doing an investigation. She was telling him hair was significant.

"Lon, "he said, "when people fight, they leave all kinds of traces on each other, don't they?"

"Yes, but it's too late to ask for swabs from Jacen. And do Jedi actually land punches?"

"No, but..."

"Stang." Shevu was furious. Something had occurred to him, and he was angry with someone, or maybe even him" self. "Stang, the StealthX. We didn't test the StealthX. In CSF, we'd normally go over that with a fine-tooth comb as a matter of course..."

"Nobody thought it was Jacen at the time. Nobody thought that there might have been anything to look for anyway, because we don't fight like non-Force-users. And..."

"What would we be looking for?" Shevu asked. "Come on, Ben, what's on your mind?"

Ben swallowed. "Hair. Mom's hair."

"Could she ever have flown in Jacen's StealthX? If we find anything, is there any other way it could have ended up there apart from being transferred on his clothing? I know she came to see him at GAG HQ, but did they have any contact outside work that would have led to transfer?"

"Not that I know."

"Then we've got to go for that, Ben."

"How are we going to get a chance to go over the thing? And he's had weeks to clean the cockpit."

"We'll think of something." Shevu looked torn between staying and doing more searching while they had the light, and heading back home. "If we come up empty, fine, but I'm not leaving that stone unturned. Come on."

They retrieved the droid and took off toward the hyperspace lane. A hundred times on the journey back, Ben shut his eyes to replay that memory of his mother and saw her lips moving.

Love you too, Ben.

Too. She'd heard him. She'd heard, seen, sensed, whatever-but she knew he'd said he loved her. He burst into tears and sobbed until his abdominal muscles ached.

"Sorry," he said at last, wiping his face on his sleeve. "I'm a bit crazy."

"Your mother was murdered," Shevu said quietly. "You're entitled to go as crazy as you like."

Ben wondered whether to tell Shevu about the apparition, but thought better of it. Later, maybe. He might not even tell his dad for a while. He didn't know how. But he'd call him and let him know where he was as soon as they dropped back out of hyperspace. He missed Luke, and couldn't imagine why he'd spent so much effort in the past trying to escape his attention. He cherished every second with him now.

"The dead talk, Ben," Shevu said. "They bear witness."

"Yes," said Ben. "They do."

BEVIIN-VASUR FARM. OUTSIDE KELDABE

Dr. Beluine gave Sintas another shot of tranquilizer and checked her pulse. This time, she didn't lash out.

"I wouldn't usually administer this," he said, "but she'll injure herself knocking into things if she isn't sedated."

Fett saw the open maw of the sarlacc a split second before he plunged into the lightless, hopeless pit of acid. Thanks, Solo. "They do say."

"Stop talking about me as if I'm dead," Sintas snapped. "Everything's so loud. Where am I? Why can't I see?"

She looked dazed now, but it was an improvement on stumbling around the room. She sounded sane enough, too, but sanity was a fragile thing and Fett knew the odds. It was fifty-fifty that she'd ever be completely normal again. He didn't know where to start explaining, and even Mirta, who usually had all the smart answers, erred on the side of extreme caution. Sintas sat on the bed, hugging her knees, blind gaze wandering unsteadily between voices.

How did you tell a woman she'd been frozen down for thirty-odd years, and that while she was busy being unconscious, her daughter had gone after her ex-husband, bent on deadly revenge, and then that daughter had been picked up by the secret police and tortured to death, and that she had a granddaughter, and.... Fett had rehearsed it in his mind. Stang. It sounded just as bad now as it had three months ago: worse, maybe.

If she remembered that all on her own, it was going to be bad enough.

Medrit, to his credit, did what Beviin would have done had he not been out chasing another potential problem. He saved his Mand'alor from embarrassment and handled the diplomacy.

“You’re Sintas Vel, “Medrit said quietly. She seemed very sensitive to noise. It was just as well she was blind, though. Had she seen Medrit-a pillar of muscle with a frown that announced his short temper-she wouldn’t have felt reassured. “You’ve been encased in carbonite for a while. You know what that is?”

“Of course I do.”

“Okay, you’re in Keldabe, on Mandalore. I’m Medrit Vasur. This is my farm, and you can stay here until you’re well enough to leave. What’s the last thing you can remember?”

Sintas stared straight ahead, sightless. She kept rubbing her eyes in evident frustration, sedated or not. “Where’s my necklace?”

“Can you remember a necklace, madam?” Beluine asked.

“I had a necklace. Where is it?”

Beluine turned to Fett. “Did she?”

“Yes, “Fett said. “She did.”

“It’s very encouraging that she recalls it.”

Fett looked at Mirta. Their eyes locked and she reached inside her collar to take off the heart-of-fire, or at least the half of it that wasn’t buried with Ailyn. He’d given it to Sintas as a marriage gift when they were both too young to know any better, but that wasn’t what made his gut tighten now. Sintas was from Kiffu. The gem-one of the rarer gold ones, shot with inner light in a rainbow of colors-was said to hold part of the soul of the giver and the receiver. Kiffar could sense the memories stored in the stones as if it were a data crystal, but with the added layer-the added unasked-for complications, Fett thought-of the emotional elements. Even if she was crazy or blind, that stone might just speak to Sintas and jog her memory far too fast for his liking. He was a man who said only what he had to say, which wasn’t usually a great deal, but this was different.

Who am I more worried about-Sintas, or Mirta? Neither woman had the full picture of the mess their family was-yet.

Beluine, who didn’t impress Fett half as much as the local farm vet who’d treated him, made a valiant attempt to earn his fee. He pulled up a chair beside the bed and spoke to Sintas in his best bedside manner. “Do you recall being in carbonite, my dear? Were you conscious?”

Sintas jerked her head as she heard the med droid enter. “Nothing. I don’t remember a thing. And you can keep that droid away from me, too.”

Mirta dangled the heart-of-fire from its leather cord wrapped around her forefinger. She gave Fett a meaningful look-now or never, Ba’buir-and approached Sintas cautiously.

“Here’s your necklace, “she said. She wrapped her grandmother’s hand around the stone, folding

her fingers gently. “I kept it safe for you. My name’s Mirta Gev. We never met, but I’m... a relative of yours.”

Sintas froze for a moment, almost massaging the heart-of-fire in her hand, gaze fixed. “It’s.... not the way I remember it.”

Fett detached at that point. He’d learned to do it in the days after his father was killed, a trick of flipping a switch between emotions rubbed raw and complete numbness. He found he could do it with physical pain, too. Anyone could learn to do it if they wanted to escape pain badly enough.

“We had to break it,” he said. “You can get another one.”

Sintas turned her head slowly toward him, and for a moment he expected her to recognize his voice. She certainly looked as if she was pondering something, but she lowered her head and seemed to be focused on the heart-of-fire. Mirta just sat there on the edge of the bed with her shoulder touching her grandmother’s, her face set in that grim way she had when she was determined not to let him see how upset she was.

“And do I know you?” Sintas asked.

Beluine leaned close to Fett. “It might be too much, too soon. The case studies I’ve read say that excessively rapid exposure to their real situation can cause carbonite patients to go into a catatonic state.”

Fett got the picture. He grabbed the excuse.

“A long time ago... Sintas,” he said. The name felt alien in his mouth. He didn’t dare use his pet name for her, Sin. She’d called him Bo. Those were relics of a brief, happy time. “Get some rest.”

He paused to stare at her for a few more minutes, wondering what had happened to his own life in the intervening years while she’d slept, and then there was the sound of doors opening. Fett stepped out into the passage and shut the door. The kids squealed in a nearby room: “Ba’buir, the lady’s awake! She’s crazy! And she can’t see!”

“K’uur!” Medrit’s voice was barely audible. He made a shushing sound. “That’s not nice, Briila. She’s not well. That’s the Mand’alor’s wife.”

“But he’s so old, and she’s beautiful.”

Like the irony hadn’t occurred to me. Fett strode into the room, once again impervious to any opinions but his father’s. That had always been the only constant in his life, the self-esteem and sense of being loved that his father had given him. Everything else was too fragile. Even the sea eel that Fett kept as a pet on Kamino; that poor creature hadn’t escaped his taint, either. He loved it in the way that small boys loved unlikely animals, and when he had to leave Tipoca City with his father for the last time, he let it free in the ocean. It was eaten by a predatory fish before his eyes, in seconds, before it had even tasted freedom. Everything he’d ever loved got taken from him somehow, or was subject to some unknown curse that said Fett was better off alone-for everyone’s sake.

“Kids, “Medrit said.

Fett studied his gloves. “They say I was one, once.”

“Goran just commed to say he’s down at the Oyu’baat and you’re not going to believe what showed up in the X-wing.”

“What?”

“A Jedi. He thinks it’s Jaina Solo. He remembers the holoimages that Sal-Solo was flashing around when he put the contract out on the Solos.”

“Well, well.”

“She wants to see you.”

“Did she bring her credit account?” Fett was almost grateful for the interruption. This was work; he could handle that a lot better than what was going on in that room. “I said I’d sell the Bes’uliik to her scumbag brother in per-son or not at all. But let’s see what she’s offering.”

“So how’s it going with Sintas?”

“Mirta gave her the heart-of-fire. That’s keeping her occupied.”

“Beluine’s a waste of credits, by the way.”

“Not too many doctors see carbonite cases these days.”

“I meant that he hasn’t asked what happened about your terminal illness, especially after being summoned to Kamino about it.”

“He can see I’m still breathing.”

“I’ll let Hayca Mekket know that she might be needed, then...”

Fett let the amusement of the tough nerf-doctor lift his spirits a little. “Let’s see what the Jedi wants. And give her ten bonus points for having the gall to come here.”

OYU’BAAT TAPCAF, KELDABE

It was the last place in the galaxy that Jaina had expected to run into another Jedi. And she definitely hadn’t expected to meet one who would pull a blaster on her, either. But she was staring a blaster in the muzzle right now.

You can talk your way out of this. You have to.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” said the old man. “You’re a Jedi.”

She wasn't imagining it; the old man made a big disciplined impression in the Force, as if he'd been trained. The other man in the multicolored armor-now, that was harder to pin down, but she was sure he was Force-sensitive. It was like hearing an accent that anyone from out of town wouldn't catch. The crowd in the tapcaf had suddenly lost interest in the bolo-ball and every single one of them had drawn at least one blaster on her. Some had two.

"Where's her lightsaber?" asked the vine-tattooed man.

"She's not carrying it." The old Mandalorian didn't even blink. His eyes-pink-rimmed, watery, a faded light color that might once have been green or hazel-were fixed on hers, boring into her in the way that only another Jedi could. He took half a pace forward, not quite so frail and grandfatherly now. "I had a very strong feeling you'd arrived."

"I'm Jaina Solo," she said at last. A Jedi name used to be enough to make doors open back at the Core. It closed them here. "And I've come to ask Fett to help me."

She could have sliced the silence with a vibroblade. She'd expected derisive laughter. Beviin just watched with the mild annoyance he might reserve for a kid. She could feel it.

"Didn't we save your papa's shebs at Caluula Station?" asked the tattooed man. "Ask him if he remembers the funny folks in armor who were killing the vongese for him. It might jog his memory. And tell him Carid sends his best."

"I apologize for.... sneaking in," Jaina said. She was now totally reliant on powers she hadn't used or trained, ones she'd seen her mother use so often with not a Force trick in sight-diplomacy and persuasion. It was much harder than it looked. "But how far would I have got past your ATC if I'd announced who and what I was? I really need Fett's help."

"Give her some credit for coming here unarmed, at least." The man in the motley armor took off his helmet, a blood-red and gray thing that didn't match another plate on him. He was in his fifties, with very dark eyes and gray-streaked black hair. "I'm Venku. Also known as Kad'ika." He looked at the old man with a distracted fondness. "My respected ori'buir here is Gotab."

"Well, so we all know what we are..."

"We're Mandalorians, Jedi Solo," said Venku. "What did you think we were?"

It struck Jaina that maybe the rest of Keldabe didn't know these men were Force-sensitive. Given the enmity between Jedi and Mandalorians, maybe they were under cover, or stranded here, or... or... no, she couldn't come up with a plausible explanation. She couldn't imagine any Jedi being out of the loop for so long that she didn't know of them, but there was always the possibility that they weren't Jedi, and just Force-sensitives. But the old man radiated trained powers, and a sense of... of healing, of rec-onciliation, of all kinds of soothing things that didn't go with the blaster or his hostile expression. He wasn't a ran-dom genetic event.



You're not here to ask too many questions. You're here to learn from Fett.

If Jaina kept testing that Force presence, however carefully, these men might feel threatened. If they were living here as Mandalorians-nobody here was treating them as if they were strangers, she noted-chances were that they wanted to keep a low profile.

Oh... no... tell me they're not Sith.

Mandalorians always fought for the Sith in the past, didn't they? Fett was Vader's hired help, too. We can't escape each other.

But she was sure she'd have felt dark energy around them had they been Sith. She'd had way too much practice at feeling Sith and Dark Jedi in the Force these past months to make that mistake.

I might need their help as Force users. Don't push it.

"Doesn't matter," Jaina said at last. "My mother came here during the Empire's occupation. She met your leader at the time. In fact, she..."

"We're doing a lot better than we were in your mother's day, no thanks to the New Republic... or the GA. Have you come to negotiate some arms deal?"

Ouch. They hadn't forgotten the Yuuzhan Vong War, then. Had anybody? "In a way, I suppose I have."

"Fett's on his way," said Beviin. "And most deals are negotiable."

Gotab, apparently satisfied that there were enough blasters trained on Jaina to allow him to rest, slid his weapon back in his belt and replaced his helmet.

"We'll be going," Venku said. "Beviin, if you need anything, call."

Beviin's expression said that he was freshly puzzled. "How come you spotted her before me? I had Sal-Solo's ID images."

"Maybe you weren't the only one here who was offered the contract on the Solos."

Jaina reminded herself that she didn't just have a trou-blesome brother. She'd had a pretty toxic uncle, too, and Fett had helped dispose of him.

And Venku obviously didn't want to reveal that he was Force sensitive.

"Lovely," she said, letting her Leia state of mind slip for a moment as she watched the two Force-sensitives leave. "I'll take it as a good sign that none of you came after us."

"Only Fett's daughter," Beviin said quietly. "And for her, Han Solo was just bait for her father."

Jaina made an effort to imagine her grief over Aunt Mara transferred to Fett, and what state of mind he might be in now. But where was he? How come the Mandalore, the ruler, didn't have some official residence where she had to seek audience with him? They were meeting in a shabby cantina. She leaned her back against the bar and thought better of trying to make small talk with Beviin, who was managing both to keep her in his field of vision and yet not to meet her eye.

Eventually, patrons holstered their blasters and went back to their ale, muttering about missing the end of the bolo-ball match thanks to a shabla Jedi. In Basic, so that I know I've ticked them off. Good start. Then the doors opened, and a man in dull green armor and a tattered cloak stood in the entrance.

Her impression in the Force was one of a lonely man resigned to being that way. Was this Fett? His armor fitted the description, but she'd seen plenty of green armor plates in the last hour or so, every shade from pale warra nut to the deepest forest. A few of the cantina crowd glanced at the man for a moment as if they were just checking who had come in, but they went back to the HoloNet screen and what looked like the postmatch dissection in their own language. It probably wasn't Fett, then. She'd expected him to be huge, monstrous, iconic; but this man was of average build, and apart from his very confident walk-not a swag-ger, just a sense that he answered to nobody-there was nothing she'd have stopped to check out twice.

He came to a halt a meter in front of her and hooked one thumb in his belt, his other hand steadying an EE-3 blaster that hung from a shoulder sling.

Then she spotted the Wookiee scalps. Oh, it was him.

"You wanted to see me, Jedi?"

"Fett?"

"There have been imposters, but I think I got them all. Let me know if I missed any."

"I'm Jaina Solo."

"We know." He tilted his head a fraction. "You look like your mother."

Jaina, used to the protocol and twittering, fawning entourages of world leaders on a dozen planets, wasn't ready for a warlord who walked around unescorted, and whose people could ignore him in favor of a bolo-ball game if they felt like it. Either Fett had the casual confidence that stemmed from huge power, or he was of no importance to them. She'd have bet all her credits on the former. Fett just stood there, waiting. Dad was right; not being able to see his eyes behind that visor was unsettling.

"You saved my father a couple of times," Jaina said. "I ought to thank you."

"I handed him over to Jabba, too. But I did time in the Sarlacc thanks to him, so we're even. What do you want from me?"

Jaina felt the ice thinning under her. She swore she heard it crack. She had to play this carefully.

“It’s my brother, Jacen.”

“The cowardly barve who killed my daughter?”

“I’m afraid so. I’m sorry.”

Fett’s voice was all passionless gravel, with not a spare syllable that didn’t have to be there. “So he wants to buy some Mando technology.”

“No,” said Jaina. “I want you to teach me how to capture him and stop him destroying the galaxy.” She paused. “Please.”

Fett didn’t reply. He wasn’t exactly a chatty man, but there was keeping one’s counsel, and then there was stunned silence, and Jaina knew which she was listening to now. In the Force, Fett felt like a sudden torrent of icy water.

She had his attention, then. Now she needed his agreement.

# Chapter 6

Haatyc or'arue jate'shya ori'sol aru'ike nuhaatyc.

Better one big enemy that you can see than many small ones that you can't.

-Mandalorian proverb

CORUSCANT: LON SHEVU'S APARTMENT

"Can you trust Captain Girdun?" Ben asked.

"As much as a Hutt," Shevu said, sitting with his elbows braced on his knees, head resting on his hands. He stared at the holochart propped against the chair as if he were trying to levitate it. "Heol, bless him, is a career man, and trust has a very different meaning for our colleagues who were recruited from the intelligence services. Let's say it's flexible."

The rift between the former spooks in the Galactic Alliance Guard and people recruited from the police had started opening early, just after 967 Commando was formed. Spies accepted that losing prisoners-as in killing them-was part of the job; CSF-trained personnel didn't. After that, they'd never quite seen eye-to-eye again.

"Try again," Ben said.

They had to get access to Jacen's StealthX. Ben would have difficulty infiltrating the GAG hangars-not impossible, but not a stroll, either-and even Shevu, with all his valid passcards, would draw attention if he so much as popped the canopy. They needed an hour in a cramped, conspicuous space to do painstaking work. It wasn't like slipping in and attaching an explosive device and sliding out again. In a saner world, they could have applied for a search warrant. Ben knew that would rapidly become a death warrant for Shevu if he tried to do it by the book.

But Shevu could be as flexible as Girdun in his own way.

"Maintenance," Shevu said. "Somehow, we need an ex-cuse to call it in for servicing."

"Don't StealthX's have a thousand-hour maintenance interval?"

"Unfortunately. And I don't think Incom will oblige us with a recall."

"Who can we trust on the ground crew?"

Shevu sat upright. "It's not a matter of trust. The fewer who know, the shorter the chain-the less we risk being discovered."

Ben had another brief urge to abandon the idea and just go with his gut rather than put Shevu at risk. If only Mom had said one word: Jacen. It wouldn't have been perfect proof in a court, but Ben

would have had closure, and maybe the end would be the same anyway-and Jacen on trial was a pipe dream.

“I better call Dad,” Ben said. “Don’t worry, we’ll think of something.”

Ben suspected that his father would have a good idea of what he was doing, even if he didn’t know where he was doing it. He’d break it like he’d planned, gently, audio only.

“Hi, Dad. How are you doing?”

Luke sounded as if he was making an effort to switch into an upbeat voice. “I’m okay. Where are you? I can’t trace the link.”

“Coruscant.”

“I thought as much.”

“Would it really help to hear me say the same things again, Dad? I’m sorry I never told you.”

“I could take it, actually. But thanks for trying to protect me.”

“Dad, I’m-I’m pretty sure Jacen was implicated.” If Ben used the detached, oblique language of investigation, Luke would know he was in full control of his emotions and not about to do anything dumb. But he didn’t say

Mom’s murder. He found himself stopping short of that. “I have to prove or disprove that for my own peace of mind. He’s worse than you imagine, Dad. He just killed one of his own crew. He broke her neck.”

There was a faintly crackling pause, and then Luke said, “I know. Admiral Niathal told me.”

“Niathal?”

Shevu looked up at the mention of her name.

“She’s moved from being helpful to us to taking the risk of contacting me direct. Ben, I’ve told her to trust Shevu.”

“Where do you think I am?”

“There you go... you trust him, too.”

“How far do you think she’ll stick her neck out?”

“Pretty far.”

As far as Cat Omas and Dur Gejjen did when they met in secret to discuss removing Jacen, and

look what I did then. If I hadn't assassinated Gejjen, would we be here now? Is this all my fault for just obeying Jacen?

"You might hear that I've asked a favor of her, then, Dad-sooner or later."

Ben struggled again with the thought that was upper-most in his mind, more important even than nailing Jacen-that he had seen his mother's Force ghost. The first thing he'd wanted to do was tell Luke the news, and then he wondered how his dad would feel when he knew that his wife hadn't appeared to him. Ben now knew exactly how desperate you could be to grab one more minute-one more second, even-with someone you'd lost. It was the greatest hunger he'd ever experienced, all-consuming and blind, but he'd got that wish.

And Dad hadn't.

Would he feel robbed? Would he torment himself wondering why Mom had chosen Ben?

Did I even see what I thought I did?

Ben was sure he had. And there would be a better time to tell Dad. Maybe he had seen her, too, but wasn't saying so yet for exactly the same reason.

"Just tell me if I'm likely to run into you while you're doing it, "Luke said, jerking Ben's attention back to the here and now. "And you might hear crazy rumors about Jaina, too. They'll be true."

"How crazy?"

"She's gone to ask Fett to train her to take on Jacen."

Ben didn't find that crazy at all. "We all have to think outside the box these days, Dad."

He could have sworn his father started to laugh for the first time in months. "You know, I must have blinked and missed you growing up. And overtaking me."

Ben almost relented and risked telling him about Mom, but the moment was lost. It would come again. "Take care, Dad."

Shevu fidgeted, waiting for Ben to end the link. "What about Niathal? What did he say?"

"She went to see Dad. She's come out against Jacen, at least privately."

"That could be a break."

"Specifically?"

"She can authorize things. All I have to do is ask her."

"That's dangerous."

“So is breaking into the GAG hangars and getting caught swabbing the seat of the Chief of State’s personal StealthX.”

“We could drop this right now.”

“No, because now I have to know, too, and this is a reported crime, right? ‘Forget that murder I mentioned, officer...’ It doesn’t work like that.”

“I could get you killed.”

“I could get you killed.” Shevu pulled the holochart onto his lap, balancing it on his knees. “Even if Jacen’s away on one of his jaunts minus the Stealth, then someone will have to have a pretty good reason for scrambling all over it or he’ll be on full paranoid alert. I’ll find a reason and get Niathal to make it happen. And I’ll make sure I’m always wired with a holorecorder when I have contact with dear Jacen, even if it’s only audio. You can never be too careful.”

Shevu was casting around for any evidence he could grab. Every loose thread Ben followed, every connection he made, seemed as fragile and flimsy as a hair. It was all if, if, if. They might risk their lives getting into the StealthX and find nothing. Ben saw Mara Skywalker again, tugging strands from her scalp and dropping them into his palm that would have waited forever to catch them. Perhaps they were still falling somewhere; he hoped that whatever unknown forces determined the existence of ghosts would allow her to appear to Luke when his father most needed her.

Mom would know the right time, if she could choose.

## JOINT CHIEF OF STATE NIATHAL’S SUITE

Niathal consulted the fleet status repeater display on her office wall-known as the tote board within the service-and noted that the Anakin Solo had returned from Fondor.

“He’s always been a day-tripper, “she said to her droid administrator, recalling Jacen’s unexplained absences in previous months. “If I didn’t know he was wasting munitions on pointless exercises, I’d say he had a secret lover.”

“There was minor enemy contact off Fondor.”

“How off?”

“In Fondorian space.”

“I hate it when he throws stones and goads them. I’ll assume he’s testing their resolve before the big push.”

“I believe he was training his new assistant.”

“Is that girl even enlisted? I won’t have civilians playing battleships. Not in my navy. At least the Skywalker boy had a proper commission.”

“She remains a civilian, Admiral.”

“We’ll see about that.” She tapped a note to Jacen and submitted it to the system. He’d see it come up on his datapad next time he deigned to check it. “There have to be some limits to this unstructured style of leadership.”

Putting on a display of niggling annoyance was superfluous with a droid, but Niathal had to remain in character so that she never slipped. If she looked as if she’d gone off the boil, Jacen would turn his attention to her; she knew enough about him to realize her mood was transparent to his Force senses, and so she kept it set at a steady temperature of irritated contempt and disdain.

It really didn’t take much effort. It came naturally.

Niathal could still manage to keep tabs on most of Jacen’s movements by logging his ship’s movements or the times his StealthX was missing from the hangar—an in-complete method but more than she expected to be able to do at this stage of his megalomania. And whether he liked it or not, procedure said there had to be someone contactable to make decisions as need arose, and that meant that he either had to hand over the reins to her completely or tell her where he was going if he wanted to be consulted.

The Anakin Solo wasn’t hard to track anyway. Even Jacen couldn’t make a Star Destroyer disappear. And he didn’t seem to be able to secure the ship against intruders, so either he was less omnipotent than most supposed, or he used the ship like an insect trap.

If she pressed him, she had a feeling he would say the latter. Not knowing how powerful he actually was—that troubled her. No military strategist could be comfortable while the enemy’s strength and assets remained undefined. Niathal stared in slight defocus at the image of Mon Calamari on her office wall, losing herself for a moment in the unbroken horizon behind Reef Home—her home—and wondering when she might find time for shore leave again.

I wanted the top job, and I got it. Serves me right.

“Colonel Solo to see you, Admiral,” said the droid, using their military titles. Neither needed to be reminded they shared control of the Galactic Alliance, but Niathal needed to hear the word admiral, to be made to remember how she’d first signed up to serve the state. It was too easy to slide into the other role.

Jacen strode in and perched his behind on the edge of a table facing her desk. He was close to knocking off a pile of flimsi and datapads with his long black cloak, and that casualness annoyed her almost as much as the fact that his business-like black GAG fatigues had given way to this pointlessly dramatic wardrobe.

“I’m hearing interested noises from some of the Moffs about joining the GA,” he said. “They’re thinking thoughts of empire again.”

“Heard personally?” she asked. Jacen had said he wouldn’t negotiate without her explicit



involvement. “Or does this emanate from their gentlemen’s clubs and smoke-filled tapcafs again?”

“Let’s say the latter.”

“How? I’m fed up guessing like this is some party entertainment.”

“The military attache was passing through Muunilinst at the same time as a Moff who has relatives there.”

“Doing charity work for bank employees, no doubt...”

“If I’d sent him to talk to the Moffs in Ravelin itself, you’d have accused me of bypassing you.”

“I would.” Niathal worried about the Moffs. The Imperial Remnant had been quiet and content to live within its borders for years, or so she’d thought. Content was a relative term. “What impression have you given them?”

Jacen slid off the edge of the table and activated Niathal’s holochart, the one she used when she had staff meetings. He zoomed in on the northeast quadrant, filling the table with translucent planets, stars, and threads of colored light representing the major hyperspace routes.

“Here’s what we’ve hinted is on the table,” he said, thrusting his fingertip into a cluster of worlds to the N’Zoth side of the Core. “Borleias and Bilbringi.”

“You’re reassuringly transparent.”

“Come on, Bilbringi is always going to be a system that they want back. We’ve not consolidated our claim on it since the Yuuzhan Vong War—all we did was defend it. Let’s just say that now we’re not going to be defending it, the mineral resources are still there, and, as they say in real estate, it’s ripe for sympathetic restoration—as shipyards again.”

Niathal thought that it was all a little too close to Coruscant for her comfort. “And Borleias gives them fast access to all the major hyperspace routes.”

“Resources, infrastructure—with a little bit of work, of course—and mobility. What more could a red-blooded Moff want?”

“Blue-blooded. They’re such snobs. I’m just concerned that they’re all dressed up with nowhere to conquer, and we’re giving them delusions of glory again.”

“They’re still not big enough to worry us. The deal is that if they commit their considerable military machine to the war effort, then their reward will be a major expansion of their territory.” Jacen tilted his head this way and that to consider the three-dimensional view of the galaxy’s flattened disk. “So I suggest we ask them to help us take Fon-dor.”

Jacen, you just can’t leave Fondor alone, can you?

It was clear that politically, Fondor irked him. It wouldn't toe the line. It was Corellia all over again, and whether he admitted the irony or not, Jacen's own Corellian blood made him a man who didn't like the word no. Strategically, though, he had a point: Fondor fed ships and weapons into the Confederate war effort at a prodigious rate, so shutting down the orbital yards made sense. Taking the planet and appropriating its industrial capacity, though—that would take more resources, and an army of occupation to keep the workforce running the yards and not sabotaging them. Niathal had her doubts about that, and for several reasons.

“You realize,” she said, “that the Remnant might think Fondor is up for grabs, too, seeing as Borleias and Bilbringi would extend their range to within striking distance of that side of the Core.”

“They might well think that.”

“Don't play games with them, Jacen. They'd be awfully close neighbors to Coruscant.”

“And with enough corridor to defend between Bastion and Borleias to keep them too busy to start getting ideas about us. And.... Pellaeon. Never forget Pellaeon. He knows how to keep the Moffs in line, so when we have his blessing, we can move.”

“If,” said Niathal. “If we get his blessing. He hates your guts.”

“So do you, Admiral.” Jacen smiled. “But we still work well together. It's an efficient strategy, two beings with no love lost between them, maneuvering...”

This was the problem with Jacen. If he had been demon-strably, consistently, visibly incompetent or insane, it would have been easy to dismiss him, and much easier to consider removing him the hard way. On sleepless nights, Niathal even found herself wondering how she could assassinate a Force user with prodigious powers and awareness of approaching danger. She always chose bombarding them from orbit with a planet-killer-hypothetically, at least. Usually she thought about mutiny, and whether she might be on the receiving end of it if she didn't make up her mind. She had never had those thoughts in her life before. But then Jacen would confuse her and negate all those justified fantasies by being strategic, sensible, and successful.

She needed him to do something barking mad to steer her one way or the other, and the murder of Lieutenant

Tebut was pretty close to the final get-rid-of-Jacen token she needed to collect to salve her conscience.

As if I could take him down alone.

“I agree that we should take Fondor out of the game sooner rather than later.”

“Is that a yes to formally approaching the Imperial Remnant?”

“It'll make us look as if we can't handle the job on our own, but—yes, we're at overstretch. I can't complain, having nagged you about that so often.”

“Excellent,” Jacen said. He seemed as pleased as a child being told he could hold a party and invite friends. “I’ll send Tahiri Veila to see Pellaeon.”

“Haven’t we got a more seasoned officer free to do the job?”

“She can be very persuasive. Much tougher than she looks, too.”

“Very well, but next time you want her to play with cannons-make sure she’s a member of the Defense Force. Give her a commission. Enlist her, if you don’t think she’s officer material. But make sure she understands wars are not for civilians.”

Jacen’s guard seemed as down as it ever would be. They’d argued, after a fashion, admitted they disliked each other, and yet reached an agreement; all mistrust seemed to have been aired. Niathal slid in her knife.

“What kind of Jedi are you, Jacen?” she asked. “Because my meetings with the Jedi Council were never quite so target-oriented and ruthless.”

“I don’t do things their way, it’s true.”

“Are you a Sith?”

Jacen’s loss of composure was always betrayed by his eyes. He could control the rest of his face and his body language-Niathal knew human psychology almost as well as Mon Cals’ now-but there was always something in his eyes when he was caught out. She couldn’t even pin it down beyond a slight flicker. But whatever it was, she saw it now.

“What do you know about Sith?” he asked, all quiet rea-son.

“Oh, not much. I know Palpatine was a Sith, and he was a brilliant tactician-no quarter given, all exits sealed, the kind of total war that I could never see Master Skywalker waging in an eternity. Which is why I ask, because your ability to see the whole picture reminds me of that.”

The first sentence was true; the second was a lie, of course.

“Yes,” Jacen said quietly. “I’m a Sith.”

“We should teach Sith tactics at the academy, then,” said Niathal, knowing that she would probably rather have the Yuuzhan Vong back instead.

Jacen gave her that patronizing smile that said he didn’t think she understood what was happening and pitied her for being so inadequate. That was fine. She was pleased with her progress, and hoped he detected that and misin-terpreted it as basking in his temporary approval.

“I’ll brief Tahiri,” he said, and left.

Niathal suspected that Tahiri was already on her way, but it didn’t matter. She sat looking at the

holochart and wondering how an Imperial Moff might see it, what temptations it might suggest. Had Pellaeon not still been running Bastion, the Remnant might have already been in the war, or at least circling the battlefield looking to take advantage of the chaos. But he was in his nineties and wouldn't live forever, so perhaps managing their ambitions now would prevent them boiling out of the Braxant sector in a few years' time like kids let out of school, bent on mischief.

I hate it when you might be right, Jacen...

"Admiral," said the droid, "Captain Shevu asks if you can spare him five minutes."

"Yes, show him in." Niathal shut down the holochart and had the feeling she might need to erase a little of the droid's memory. "If anyone calls, tell them I'm in a procurement planning meeting."

Shevu wasn't the kind of officer who popped in for a chat. Niathal had almost expected him since Luke Skywalker had identified him to her as a potential ally, and he hadn't wasted any time; considering he was the most senior officer in Jacen's personal elite, 967 Commando of the Galactic Alliance Guard, he was taking a huge risk-and Jacen couldn't have made a worse-placed enemy.

She gestured to him to take a seat and wondered who would say it first.

"It's all right," she said. "I sweep the office for surveillance devices every time I enter it."

Shevu slid a small scanner out of his pocket and aimed it at various points around her office before looking a little more relaxed. "So do I."

"So we understand each other."

"I think so."

"What can I do for you?"

"I need to carry out forensics tests on your colleague's StealthX." He didn't say Jacen. This was a man used to giving others very little to use against him. "Is there any way I can get access to it, uninterrupted, for a few hours?"

"He's gone to brief his new minion for a mission to Bastion." Niathal ran through all the routine procedures a StealthX would undergo and why. Jacen's was one of the few that the Jedi pilots hadn't taken when they withdrew. "How urgent is this?"

"We should have done it three months ago," Shevu said. He mouthed Mara at her. "Might turn up nothing, of course."

So it wasn't just Ben who thought Jacen had been involved in Mara's death, then. Even though Luke had told Niathal, the idea seemed far more shocking coming from an objective outsider-a professional investigator-like Shevu.

"If you do it," Niathal said, "won't he sense that you've been in the vessel?"

“That’s why I’m getting a droid to do it.”

“A GAG unit?”

“No, a CSF one. Leave me to worry about scamming the identichips.”

“Very well, Captain, I’ll arrange for the ground crew droids and personnel to be told it needs a special examination-checking for canopy seal integrity, fuel leaks into the cockpit, whatever I can think of. In fact, let’s do all the space-capable vessels the GAG has, too, to make it look convincing. You don’t have that many.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

“And we’d better come up with a good cover story in case anyone compliments the Guard on their extra attention to safety standards, and it reaches His Celestial High-ness’s ears...”

“A few months ago, “Shevu said, “I’d have expected him to know all about it right away. He was hands-on with his troops. But he’s taken his eye off the little people now, and just focuses on the big players. We’ll use that.”

“You know how dangerous it is to go after him, don’t you?” Niathal said, slightly ashamed that she wasn’t leading this quiet revolution against Jacen.

“Not half as dangerous as it’ll be if I don’t, “said Shevu.

OYU’BAAT TAPCAF, KELDABE

“What can I possibly teach you, Jedi?” Fett asked.

At any other time, Jaina Solo’s plea would have been amusing-no, satisfying. There was no humor to be had from this. A voice inside Fett still said that he should personally make that barve Jacen pay for what he had done to Ailyn, but he’d made up his mind when he saw his daughter’s body that his revenge would need to be more substantial, more complete, the kind he should have planned when his father was killed in front of him. Jedi had robbed him of what little family he had, and now they expected him to help them clean up their own mess.

“You’ve killed and captured more Jedi than anyone, “Jaina said, looking like the words were choking her.

“Oh, I don’t know.... some of my brothers racked up a pretty good score back in the day.”

She didn’t react. “Jacen and I are matched in terms of Force strengths. But he’s picked up training in Force techniques I don’t even understand, so my best chance of taking him is to use skills he doesn’t have. And I’m pretty sure you never gave him the top ten Mandalorian tips on Jedi busting.”

“Only if he paid me, “said Fett. “But what do you care about Ailyn?”

“It’s not only your daughter he’s killed.” Jaina was doing a good job of looking desperate, losing that steady gaze for just a moment. She was desperate. Fett could taste it. “He might even have been involved in Mara Skywalker’s death.”

“Ah, so that’s when you decide he needs stopping.” He was totally unsurprised by the idea, just taken aback that Jaina had come here. Families feuded; no shock there. “When it’s Jedi getting killed.”

Beviin hauled himself onto a bar stool and put his helmet to one side while he thumbed through his datapad.

“He kills his underlings, too, Mand’alor.” He held out the pad so that Fett could see the message from one of his long list of informants. Coruscant wasn’t half as far from Mandalore as it thought it was. “Look, Ma, no hands. He’s learning to break necks with the Force. Some lieutenant called Tebut, and it’s the talk of the fleet—well, the people I know in the fleet, anyway. He’s so adorable.”

“Just like old times,” Fett said. “Except I almost liked Vader.”

Jaina’s face fell slightly, as if she hadn’t known about

Jacen’s latest victim. She didn’t accuse him of lying to wind her up, either, because they both knew what Jacen had become. It was funny how victims mattered more when they had names. Fett resisted the urge to remind her that beings in all the places that Jacen had attacked had names, too.

“You sent the crushgaunts,” said Jaina. “So we took that as a big hint.”

“Try ten tons of high-spec thermal detonator.”

“We want him alive.”

“Alive’s always more complicated. Only do alive if they pay extra, Jedi.”

Fett laid his blaster on the counter and removed his helmet two-handed. He was more comfortable revealing his face now. Up to a few months earlier he wouldn’t even have let his own men see him without the helmet, except Beviin, but he’d seen the look on Han Solo’s face when the man had looked into his eyes close-up for the first time. He could read Solo’s reaction—that the cold, implacable, toughened durasteel helmet didn’t conceal a heart of gold, just more durasteel, more cold, and less heart. If they wanted to see a happy and well-adjusted Mandalorian under the armor, then they could go admire Beviin.

Fett watched Jaina’s eyes take him in.

“If I don’t do it,” she said, “I don’t think anyone else can.”

Beviin was used to playing a double-act with Fett at times like this—nice Mando, nasty Mando. He slipped into the role without even needing a cue while Fett just stared into Jaina’s face, testing her nerve.

“You’ve got a lightsaber, lady, and Jacen Solo doesn’t have beskar’gam,” Beviin said. “What can we possibly teach you? Ambush? Blaster master class?” He drew his ancient beskad, the traditional Mandalorian iron saber, halfway out of its hilt. “My handy Vong-splitting technique?”

Jaina’s eyes never left Fett’s. “Beskar is your special iron, yes? The metal the crushgaunts were made from.”

“Available at all good arms dealerships now,” Beviin said cheerfully. “We’ve got a lovely new supply. Is this all you really want? Just a few tips on whacking the bathrobe brigade?”

“Fett,” Jaina said, undistracted, “you can teach me to bring down Jedi. You’ve done it often enough.”

Fett counted two beats. “And end the war just when our economy’s getting back on its feet?”

“You’d sacrifice whole worlds for your own ends?”

“You sacrificed Mandalore to the Vong for your own ends.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t give you the reconstruction aid we should have, Fett. I’m not proud of that. But can’t you see what Jacen’s going to do if he carries on? I need to stop him before he consolidates his power.”

She wouldn’t back down, he gave her that much. If Sintas hadn’t been back from the dead, with all the unfolding misery that went with it, Fett might have found training Jaina Solo as near to enjoyable, as near to sweet revenge, as he’d come in decades.

Do it. Jacen Solo needs removing, because there’ll still be plenty of business in his wake, and there’s no irony finer than the Jedi elite fighting their own. Twin-on-twin combat, just like the Vong boys always wanted. Shame most of ‘em are too dead to enjoy it.

But if he really listened to the unquiet voice in his mind, and didn’t slap it into silence, he heard what it was whispering: that the more the war spread, the more likely it was that Shalk and Briila might see their father killed in action. No kid deserved to go through what Fett had.

Mando’ade fight, always have. ‘What’s wrong with you?

What was wrong was that they were Beviin’s grandchildren, and Beviin and Medrit had adopted the kids’ mother-Dinua-when her own mother was killed fighting the vongese with Fett. They’d all had enough of bereave-ment. Fett’s whole life was tangled in orphans and unlived lives and moral debts.

He looked Jaina up and down. She was small, and her smooth hands said that she’d never had to build an entrenchment with them. But she was a Jedi-he could treble her weight and reach based on that alone-and she was going after her brother whether Fett trained her or not. He could see it in her eyes; a little fear, maybe not of him, and shame that she’d even had to ask the favor. It clearly stuck in her throat to beg her father’s old enemy for anything, but she was going to tough it out to get a

necessary job done.

Fett respected that. It was the first lesson any bounty hunter needed to learn: to forget the emotional baggage and focus solely on an objective.

If I'd been around for Ailyn, I'd have trained her to fight, to look out for herself, maybe to hunt Jedi, too. Every Mando trains their kids, even other folks' kids. They say you're not a man unless you do.

Shysa's dying voice was back in his head a lot lately after being silent for so long. If you only look after your own hide, then you're not a man. It joined the chorus that nagged him most days, all advising him on what he ought to do. All his dead were coming back to haunt him in one form or another.

"Okay, I'll do it," said Fett. "And it's going to cost."

"I wasn't asking for charity." Jaina raised a withering eyebrow-she was Leia's girl, all right-but her shoulders relaxed a fraction. She took a very large-denomination credit chip from her flight suit's breast pocket and held it between neatly manicured fingertips. "Not even vengeance gets in the way of business, does it, Fett?"

"That's your first lesson, Jedi. I'll bill you for it later." Fett didn't need the credits, but he had his self-respect to consider, and she needed to hang on to hers. It was going to get pretty battered. "But let's avoid the tax bill. What else can you do to earn your keep?"

"I'm a fighter pilot. But I'm pretty handy with mechanical stuff, too."

"We're all pilots here," Fett said. "But we can always use mechanics. Lots of exiles coming back, infrastructure creaking under the load. You'll be useful."

Fett put on his helmet and turned to go. Jaina called after him.

"When do we start?"

"We already have. I'll be back tomorrow. Take a room here and get a good night's sleep."

She didn't look like she had anywhere else to go, and Fett wouldn't ask Beviin to find room for yet another stray. Bal-tan Carid, whose vine tattoo seemed to have sprouted a couple of extra leaves, called to the barkeep: "Better kick the strill out of the executive suite, Cham'ika. You've got royalty."

Fett paused outside the Oyu'baat to take stock, then paced across the square to the sheer drop that stared down into the Kelita River. Beviin kept his counsel and waited with him, both of them leaning on the balustrade watching the current as it tossed small freshly broken branches onto the rocks. There was a lot of construction going on upstream.

"Jedi can be healers," Beviin said. "Now, that's something none of us can do."



Fett braced his hands on the top rail. “I don’t want her fixing Sintas. Let’s keep the problems from interbreeding.”

“Just a thought.”

“Thanks anyway.”

“But if you need the Jedi kept in line, there’s always room at the farm.”

Beviin would make a far better Mandalore than Fett ever had. He was more in Shysa’s mold, as ready to boost morale and build alliances as he was to put his beskad through the nearest enemy, and everyone liked him. All Fett had was his record on the battlefield and his dynastic name; he was an image that Mando’ade liked to present to the world, not someone they actually needed, more a living talisman than a leader. Every Mandalore had his own style. In the end, it didn’t seem to change the essence of Mandalore one bit.

“I told Mirta I killed Shysa,” Fett said.

Beviin sighed. “Might as well have all your osik hit the fan at the same time and get it over with, Bob’ika...”

“I didn’t explain. Just told her.”

“You ever going to tell me?”

“Okay, I put Shysa out of his misery. We were surrounded, he was too badly hurt to escape, and I couldn’t leave him to the Sevvets.”

“Tough decision. But we guessed that.”

“He asked me to do it.”

“So you got the top job. Nobody ever argued about it anyway.”

“You can’t blow a man’s brains out without taking his last wish seriously. He made me give my word.” It was nonnegotiable: Jango Fett had taught his son from the cradle that his word was everything. “He made me swear I’d be his successor. He always wanted me to be Mandalore. If I didn’t know better I’d have said he arranged it.”

“No witnesses.”

“You think I wanted this job?”

“Says a lot about you.”

“I said, I never wanted to be Mandalore.”

Beviin sounded a little testy. “I meant, Bob’ika, that you could have sworn anything to Shysa and nobody would ever have known if you broke your word or not.”

Fett gripped the edge of the stone balustrade, “I’d know.”

Beviin just nodded. “You’d never abandon anything without a good reason.”

No, for once Beviin was wrong. And if Sintas got her mind back, she’d tell him so.

# Chapter 7

No Mandalorian soldier should have to fight an aruetii's war for the price of a day's food. No Mando'ad should have to fight at all, except to defend Manda'yaim, his home, or his family, or because he wants to. We have to stop being the tool of governments that don't care if we live or die so long as we do their bidding.

-Kad'ika, also known as Venku, addressing an informal gathering of clan leaders

BEVIIN-VASUR FARM, NEAR KELDABE

Fett waited outside the door for a few moments. He could hear the droid whirring as it moved around the bedroom, and Dr. Beluine's murmuring voice. As soon as the doctor came out, he'd go in and sit with Sintas for a while. After that, he'd start his sessions with Jaina Solo. His day was planned.

"Grandmama keeps asking where she is." Mirta came up behind him and nudged him in the small of his back. She wasn't quite up to taking his hand or hugging him, and he wouldn't have known how to respond to that kind of intimacy or compassion anyway. "We keep telling her, but her short-term memory is shot to haran."

"Early days," Fett said, wondering who he was.

"She won't let go of the heart-of-fire."

"Did you call her grandmama?"

"I thought that would be asking for trouble, Ba'buir..."

Fett heard boots in the passage behind him, slow and careful, like someone was creeping in and trying not to be noticed. Even without his helmet's 360-degree vision, he knew who it was.

"Morning, Grade."

"Su'cuy, Mand'alor." Ghes Orade, Mirta's new love, stopped in his tracks, clutching some wild vormur blooms. "I brought some flowers for Sintas."

"She's blind."

Grade gave him a look that said heartless barve. "She can smell the scent."

It was a nice touch, something Fett hadn't thought about. He better treat my granddaughter like a princess, too. Fett turned slowly to give the lad the full benefit of his unspoken warning. "You marrying Mirta, then?"

"Yes, Mand'alor."

“You’re the only Mando’ad on this planet who cowers to me. Don’t.” Grade was a typical tough Mando lad, but in-laws were a lot scarier than Yuuzhan Vong. “One minute I’m an orphan. The next I’ve got family coming out of the woodwork like squalls.”

“Okay,” said Grade, spine stiffening. “I’m marrying Mirta, and if anyone has to take care of her grandmother long-term, it’ll be us.”

My grandson-in-law. Fierfek. Fett assessed him, and thought he’d do.

A Mandalorian wedding consisted of four short vows and was usually a private ceremony for the couple, not their families. Fett, still thinking in aruetii terms, wondered whether to feel offended that he hadn’t been invited, and then realized nobody else would attend, either, although there’d be communal drinking and sentimentality afterward. Not a credit would be wasted on fripperies. Mando’ade operated on plain, honest pledges and contracts, in love as well as business.

“No urge to revert to Kiffar culture, then?” he asked Mirta.

“I’ve made my choice,” she said.

The door swung open and Beluine came out, looking anxious. Fett took him to one side while Mirta and Orade slipped into the room.

“Is she going to get better?” Fett demanded.

“The fact that she’s alert and mobile is remarkable enough.” Beluine lowered his voice so that Fett had to strain to hear him, but he seemed indignant that his treatment hadn’t been appreciated. “Most cases were in some degree of coma for months. Her Kiffar brain chemistry may have offered her some protection from the worst of the carbonite trauma.”

Kiffar were different, Fett knew that. The ability to detect past events from inanimate objects was proof of that, just like Gotab had done when he’d told Fett far too much about his history with Sintas simply from holding that heart-of-fire stone. He had to be a Kiffar, too. “So she might improve.”

“She might. Carboniting affects neural connections in the brain. That’s why your wife can’t see, and why her memory is affected. Given time, neurons do regenerate. Stimulation helps—little mental exercises to stimulate her memory, objects she might remember, like the necklace, holoimages, that kind of thing.”

Ex-wife, Doctor. Ex-wife.

But the weight of responsibility felt the same. Fett had never been very good at thinking for two, unless the other was his father. “You’re saying she’s brain-damaged.”

“Technically, yes. But therapy...”

“You said I had a year to live. I’m fine now.”

Beluine squirmed visibly. “You found your Kaminoan scientist, then.”

“I found what I needed.” Fett hadn’t had a checkup since the veterinary lab had cleared his blood samples. Physically, he felt fine. He suspected fate had spared him a pre-mature death so he could hang around and have his past catch up with him. I’m not proud of anything I’ve done. I’m not ashamed of anything, either. I did what I had to do. “I’ll find Sintas what she needs. If I need you, I’ll call you.”

Beluine was always good at knowing when he’d been dismissed. Mirta stuck her head out of the doorway, face set in a frown.

“Whatever Medrit says, Beluine did a good job,” she said. “You’re so ungrateful. Grandmama could easily have died.”

Fett recalled his first lessons in combat, learned at his father’s side. Commit fully to the attack. Don’t let up. Don’t stop to think. It was good advice for facing your past, too. He walked in and sat down at the bedside. Sintas was sitting cross-legged on the mattress, turning the heart-of-fire over in her hands as if she was searching.

“Who are you?” she asked, turning her face to him.

Don’t stop to think.

“I knew you when we were younger.”

“What’s your name?”

Don’t stop to think. Don’t... “Boba. Boba Fett.”

He expected the world to come crashing down at that moment, but Sintas just looked blank, as if she was trying to remember something minor, not the man who’d put a huge dent in her life. “I’m Sintas Vel, and you’re Boba Fett, and she’s.... she’s...”

Mirta took up position on the opposite side of the bed. “I’m Mirta Gev,” she repeated patiently.

“Yeah, Mirta.... are you my little girl? I have a daughter.”

Fett switched off. He hadn’t planned to, but it happened automatically. It was like a thermostat switch that tripped whenever things were in danger of overheating.

“Ailyn,” he said. How could he know how much she could handle at one time? She forgot it all the next moment, anyway. “Your daughter’s name was Ailyn. She was about sixteen last time you saw her.”

“I have to find her. She’ll be wondering where I am.”

Mirta fixed Fett with a stare that said Don’t even think about it. “Lots of things have happened

while you've been in carbonite." Mirta took a deep breath. "I'm your granddaughter. "

Sintas didn't react for a while. She kept turning the heart-of-fire between her fingers, lips moving silently. Fett wondered if she was reading it and trying to tie up its information with what she was hearing. Sin was always sharp, analytical, looking for the angle. He didn't know what al-ways meant, of course; from meeting her to leaving her had been just three or four years, tops.

She placed the heart-of-fire around her neck, one hand still clutching the stone. Grade leaned over and held the flowers in front of her.

"These are vormur blooms, "he said. "It's me, Grade. Remember? From yesterday?"

Sintas inhaled the scent and just smiled. At least she wasn't distressed now; that was something. Mirta got up and took something from the cupboard, something Fett hadn't seen in a very long time. It was a red oblong canister with a handle on the top. Somewhere-not here, not now-his heart sank, but he didn't let it touch him.

"We found this in Rezodar's effects, "Mirta said, opening the lid.

A hologram leapt into life with a faint hum, triggered by the mechanism. Mirta looked up slowly, fixing Fett with an expression that might have been recrimination or a cue to tell Sintas what he could see and she couldn't. Fett couldn't tell which. The hologram showed Sintas holding a baby, all smiles, and Fett standing with one arm around her shoulder.

I could have said it was Spar standing in for me, doing Shysa's bidding as usual, the idiot. But that's me standing there. I remember the day.

Fett also remembered killing a lot of scumbags to retrieve that hologram for her, long after they parted. He couldn't-wouldn't-remember how he'd felt when the image was recorded.

"What is it?" Sintas asked, reaching out toward the source of the hum.

"It's an old hologram, "Mirta said gently. "It's you and your daughter, I think. My mother. And-your husband." Her eyes were fixed on Fett's, back to the cold black stare she had given him when they'd first met. It was as if Ailyn's lessons in hating him were all flooding back to her. "It'll make sense when you can see again."

Sintas half smiled, looking embarrassed. "I have a husband? What happened to him? How long have I been out of it? Come on, tell me."

She might have lost her memory, but this was the old Sintas, all right, a no-nonsense bounty hunter who didn't have time for excuses and platitudes. She always wanted to know the score.

Fett took a long, slow breath in the same way he did to prep for storming a room.

She won't remember tomorrow, Grade mouthed at him.

Fett kicked down the door in his mind. “Thirty-eight years.” Get it over with. He even looked Sintas straight in the eye, although she couldn’t see him. “And I was your husband. I’m Boba Fett.”

He counted to three, like timing a det and getting ready to fling himself flat just before the blast wave reached him. But it never came. Sintas’s eyes moved from side to side as if she was searching. Her expression was almost beatific as some realization dawned on her.

“Who carbonited me?”

“I don’t know. Yet.”

“But you found me.”

“Yeah.”

“You found me.”

“We found you.” There was no point giving Sintas the wrong idea. He owed her more than that. “Mirta did all the work.”

“I don’t remember,” Sintas said. “I don’t remember anything. But if you came for me-after all that time, you were still looking...”

Fett parted his lips to explain that it wasn’t quite like that, but Mirta held up a warning finger. She doesn’t need to know that right now. He stopped in his tracks.

“You’re going to be fine,” he said. “I’ll come back later.”

It was a tactical withdrawal. When Fett turned, Beviin was standing in the doorway with his arms folded. He stepped back to let Fett pass, and then followed him down the passage through to the front of the farmhouse, where Dinua and Jintar were having breakfast with their kids in the kitchen, in a world of their own and clearly delighted to be together again. Fett caught a snatch of their conversation; Jintar was discussing his plans for a new workshop, so he obviously wasn’t planning on more mercenary contracts for a while. Some people managed family life effortlessly even in the most trying conditions.

“I could take the Jedi off your hands today,” Beviin suggested. “Unless you want to be elsewhere.”

“Sooner I kill her idea that I’m some devoted husband, the better,” said Fett. “Just makes it harder for her when she finally gets the full picture.”

He reached the front entrance, but Medrit was blocking it. He was big enough to do that. Medrit had been born solid and tall, but years of pounding metal as an armor-smith had added prodigious muscles to his frame.

“Wait,” Medrit said imperiously. “No sparring with jettiise until you’re properly dressed.” He crooked a soot-stained finger at Fett and led him to his workshop. “Heads will not roll. Okay?”

Laid out on the bench was a set of armor plates, the mid-green paint still unmarked. It was a common color for Mandalorians; it happened to be Fett's color, too.

"Might as well make the most of the new beskar deposits." Medrit picked up the breastplate and twirled it between his hands. "I said you should ditch that durasteel armor, didn't I? Here's your proper beskar'gam. Wear it in case the Jedi gets lucky. She'll need to hack away with her jetii'kad for a week to dent this."

"Humor him," Beviin said. "He made a collar section specially..."

Fett didn't plan on testing the beskar'gam in earnest, but the collar intrigued him. It was a near-circular band that hinged open and protected the neck between the helmet and gorget plate. If his father had worn one, he would probably have survived Mace Windu's decapitating lightsaber blow. Fett slipped it on and rolled his head to test the range of movement in it.

"You think I'm going to spend my time fighting Jaina Solo, do you?" Fett submitted to having some plates swapped out. "Plenty more ways to train her to hunt her brother than wearing myself out."

"If I had my way, you'd be wearing greaves, too. You ask for trouble, Mand'alor."

"It doesn't look like mine. Too new."

"Okay, you want your dents in it? I'll paint dents on it if you want to look roughly-toughy. It's beskar. It doesn't dent."

Mirta's reminder that he was an ungrateful shabuir wormed into his head. "It's good, Medrit. Thanks."

Beviin helped him attach the rest of the plates. The new helmet-he'd sort that later, himself. The durasteel one would do for today. He swung his arms a few times and ac-customed himself to the extra weight before replacing his jetpack and Wookiee braids, and then set off for the hangar that he'd earmarked as a training area.

Beviin followed him.

"You want to watch the show?" said Fett. "I'm just going to see what skills she's got first."

"I don't trust Jedi, Bob'ika. Not that I don't think you can handle her."

"We all trusted Kubariet during the war."

"He was a different kind of Jedi, may he find rest in the manda." Beviin was a traditionalist; he might not have believed literally in the collective oversoul, but he wished fervently for its existence. He patted the pommel of his beskad. "But I'll give the woman the benefit of the doubt."

Jaina was waiting for them in the barn, looking very small and dejected as she sat on an upturned pail. She flinched when Fett approached her; he was so used to getting that reaction that he thought



nothing of it until he realized the look on her face wasn't alarm but concern.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

Fett felt naked. She could sense anxiety clinging to him. He was sure that he wasn't letting Sintas get to him, but Jaina seemed to smell trouble anyway.

“Family problems,” he said.

“Yeah, tell me about it...” She stood up. “Your granddaughter?”

There was no reason not to tell her. Everyone in Keldabe knew anyway. The shock might teach her a lesson about not letting anything distract you from the task in hand.

“My ex-wife,” he said. “She's just shown up after being carbonited for thirty-eight years. And she doesn't know your brother killed her daughter - yet.”

“If you'd rather be with her now...”

“We've got work to do.”

His eyes met Jaina's, and he saw a shared pain he wasn't expecting. Both of them had families torn apart by tragedy; both had harsh duties ahead. For a heartbeat, they looked at each other, and he could have sworn there was some sympathy, some real compassion in her. He didn't like that at all.

Jaina drew her lightsaber with slow caution as if she didn't want to make anyone too jumpy. “Want to see what I can do?”

Fett's mind emptied instantly of all superfluous thought. Combat was cleansing; he'd done this so often that it was almost a form of meditation. He was in his natural element again, freed from the alien world of relationships he'd never learned to handle.

But he'd learned to master every weapon the galaxy had to offer, bar one.

“Me, too,” said Fett, drawing a lightsaber. “We can teach each other some new tricks.”

BEVIIN-VASUR FARM. OUTSIDE KELDABE

Jaina had thought that she might start her bizarre apprenticeship with a discussion about Jacen's prodigious catalog of Force powers, but it wasn't to be.

“I'm no swordsman,” Fett said, holding the lightsaber like a hammer as he circled her. Its blade was green. She wondered whose hand he'd taken it from, and how. “And I've never trained anyone. It'll be an education for both of us.”

It had to be a trick. Jaina matched his movements, keeping a constant distance from him. She was aware of Beviin as a deep blue blur to her right, watching, and she didn't feel comfortable. Suspicion

emanated from him, but there was a core of... she could only call it good humor. Maybe he felt this was a joke; but palpable malevolence was missing. She found herself mapping him in her Force awareness of the environment anyway, a transponder on a holochart, an enemy vessel not in range but worthy of cautious monitoring.

“I want to learn what Jacen hasn’t, “she said.

Fett stopped and stood with his head slightly tilted. He looked as if he might be smiling under the helmet, and she was ready for that; she thought he’d taunt her, mock her, generally wind her up to see how fast she lost her temper and how many mistakes she could be provoked into making.

“Tell me what he can do, “said Fett. “Other than kill unarmed women without touching them.”

Jaina felt Beviin move slowly out of her peripheral vision. So Fett didn’t want to test her fighting technique. He was distracting her.

“Apart from the academy basics?”

“Apart from the leaping, mind-influencing, throwing rocks around with his mind...”

“Telekinesis.” Jaina took a step back to keep Beviin in physical view. He had a blaster and that short, flat saber, both hanging from his belt. “I’ve known him to move starships, deflect ion cannon... even turbolasers. He can hear at huge distances with some Thera Force-listening technique. He can create elaborate Force illusions that feel real, he can walk into the past or future, he can control objects like scanners, and he can mind-rub-he even mind-rubbed Ben.”

“Made him forget.”

“Yes.”

“He could get rich on that.” Fett didn’t sound as if he were mocking. In fact, he felt totally neutral to her; a blank slate in the Force, nothing to read. “Why does he need spies and secret police if he can eavesdrop wherever he wants?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“If he can stop turbolasers singlehanded, why does he need a fleet?”

Jaina looked for the angle. “Again, no idea.”

“Why does he need shields on ships when he can create his own?”

She was balanced on the balls of her feet now, ready to leap. It was so instinctive, so ingrained by training, that she couldn’t override it. She felt threatened. In the corner of her eye, the thin strip of light that marked the barn doors expanded into a wider ribbon and someone-several someones-came in. She had an audience.

I'm the cabaret. Okay, Fett. I never thought this would be a stroll anyway.

Fett lowered the lightsaber and held it with its tip just above the dusty floor, kicking up little clouds of particles as he walked slowly toward her. "Anything else?"

"We... can't sense him in the Force..."

"Welcome to the mundane world."

"...and he can make himself invisible, sometimes."

Beviin burst out laughing. "Wayii, gar ori'shukla!"

Jaina almost turned, triggered by the simple instinct to face the source of a sudden sound, but she fought it. Fett was totally relaxed, now a couple of meters from her, lightsaber held loosely in one gloved hand. His armor looked different-cleaner, brighter. Maybe he'd put on his holiday best.

"What's that mean, Mirta?" Fett said.

One of the Mandalorians who'd come in was a young woman. Jaina remembered. Uh-uh, his granddaughter, the one Mom and Dad met.... the one who tried to kill him. I've come to the right place. Fett understood family rifts. She could feel anxiety in the girl, but it had nothing to do with her. It was more like a bad memory she was trying to forget.

"Beviin says, 'Oh, dear, you're totally screwed,' Jedi." Mirta moved into her field of view behind Fett, a figure in egg-yolk yellow plates with her helmet under one arm. She felt sharp and bitter now. "Jacen's very clever, isn't he?"

He killed her mother. Oh boy.

Jaina felt them all come to a halt. She was tracking mul-tiple targets in her Force sense, aware now of Beviin, Fett, Mirta, and three other armored figures that stood waiting. Maybe she'd made a terrible misjudgment; maybe they were just going to make her pay for the death of Ailyn Vel, an eye for an eye, a daughter for a daughter. Fett was now within striking distance. But his weight was on one leg, not evenly balanced to ready for a blow, and he exuded calm.

He was just tormenting her. He shut down the lightsaber blade and studied the intricately carved hilt. Jaina lowered her lightsaber and then shut it off.

"You've got problems, Solo," Fett said, hooking his thumb in his belt, weight still on his right leg. Jaina didn't need to be told that. "How you going to take him, then?"

She had no answer yet. Fett shrugged, and then...

The next thing she knew, the wind was knocked out of her as he landed a punch in her gut. Her lightsaber was back on and slashing up across Fett's chest in a split sec-ond, unplanned; she snapped straight to instant raw instinct. Fett fell back a couple of steps. Jaina bent almost double, gasping for

air as her solar plexus screamed in agonized protest at the punch, but she held her lightsaber out in front of her to ward him off.

“You...” Nobody had ever jumped her like that before. She hadn’t sensed it coming. She struggled for breath. But nobody was mocking her and she’d expected contemptuous laughter. “What’s that...”

“Lesson over, “Fett said, inspecting his chest plate. Jaina’s eyes were watering, but she could see a scorch mark across Fett from belly to chin, the green paint burned away in a line that spanned the sections of armor like a careless black brushstroke exposing a streak of bare gray metal beneath. “Hurts, doesn’t it?”

Jaina steadied her breathing with a little help from the Force to settle the disrupted nerve impulses. Yes, it hurts, you cretin. She fought to keep her dignity in front of the audience. News of her gullibility would be all over Keldabe in hours.

“And there’s... a point to... all that..., “she said, determined not to show just how painful the blow had been. Fett still held the lightsaber hilt in his right hand. He’d used it like a knuckleduster, and seventy-plus or not, he still had a serious punch on him. “I hope.”

“There is, “he said. He was still looking down at the lightsaber scar across his plates. “I’m waiting for you to work it out.”

Jaina straightened up and finally decided it was safe to deactivate her lightsaber. If anyone was going to try their luck with her, they’d have done it by now. “So that’s beskar armor, is it?”

“Beskar’gam, “Beviin said behind her. “It means ‘iron skin.’ We live in our armor. And if the Mand’alor hadn’t been wearing it, I wouldn’t have let him get that close to you.”

“If I hadn’t been wearing it, “said Fett, “I wouldn’t have tried.”

Beviin, helmet under one arm and a pleasant smile on his face, drew his saber one-handed and held it vertically so that Jaina could look at it. “If you’re willing to spar with me, I’ll assess your technique.”

“Modest, aren’t we?” Jaina said.

“Does your brother know how you handle a lightsaber?”

“Yes...”

“So maybe I can show you how he might use that technique against you.”

Humility, girl. Remember humility. “Of course. Thank you.”

The barn was roughly constructed out of timber and duraplast sheeting, pierced by shafts of sunlight from dozens of gaps in the boards. All Jaina could see those gaps as now were sniper positions, vulnerabilities, and she’d never felt exposed like that before. She had strong enough Force

powers to get herself out of trouble, didn't she? She could deflect blaster bolts. She could leap clear. She could Force-throw.

Fett had psyched her out.

That was it. It had to be. It was all the family baggage, all the stories she'd grown up with about what he'd done to her father, and how he never stopped, never gave up, how he just kept on coming and not even the Sarlacc could kill him. But that wasn't going to help her defeat Jacen. Now that she could pause to look at her small audience, she found it was a big man in dark gray armor, face obscured by a helmet, a young, blond, bearded man who seemed to be with Mirta, and another older man with magnificent black matted braids strung with gold clips, his ebony skin marked with raised scars. He gave her a knowing wink. If she'd met him in another context, she would have taken an instant liking to him.

"Don't you get it, Solo?" Fett asked.

"You played on your propaganda, I think."

"No, I played on your mistakes. You read my body language wrong. You assumed you were safe."

"It's hard to sense danger from you." Oh, that's clever. You're just confirming how he can kill more Jedi. She gestured with her thumb at Beviin. "I was picking up more from our friend here."

"And you still held back."

She pointed to the burn across his plates. "Hey, I hit you fair and square."

"You assumed too much. You're just training, nobody wants to hurt you, the nice Mando is helping you, he's standing all wrong to attack... you want to win? Start out to win. Hit first."

"You're telling me to fight dirty. I get that."

"No, I'm telling you this isn't about lightsaber technique. I'm more than twice your age, no Force powers, and I still got you to drop your guard. Winning isn't about being better. It's finding your opponent's weakness and exploiting it."

"So what's Jacen's?"

"What's yours?"

Jaina chewed her lip in thought, aware of Mirta's gaze.

She looked like more trouble than her grandfather. What if

I'd just walked in and laid into Fett, no hello, how are you, anything? Just went for him? Could any of them have stopped me? I...

The realization dawned on her. “I use appropriate force. With a small f. I follow the rules of combat.”

“Good.” Fett rolled the lightsaber hilt in his palm and then slid it into the dump pouch on the thigh of his pants. “You’re learning. Next lesson-Goran will show you how to go crazy with a blade.”

“But what about Jacen’s weaknesses?”

“They’re yours.”

“He’s my twin. I know him.”

“And he knows you. Be someone else.”

Jaina clipped her lightsaber to her belt and understood both the simplicity and enormity of her task. The solution was obvious. It was just very hard to achieve. She didn’t need to be fitter, or stronger, or more skilled; she needed to play it so out of character that Jacen wouldn’t be able to counter or anticipate her.

“If I could be that different, Fett, I wouldn’t be a Jedi.”

“There you go,” said Fett, and walked away.

Mirta and the two men without helmets followed him. Beviin stayed. The big guy in dark gray took off his helmet and gave Jaina the kind of look that said she was something he’d wipe off his boots.

“Is this Fett’s idea of mystic enlightenment?” she asked.

Beviin shrugged. “It’s not hyperspace engineering.”

“Pity.” Jaina considered wiping the scowl off the big silent guy’s face but decided it was impolitic. “I could handle that.”

Beviin walked toward the doors and jerked his head for her to follow. The man in gray ambled along beside him.

“We’ll try to give you an alter ego,” Beviin said. “A nasty Jaina. A crafty, cheating Jaina. A bounty-hunting Jaina. You up for that, Med’ika?”

“I’m all for giving folks a second career option,” he said. He was very well spoken, surprisingly so, as if he was a highly educated man. Jaina had expected him to be an inarticulate brute. “But she can service the tiller droids first. Can’t we send her back and get an AgriCorps Jedi instead?”

Beviin laughed. “Ingrate.”

Fett had vanished. Jaina wondered what he got up to in his private hours, and when Beviin pointed out the hovel Fett was staying in, she was genuinely shocked. He could have had a palace. Beviin’s

farmhouse, with its shantytown of outbuildings and moat-like boundaries, reminded her more of a bastion than a haven of rural peace. The tunnels and passages seemed to run everywhere. Nothing was quite as it seemed.

She stood in the grimy workshop with her arms in the oily guts of a tiller droid, listening to the whine and roar of vessels overhead-fighters, definitely, the way the falling note indicated something moving away from her at high speed. While she adjusted clearances and checked filters, a small girl five, not a day older, she was certain-appeared in the doorway to stare at her. She wore a tiny version of the flight suit every Mandalorian had, with scaled-down but loose fitting plates that looked a couple of sizes too big, and a hold-out blaster hanging from the belt that looked full-size on her.

The blaster was real.

“Hi, kid.” Jaina smiled, ready to deflect a bolt.

“Su’cuy, jetii.”

“Is that your blaster?”

“Mama gave it to me.” The girl unholstered it like a professional, checked the safety catch, and held it with the muzzle pointing safely away from Jaina. “I’m five and a half. I’m training.”

“You and me both, sweetheart.” Jaina swallowed hard, more touched than worried. “You and me both.”

No, Mandalorians weren’t what she’d expected at all.

And she would learn to be as much of a surprise to her brother as they were to her. Thanks, Fett.

IMPERIAL PALACE, CITY OF RAVELIN, BASTION: TWO DAYS LATER

“Show the young lady in, Vitor.”

Receiving visitors in the Palace drawing room always reminded them what they were dealing with, Pellaeon thought. It was an imposing chamber that whispered casual wealth; it hinted that the Empire didn’t have to try too hard. While he never let himself think of having an emperor’s role-that way lay delusion and moral corruption, he was sure-he was in command, and he liked visitors to know that.

“And will it be caf or murrih tisane, sir?”

“Both, please.” Pellaeon could see a patch of vivid turquoise sky from the floor-to-ceiling windows, a little promise of escape in an otherwise stormy day. He missed being out with the fleet. “And monitor the meeting, will you?”

“Of course.”

Pellaeon saw no reason not to listen to what Jacen Solo's envoy had to say. Listening committed him to nothing; it simply filled in the gaps, if his informants had actually left any. In a career spanning more than seventy years, he had built up a personal network that could give any state intelligence corps a run for its money. Even the apparently omnipotent Jacen couldn't do much without leaving traces. He had to work with the raw stuff of society-troops, civil servants, clerks.... even droids. The ship of state could leave an awfully big wake if you knew where to look.

Tahiri Veila glided into the room right on time. Her bright blond hair and general artless demeanor made her look too young to be sent on a task like this, although the

Yuuzhan Vong markings still visible on her forehead evoked unpleasant memories.

Jacen, if you send a pretty girl to sweet-talk me, don't break the spell by reminding me of the Vong...

Pellaeon stood and ushered her to her chair. The spell was definitely broken before she'd even had a chance to cast it.

"Is this your first visit to Bastion?" he asked, pouring her a murrih tisane that spread an amethyst pool of light on the white marble table. "If it is, don't leave without seeing the Imperial Gardens."

"I'll make a note of that, Admiral."

"So..." He settled down in his seat, making a point of being slow and old, looking like easy prey. "We live in challenging times. But here in our little backwater, we've managed to avoid the war, and I'm wondering what could possibly make it worth our while stepping out into that fray."

"You have a very small empire."

"But it's perfectly formed."

"Here's our view in the GA." Tahiri leaned forward slightly like an earnest student. "The longer the war goes on, the worse the prospects for all of us, not just those directly involved in the righting. We want stability. What we have is not just a split between GA and Confederation, but also systems unaligned to either and fighting their own local disputes. Hit the most powerful systems working against the GA, and things will be over faster."

"You realize," Pellaeon said, "that I've been here before, and more than once? And wasn't the short, sharp shock supposed to bring Corellia into line?"

Tahiri evidently hadn't been briefed to argue a wider case than the offer to be put on the table. She blinked a couple of times. "It would work if you added your fleet and troops to ours."

"Now give me a more immediate benefit for expending

Imperial citizens' lives on this gamble-and it is a gamble." Pellaeon couldn't look too willing; every word would be reported back-recorded, he suspected-and Jacen would look for a deeper



motive if he didn't raise objections. He'd raised them over targeting Corellia, after all. "I have to make a good case to the Moff's beyond vague plans for peace and galactic harmony. Permacrete, not vapor."

"The GA is prepared to offer you Borleias and Bilbringi."

"What are the conditions?"

"That the.... Empire first sends vessels and troops to attack Fondor with the GA."

"Ah, performance-related pay. Very wise. With what objective?"

Tahiri's eye movements-the occasional wobble as she tried to process the words-showed she wasn't yet used to the military jargon. "To bring it back to the GA."

"But the detail matters, my dear. Is Jacen planning to take over the orbital yards, or destroy them? What about the planet itself? Does he simply want to force a surrender? Is he preparing to subdue it by occupation? Each objective requires very different resources."

Tahiri recovered well. "I think the strategy is something you need to discuss with the joint Chiefs of State. I'm only here to make the initial offer."

"A good point," Pellaeon said. Jacen was nothing if not consistent. He really was working through his shopping list of planets to batter into submission. "I'll put it to the Moff's."

"But it's you who really calls the shots here, isn't it?"

"However much power a man has, it's impossible to keep it for any length of time unless he has the support of most of those under him. I consult."

Chew on that, Jacen Solo. If he was smart, Jacen might take it as advice from an old man who'd seen other auto-crats pulled down by their underlings over the decades. Either way, Jacen needed the Empire. If Pellaeon had read him right-no, if Jacen thought like Pellaeon-then he knew he didn't have the numbers now to quickly crush key targets in the Confederation, but a sudden injection of troops and hulls might well tip the balance. One battle could change the course of a war. The only problem was that you never knew which one until years after the cease-fire.

And if you do win, Jacen... the war still won't be over for the Empire. What kind of a galactic regime do you really have in mind?

"Thank you for the tisane," Tahiri said. "We'll be in touch, I hope."

After she left, Pellaeon summoned Reige. "Vitor, call the Moff's. Let's see who jumps at this and how fast."

Reige consulted his datapad and began tapping messages into the office comlink system. "Well, most of them are on Bastion at the moment, so you'll have nearly a full house to debate this. Are you

accepting the offer, sir?"

Pellaeon nodded. "If or when Jacen gets his backside kicked, then the GA might fall apart, and we'll be there to pick up the pieces. If we sit it out, we take our chances, but if we back him, then we at least get greater control over events whether he succeeds or not in the long run."

"You think he will fail?"

"He's now faced with occupying or subduing half the galaxy to put the GA back together again, and he can't keep that up forever, however successful he is as a commander. Unless he comes up with a convincing peace deal that somehow bypasses the principle of a pooled GA defense force, then I don't see this ending. That's why the war started, remember."

Pellaeon waited for the Moffs to gather in the meeting room, and tried to think like Jacen. The man wasn't a fool, but could he see the galaxy through Fondorian eyes? Did he know which battle he was trying to win? He seemed to see worlds as controlled by a few stubborn leaders, whose removal would free the population to see things his way. He didn't see that the general population didn't want to do things the GA way, either.

If you wanted to build an empire.... well, the trick was to leave the population to get on with their lives. Pellaeon got up and walked across to the cabinet that housed hundreds of datapads, antique bound flimsi, and even ancient animal-skin scrolls, military histories from a thousand worlds spanning millennia. He knew that if he picked one at random, any history at all, he would find much the same story as the one he was living through today: seizure of power, the desire for expansion, and the inevitable inability to hold all that had been grabbed. The only variable was how long it took to fall apart. The longest-lived empires were those with the lightest hand on the reins.

"Empire can be different," he muttered aloud. "Provided we shoot all the lunatics who enjoy the idea."

Where that left him—no, he was purged of ambition at ninety-two. He simply wanted to leave the galaxy tidy and clean when he left it for the last time. That was what government was about, and the military was its instrument to achieve it.

The Moffs, predictably, were mostly split between enthusiasm for the Jacen Solo plan, ill defined as it was, and those like Rosset who wanted to know more before signing up.

"I'm with you on this, Admiral," said Rosset, sitting opposite him across the mirror-polished table. "Putting orbital yards out of action is a very different proposition from subduing the planet itself. Are we going to end up policing Fondor for Jacen Solo until Mustafar freezes over?"

Pellaeon was fascinated to note how Admiral Niathal had been erased from the scene. It was seen as Jacen's war. The Mon Cal schemer would probably be happy about that, he thought. She could step in when Jacen hit the buffers, hands relatively clean. "How badly do we want Bilbringi? Borleias?"

"They're not going to be costly to take," said Quille. "Very small population on Borleias post-

Yuuzhan Vong, probably happier to have someone like us look after them than not. Bilbringi might require some military effort, though.”

“Like I mentioned before, “Rosset said, “we could take both systems if we wanted to without committing anything to the GA, because I don’t think Jacen’s in a position to stop us.”

Quille had an expression of almost religious epiphany on his face. “But the GA isn’t going to be able to hold Fondor without us, because that’ll require an occupying army after it surrenders. Poor old GA, short of hands-and we offer to look after the place while it’s busy hammering more wayward systems back into the Alliance fold. We end up staying. And.... possession is nine-tenths of the law, after all.”

Rosset let out a long breath. “I think they’ll notice we tried to steal Fondor from under their noses.”

“I don’t think they’ll see it like that.”

Pellaeon interrupted. He was wary about agreeing with Quille even about the time of day, but the Moff had a point. And if Jacen was going to fall sooner or later anyway, when he stretched himself just that little bit too far - “If we have both Borleias and Bilbringi, then that gives us a platform from which to maintain a presence on Fon-dor, and then we’ll have expanded down past the Core again.”

Pellaeon didn’t have to elaborate on that at all. Every Moff understood the potential.

“Are we all agreed, then, gentlemen? We accept the GA’s invitation, subject to their sharing the Fondor plan with us, and our being able to resource our role?”

Normal practice was to go around the table and record votes for and against, but the Moffs paused in silence for a moment and then all burst into spontaneous applause. Pellaeon wasn’t sure if they were applauding him, or simply overwhelmed with martial emotion at the prospect of being back in the saddle.

“You’re not entirely happy about this, are you, Admiral?” Reige said as he made Pellaeon’s nightcap, a mix of two parts Corellian brandy to one part water. “You’ve never appeased the Moffs before, and Jacen Solo is...”

“Anathema to me? Yes. And I’m not appeasing the Moffs now.” Pellaeon stood on the balcony of his chambers, looking out over the parkland beneath. The Imperial cavalry’s ceremonial troop was exercising the bloodfins, cantering in a neat line along the rise and skylined for a moment against the sunset that passed for evening at this time of the year on Bastion. For a few weeks, the sun didn’t set fully and night never moved beyond a glowing dusk. It was a fine moment to sip a brandy and savor the fresh scent of cut grass on the breeze. “I’m trying to make the best of a situation that Jacen Solo will impose on the galaxy whether we join him or not. If we don’t, all the recovery effort after the last war will be for nothing. I anticipate that he will go the way of most despots, and fall, or even hang. If that happens-when that happens-we shall be there to pick up the pieces. I have no faith in the GA to run anything beyond their Coruscant front garden, let alone a galaxy.”

Pellaeon rolled the brandy glass slowly between his palms and glanced back at Reige. He really did look like his dead son, Mynar, sometimes; and it would have been so simple to check, to test, to know for sure if Reige were his flesh and blood or not.

No, it wouldn't have made any difference to Pellaeon's regard for him. He settled for never knowing. Some things were best left unknown.

"Anything else, sir?"

"Thank you, Vitor, no." Pellaeon gestured with his glass. "Care to join me?"

"Perhaps later, sir. I have some work to finish."

"I look forward to it."

Pellaeon stood at the window until he'd drained his glass, but neither the decision nor the brandy could make one thought go away: that Jacen Solo was a self-serving megalomaniac, and there was nothing to reassure Pellaeon that the man would honor any agreement unless forced to. For all the victories he'd achieved, he was erratic, and the GA was still losing allies, even Hapes.

And Kashyyyk-that was a disgrace to anyone in uniform.

It was time to take out some insurance. Whatever Jacen was planning for Fondor and the Empire-and Pellaeon was certain there was a whole side of the strategy that the Empire would not have been told-Pellaeon needed a trump card of his own.

And not one for the Moffs to see yet, either. We have our own Jacens here, too.

"Well, then, old friend," he said aloud. He walked over to the floor-length mirror and smoothed back his white hair, checking the cut of his jacket. "Time to call in a favor."

He felt suddenly foolish; she wouldn't even see him. He was simply going to send a message, and one without a sin-gle word in it. But she would receive it, and she would know what it meant, and that it was critical.

And she would respond.

Pellaeon took out a few small flimsicard trinket boxes from his desk drawer and tapped his fingertips on the lid of each in turn, listening for the best approximation of a small drum.

Rap.... rap.... rap.

Rap, rap..... brr-rrr-rapp.

That was the one. Pellaeon settled down at the desk and positioned his comlink next to the box, ready to drum out his message. He had to rehearse it a few times; his fingers were a little stiff, but he refused to bow to arthritis even now, and Jacen Solo had nothing on that.

“I wouldn’t do this unless I had to, my dear,” he said, and opened the comlink.

Rap.... rap... rap.... rap, rap... brr-rrr-rapp.

It was time for the warrior-sailor Darakaer to be summoned as in the Irmenu legend; Pellaeon felt that the galaxy was slipping toward its darkest peril, and Jacen-Jacen might have looked like an ally, but Pellaeon knew he was truly a foe in every sense.

Rap.... rap.... rap... rap, rap... brr-rrr-rapp.

Darakaer, long dead, probably didn’t have the kind of fire power that Pellaeon wanted even if he rose from his grave and answered the call. But the admiral knew someone who did, and who had been very taken with the saga of the Irmenu hero.

Rap.... rap... rap.... rap, rap.... brr-rrr-rapp.

The drumbeat went out across space. It was just a repeating rhythm that would mean nothing to anyone except an Irmenu historian, if any could listen in on this secure link, and a warrior-sailor who was-he hoped-still very much alive.

Rap.... rap.... rap.... rap, rap.... brr-rrr-rapp.

Pellaeon closed the link and settled in for a long wait.

# Chapter 8

The Tra'kad is primitive. We thought that you wanted state-of-the-art technology, and that is why you allied with us. What is the point of this machine?

-Sass Sikili, negotiator of the Roche hives, to Jir Yomaget, head of MandalMotors, on seeing holimages of the Tra'kad prototype multimission combat vessel

## OFFICE OF THE JOINT CHIEF OF STATE, CORUSCANT

Caedus ran his fingertips over the name plate on the outer doors and wondered when he would have the engraving changed to replace COLONEL JACEN SOLO with DARTH CAE-DUS.

Would he need a plate on the door, or even an office at all? He'd still intended to leave the routine business of government to Niathal, but she was becoming an irritant, and it was time he started looking for an administrator to take over just in case he had to retire her. Caedus hoped she might see sense and return to Mon Calamari, or even accept a transfer back to operational duties with the fleet, but she had tasted power, and few were willing to slide back into taking orders when they'd given them.

Flesh and blood were heir to ambition. He liked ambition in an apprentice or junior officer, but the closer it crept to his own rank, the more it got in the way of the tidy business of running a peaceful, stable galaxy. Keeping a constant eye out for usurpers was time consuming and distracting. He was beginning to prefer the service of droids; a legal droid had enabled him to exploit the law to grab power, and it expected no favors or high office in return. It simply did its job. Maybe he needed a droid administration.

Just one more push. Just one more, to break the back of resistance. Make an example of Fondor.

The Imperial Remnant was joining him, and that made all the difference.

Caedus's sense of standing on the brink of a pivotal moment was growing stronger. The state of galactic alliances might not have looked in his favor numerically, but the recruitment of the Moffs to his cause was a coup. Their military weight was what he'd wanted most, but their sphere of influence-which also included the banking centers of Muunilinst and Mygeeto-was a prize in itself.

I have resources, should I need them, but I can also choke off the resources of others.... economics is a weapon, too.

"Tahiti," he said. "Where have you been?"

Tahiri sat down in the chair facing his desk, now looking the ideal junior lieutenant. She'd even pinned up her hair. "I thought you could tell. Can't you detect me?"

Caedus activated the holochart and magnified the Fondor system, moving asset icons into different positions. "I don't have time to keep an eye on everyone. And talking of detection, are you any farther

forward with locating the Jedi Council's base?"

"No, I am not-sir."

"Why?"

"There's a lot of galaxy to search, and the StealthX needs regular maintenance. I lost one day already."

"I realize the service schedule seems to have been stepped up, but that doesn't explain the lack of results from a Jedi."

"Sir, that's unfair." Tahiri was taking her new military status seriously; she hadn't called him Jacen in days. "If this is a priority, then you have far more powerful Force senses than me, and you should be able to locate them. I still think they'd bolt to one of their old haunts."

Caedus didn't think Luke was so unimaginative, and would know that, of course; so he might do it, and head for somewhere like Hoth or Endor, as much to relive some sad nostalgia for his youth as to hide. But Luke would also know that searching Hoth or some Force-forsaken wilderness would tie up Caedus's scarce elite resources, and so he would be happy for Caedus to believe he was a fool, or have him lock himself into indecision trying to guess Luke's strategy.

I will not give Luke the satisfaction. He's yesterday's man. I do not dance to his tune.

"He'll want us to waste time searching his old haunts," Caedus said. "So we won't."

He moved Star Destroyers and frigates around the Tapani sector chart with his fingertip, considering his options for bringing Fondor back into line. In some ways, it mattered more than Corellia. Corellia had always been a thorn in every government's side, a planet of hobby dissidents who didn't care who ran the show or what the policies were as long as they could rebel against them. Perhaps the worst thing to impose on Corellia was a regime in Coruscant that agreed with them on their every whining objection, sending them into a spiral of confusion. But Fondor was psychologically different. It was a regular world, usually a compliant and responsible world, and so its secession from the GA was a more dangerous signal to others in the GA. Caedus was sure this had emboldened other systems to break ranks. He had to be seen to crack down now, something he should have done months ago had he not been distracted by more domestic matters.

I haven't thought about Allana for hours. Or Tenel Ka.

If I try hard, I can forget them, in time.

"After we take back Fondor, I'll join you in hunting him," Caedus said. He didn't plan to make the same mistakes as he had with Corellia, by listening to weak-willed bureaucrats who didn't have the stomach for a fight. I told Cal Omas that we should crush Corellia right away, and nip the rebellion in the bud. It's his fault for limiting me. And Niathal's. I've proven my point. Either you put out a forest fire right away, or it goes on burning underground even when the surface vegetation is ash. Caedus knew all about forest fires now. He liked the analogy. Just as the real forest fires on Kashyyyk would

enable new healthy growth to spring up again, so did purging the old order of chaos and petty planetary politics. ““After Fondor. Are you spending any time around fleet personnel?”

“Sorry?”

“I meant-do you listen to the mood on the lower decks?”

“I-I ate in the mess at HQ a couple of times, yes.”

“And?”

Caedus made himself forget Fondor for a moment and stepped back, eyes closed, to quiet his mind and focus on a randomly chosen point in time and space, the junior ratings’ mess in Fleet HQ. If he shut out everything else, he could sense the collective mood of fleet personnel, taste the blend of anticipation, fear, curiosity, loneliness, even the worries about pay and promotion-as if it was one entity. He sank deeper into the swirl of light, sound, and texture, sensing the mess as white noise, and then snatches of specific emotions and chatter welled up from the blur in sharp clarity. I don’t believe it.

It’s true, I tell you. He killed her. Snapped her neck. He’s the best officer we ever had. He cares. He killed her, I tell you. Tebut was all right. If he can kill her....

Lots of people have ended up dead since he took over. Omas, Gejjen, Luke Skywalker’s wife.... Don’t be stupid. She was family.

Caedus snapped out of the listening trance and his office looked dead, its colors washed out for a moment. He was furious. I killed Mara? They’re saying I killed her? She came after me. She was trying to kill me. If I hadn’t killed her, I’d be the one getting a state funeral now. Destiny steered by the Force or not, she tried to kill me. She was an assassin. It was all she ever was, all she was destined to be, for the purposes unfolding now. He felt his face flush, hot and hurt. The strength of his reaction shocked him. He could face himself when he shaved each morning, and however many lives this war was costing, he did what he had to do; each life spent was to save many others, and he would not apologize for it, or be regarded as a common criminal.

“Sir, are you okay?”

Caedus settled himself and embraced the temporary distress as another inevitable pain in the road to mastering the Sith way. If he couldn’t feel stung and wounded, if he could ignore the barbs.... then he couldn’t harness the passions a Sith had to feed upon. They were his strength. The pain was his strength.

If only Ben had realized the value of pain. He was so much sharper, more thoughtful, more worthy than Tahiri, for all his sentimental shortcomings. Where will I find the right one? When will I find a deserving apprentice?

It would have to wait.



“I shouldn’t have to do the foot-soldier work, Tahiri. Be my eyes and ears. I’d hate to have to use ch’hala trees. You’re smarter than a tree-aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, and her resentment tasted like sour vattle juice at the back of his tongue. That was a positive sign, better than the needy desperation that had motivated her to effort only when she wanted to see Anakin again. If she was going to be more than just an errand runner, he had to find the durasteel in her spine, some powerful emotion that would make her fight back and even challenge him. Her fire, her drive, needed to come from her living self and not from a dead boy she could never have.

It was unhealthy, this fixation with what was gone forever. Caedus sometimes felt uneasy using the flow-walking bait, but it was just a way of placing Tahiri in the right position so he could then show her something real and lasting. It was a necessary, temporary evil.

“Then you’ll understand this,” he said. He beckoned her over to the holochart table, even though she could easily see the plot if she twisted in the chair. “Come here. See my strategy for Fondor.”

Caedus moved clouds of small icons like miniature star clusters into an irregular ring around Fondor.

“Your strategy.” Tahiri wasn’t cowed down by Caedus’s verbal slaps. Good. She was still smarting and angry. “Is Admiral Niathal not involved?”

“Who runs the state while I’m away? We need to avoid having both Chiefs away at the same time unless there’s an overwhelming crisis away from Coruscant that demands it.” Caedus thought of how often they’d both not only been offplanet, but in the same engagement. No attempt to overthrow us, though... how compliant beings can be. “She’s aware of my plans.”

“But you trust her enough to turn your back on her.”

“My back,” Caedus said, “is never turned, no matter where I am.”

Sowing seeds of doubt, either because she wants to rattle me, or because she’s genuinely suspicious. Both worthy of a Sith. Perhaps Tahiri has turned a corner at last.

“So what am I looking at?” she asked.

Caedus sensed Niathal coming along the corridor. Her timing was impeccable; she must have seen Tahiri pass the lobby outside her own office.

“The small icons are mines,” he said. “I’m not making the same mistake as we did in blockading Corellia. Then, we still deluded ourselves that we could bring the planet to its knees by maintaining a civilized picket line... like some customs and excise operation. No, that eats resources, especially when there’s a ring of orbital stations to isolate from both planet side and space side. When I deploy warships and fighters, it will be to wage war and fight, not to be run ragged stopping Confederates from walking on the grass. I’m taking the first element of the Fourth Fleet to Fondor today. The minelayers have already left.”

“Around the whole planet?”

“That’s the only option. Mining the main transits from the Rimma Trade Route simply allows supply vessels to by-pass the minefields, or catches the careless ones, and while I want to deter commerce from supporting Fondor, there’s nothing to be gained in alienating the trade worlds with civilian casualties.”

Niathal’s presence blew in like a storm building on the horizon a few moments before she appeared. Caedus and Tahiri paused and turned together.

“Bad form, yes. I agree. No dead civilians.” Niathal walked over to the chart, hands clasped behind her back; in her pristine whites and gold braid, she was the quintessence of admiralty as she cocked her head to study the holoschematic chart of the system. Caedus knew that Mon Gals’ eyes were positioned so that the tilt was necessary to focus closely, but to a human the gesture always smacked of doubt, as if she thought he was the dim boy in the class who never got the right answer. “So, the impenetrable ring of detonite, eh, Jacen?” She turned to Tahiri. “How smart you look in a proper uniform, my dear. Welcome to the fleet.”

Caedus cut in. Niathal was in one of her irritating smug moods, no doubt thrilled at the prospect of his absence. “I’m deploying to Fondor tonight, remember. I’m sure you’ll miss me.”

“That begs a joke, but I’m no comedian.”

“Five minelayers should be in position a few hours ahead of the rest of the task force.” Jacen glanced at the wall chrono. “There’ll be a shell around the entire planet when I get there.”

Niathal extended a long bony fin of a finger into the nest of tangled, glowing lines dotted with multicolored lights. “Don’t forget that you lay the inner ring first, though, will you?”

“Oh, you’re too modest when you say you’re not a comedian, Admiral...”

Niathal felt as if she was savoring the carefully worded fight. “And these won’t be activated until we’ve warned Fondor and given a one-standard-hour general shipping alert, will they?”

“Not issuing a warning about planetary mine nets would be a war crime, Admiral, because of civilian traffic...”

“That’s why I ask. You’re so forgetful lately. And we’ll take the decision to activate jointly, won’t we?”

“I’m a team player. I look forward to it.”

He didn’t need his Force senses to tell him that she wouldn’t miss him. “I’ve put the Third Fleet rapid-reaction force on alert, so if you need help, do call.”

“I’ll give the blockade a week before we move to the assault phase.”

“We didn’t discuss that.”

“Oh, I thought of it later...”

“Why create a mine shell if you don’t intend to sit it out? It’s not as if we have hulls and troops to spare.”

“Because I still think we should take the yards sooner rather than later, and we can pick them off once the planet is locked down. Then, when the yards are secured, I intend to capture the capital and main regional centers.”

“Yes, you did say that, but let me remind you that there are still five billion Fondorians, at least half of them on the planet’s surface, and most in those cities.”

“I’m hoping it won’t get to that stage. I may sacrifice one yard to show I mean business, but Fondor won’t want its industrial infrastructure destroyed. Will it? Small, rich world, one that will see sense.”

“Corellia has an even smaller population, and look how well that went.” Niathal checked the splendid gold fob chrono on her jacket. “My, is that the time? I must be going.” She headed for the doors.

“Wow, “Tahiti said, when Niathal was long out of earshot. “Are you two always that barbed with each other?”

“It’s how we keep on our toes.” Caedus would have been much more worried if Niathal oozed sweetness and light to him; as long as he felt that she despised him-and he felt it-and she paraded her disdain openly, he knew he could still trust her not to attack him. She was much more transparent than he’d first expected. “She’s actually very, very good at her job. I just wish she’d accept that she’s not very good at mine.”

“You can feel her hatred. I certainly can.”

“It’s not hatred, Tahiri, “Caedus said. “It’s disdain, contempt and a certain superior pleasure at being better and nicer than me-as she sees it. That’s loathing, perhaps. Not hatred. Hatred is close to fear, and always has an element of dread in it. Like love has a component of pity, and it’s just as hard to see the line between the two.”

Tahiri might have taken it at face value, or she might have been unpicking hidden meaning in it. He hoped she was doing the latter. “I’ll turn to at eighteen hundred, “she said, as if she’d learned all the new jargon to impress him and possibly secure another fruitless, tantalizing glimpse of Anakin. “Sir.”

She walked out of the office with a more rigid spine. Perhaps she’s choosing pain, too.

“You did well with Admiral Pellaeon, by the way, “he called after her. “Good job, Lieutenant.”

Something else had just shifted in the Force, a small thing, a cog turned by just a single tooth, but it had moved, and with it the rest of the machine was subtly altered. That was the nature of destiny.

Caedus felt around in the Force for where Luke and his entourage might be. But his mind was too restless now, fixed on the need to bring down Fon-dor.

It will be a short siege, I promise. A decisive one.

He tried to search out his twin sister, just out of... curiosity.

Jaina. I can't believe how easy it is to forget people. I can go for days without even remembering you exist. Jaina...

He reached out in the Force, but something else in the great machine had changed, too. He couldn't feel Jaina, not the familiar mix of temper and passion and-always applied too late-the urge to control it all. Perhaps Ben had taught Jaina how to shut down in the Force, too, like he'd probably taught his mother so she could kill Jacen Solo more efficiently. Caedus checked himself as he realized that he saw Jacen as a separate entity. It was more than having changed: it was separation. Jacen still existed for the family who tried to understand him, but he wasn't the man sitting here now.

Better not teach Tahiri to Force-hide. It just complicates matters.

Jacen Solo. Gone, now; not concealed. Gone, and never coming back.

Caedus spent the afternoon moving assets around imagined Fondor space, feeling fresh pleasure each time his fin-ger connected with the amber lights representing the new assets, the battleships and fighter squadrons of the Imperial Remnant. This would not be the long, groaning, humiliating failure of trying to subdue Corellia. He had a good chunk of the Fourth Fleet, and nobody else was placed to come to Fondor's aid. Everyone else now had their own woes and war to keep them busy.

This time, it'll be different.

It would be different because there was no more Jacen Solo, or any of his levers left to pull.

And if there was no more Jacen Solo, then Darth Caedus had no twin sister. Caedus relaxed.

GA FLEET HANGAR, GALACTIC CITY: SIX HOURS LATER

"We're on," said Shevu. "The Anakin Solo has cleared orbit."

Ben could see Shevu on the monitor that was set in the CSF speeder's dash. He didn't know-or ask-how the captain had managed to borrow a police traffic patrol vessel, but it was handy cover for anyone who wanted to sit waiting at a skylane intersection near a military installation without drawing the wrong kind of attention.

It was also linked to a network of skylane surveillance holocams. All Ben had to do was sit there and monitor the images that the forensics droid relayed from the interior of the StealthX cockpit.

"Okay," Ben said. "Let me know if you need a spot of disruption."

Shevu adjusted his helmet as he walked toward the hangar's open doors. Yellow light spilled out onto the permacrete ramp. "If you ever take up a life of crime, Ben, you'll do staggeringly well at it. Just as well Jedi are pretty honest."

Ben had learned that, even for him, there was a principle of need-to-know-and he didn't need to know how far CSF was involved now. The police looked after their own, no questions asked; and as far as they were concerned, Shevu was still one of the lads, even if he now wore the black of the Galactic Alliance Guard.

It was just a matter of slipping the CSF forensics droid into the StealthX. It was a small sphere about the size of a smashball, disturbingly like a thermal detonator, and packed into its innards were probes, spectrometers, reagents, sample packs, and a full array of sensors that recorded everything at the crime scene it was sent to record. It was perfect for sending into dangerous or inaccessible places that a flesh-and-blood CSF scenes-of-crime officer couldn't reach, and it was also small enough to be discreet.

The only problem was that it didn't look like a maintenance droid, and someone might notice. Ben's job was to make sure they didn't.

Shevu, in uniform and taking advantage of the fact that GAG officers could do as they pleased in Jacen's new galactic order, ambled into the hangar, and the external traffic remote lost him in the shadow. There was a brief fog of sta-tic on the monitor as Ben switched from the traffic-control holocam to Shevu's helmet cam.

"Here we go," said Shevu. The forward image showed Jacen's personal StealthX sitting in its bay, canopy closed, in a line of X-wings connected to the diagnostic grid by ca-bles and wires. Maintenance droids and a couple of human technicians walked in and out of eyeshot looking harassed. "Got the droid ready."

"I'm watching."

Ben followed Shevu's field of view as the captain walked up to the technicians and asked them when Colonel Solo's StealthX was starting its maintenance cycle. They assumed they were being nagged to make the vessel a priority.

"Okay, we'll do it before the next batch of X-wings," one technician said in an exasperated tone. "Look, we can only process them so fast, you know."

"It's okay." Shevu sounded as if he was relenting. "I'll hang around, if you don't mind. You know what a pain in the neck he is about efficiency."

The technicians lapsed into stunned silence, mouths slightly slack with horror. It was just a figure of speech, but with the gossip about poor Tebut doing the rounds of the fleet, it sounded like a very sick joke. They didn't seem sure whether it was safer to laugh at it or not. Armed forces humor was very tasteless sometimes, right on the borderline between laughter and tears. Shevu shrugged and walked away.

It was a perfect excuse for him to mooch around the hangar, looking as if he were killing time by sticking his nose in everywhere. He was a secret policeman. It was what they expected him to do. He clambered up the ladders on a couple of X-wings, prodded cables, and generally made all the movements of a man wanting to get on with something because he had a very unreasonable boss.

Did the rest of the fleet still like Jacen? A few days ago, he'd been their hero, one of the team. He sent procurement managers to the front line for providing poor-quality kit to the troops, or not providing it at all. He led from the front; he never asked his personnel to do anything he wouldn't do himself. This, Ben knew, was what created the loyalty that made beings put their lives on the line for an officer. It wasn't political fervor or a desire for glory. It was devotion based on shared risk, on knowing that comrades-whatever the rank-looked out for each other.

But Jacen hadn't looked out for him. He'd tortured him. Ben couldn't imagine doing that to someone he was supposed to care about, especially for their own good.

Do you really know how much he's changed, Jaina?

"Ben, stand by."

Shevu's helmet link showed he was at the StealthX now. It was one of three left. The Jedi had taken the others with them, and a StealthX wasn't much use to non-Force-users, seeing as they had to use comlinks. Ben watched Shevu's field of view shake with the one, two, three of climbing the small ladder up to the cockpit, and the flash of a transparent canopy lifting followed by the dark interior and matte instrument panel as Shevu looked inside.

"In the hole....", "Shevu muttered into his helmet link. Then he climbed back down and wandered apparently aimlessly around the hangar. "Droid on the case."

Most of Ben's attention shifted to the monitor showing the droid's-eye view of the cockpit; a fraction of it remained on Shevu's monitor, watching for complications that might require a little Force ingenuity from Ben. He could see the smooth matte-black curves of the instrument panel, and the small brush-like projections from the droid skimming over plastoid and durasteel, picking up traces and analyzing them before storing the swabbed samples in-side the case. An icon on the monitor showed the results as the droid worked; there were traces of skin cells, machine lubricant, microscopic shavings of metals, and sweat from hands. There was even dust with the mineral profile of Kavan, but then Jacen had landed to find Ben. It wasn't evidence.

The droid worked methodically, covering the cockpit deck and bulkheads. It was picking up the odd hair, too, five-centimeter lengths-short, and male. Ben's heart sank; the cockpit must have been cleaned several times in the last few weeks.

Then the droid worked over the apparently clean seat. Again, the icons showed skin cells, dust, oils. The probes worked down into seams, and then between the sections that formed the angle of the seat, deep folds of fabric.

The icons changed.

PARTICLES: BRICK, ORIGIN UNKNOWN. CLAY. SILICATES.

ORGANIC MATERIAL: HAIR, FEMALE, 2.9 CMS. FOLLICULAR TAG PRESENT. TRACES OF BLOOD ON HAIR SHAFT. DNA MATCHES HAIR.

“Oh, oh, oh, “Ben whispered.

“Got it?” Shevu’s view showed he was near the doors, head moving slowly as if watching nothing in particular.

“What is it, Ben?”

“Hair with blood, and a follicular tag. Female hair.”

“If it’s got a tag, Ben, it’s probably been pulled out.” Ben saw his mother in his memory, tugging her hair and dropping strands into his palm as he stared dumbfounded at her ghost on Kavan.

You did it, Mom.

“Let’s get out, “Ben said. “We’ve got it.”

“Stang, “said Shevu.

When Ben switched his attention back to Shevu’s monitor, he saw what had made him curse. Captain Girdun was walking toward him, hands deep in pockets, whistling soundlessly.

“Walk him away, “said Ben. “I’ll extract the droid.”

“Wait until he goes. I’ll get rid of him.”

“No, just get him away from the StealthX. Leave it to me.”

“Okay.” Shevu’s voice was now totally different, external, addressing Girdun. “Keeping you up, are we?”

“Don’t see you down here often, “Girdun said.

“Just making sure Solo’s toy is ready if he decides to come back early. Don’t want him to shake me warmly by the throat, do I?”

Girdun made a snorting sound. “Hah, you’re his little Master Perfect. He won’t throttle you. Besides, he’s going to be stuck at Fondor for a long time.”

Shevu began walking away from the StealthX very slowly, getting Girdun to follow him without even thinking. Ben watched Shevu’s helmet cam shift perspective from the speckled, irregularly shaped fiberplast airframe of the fighter to a long view of the hangar with the X-wings staggered along the length of both walls, and waited until it had passed three of them before extracting the droid.

Am I stopping it too early? Will there be other evidence in there?

No, Ben had what mattered. The droid was self-Propelled, but he gave it a little Force assistance and plucked it out of the cockpit, moving it to the floor and then sending it out of the doors and into the night. Once it was clear of the hangar ramp, he lifted it into the air and pulled it to him as fast as he could, almost smacking it into the side of a passing repulsor truck in his haste. When it plopped onto the seat next to him in the traffic speeder, he couldn't stop himself clenching both fists and hissing, "Yes, yes, yes!" in triumph.

Now all he had to do was wait for Shevu to get away from Girdun and meet up with him. He moved the speeder onto the next intersection and sat with one hand on the droid as if it were an obedient pet that had done a clever trick. Eventually he heard Shevu said, "Hang this, I'll come back in the morning...", "and relief flooded his body.

By the time Shevu called him for a pickup from the next skylane, the captain was wearing plain black coveralls without insignia or rank, looking like a CSF tactical weapons officer. He dropped Ben and the droid off two blocks down from the apartment and disappeared to return the CSF speeder. Ben wondered how flexible the CSF admin system had to be for some officer to loan vehicles to a buddy for a highly irregular operation that had nothing to do with CSF-not officially.

Back in the apartment, Ben placed the droid on the table and sat staring at it as if it might make a dash for freedom, and almost expected his mother to appear to him again with some gesture of congratulation. But she didn't, and he was disappointed. For the first time since finding her body, though, he felt that she wasn't totally gone. She was simply in another place. Unlike most beings in the galaxy, he actually knew that to be true and real, not just a sincere hope. It meant he could go on now. He would, as he promised himself, live for her, and live well.

That evening, he and Shevu ate their supper in silence. There was a sense of anticlimax.

"I'll play Palpatine's advocate," Shevu said, chewing slowly. "The hair. First you have to match it to your mother's - "

"Dad grabbed most of her stuff before he got out. He's got her brushes. Plenty of hair to match up DNA."

"I was going on to say that you'd need to prove there was no other way that the trace could have got into the StealthX."

"It was on Jacen's clothing." Ben tried to imagine how his mother's hair got pulled out. She'd bled, though; he could see that when he found her. "They must have fought hand-to-hand. That's.... grim."

"She hadn't got any traces of his skin under her nails or anything, so what were they doing for him to have grabbed her hair? Did he ambush her?"

"I don't know."



“A defense lawyer would say that Jacen might have picked up the hairs from you.”

“I didn’t touch her body. It was a crime scene. I wanted to, but I knew it was important to leave things alone.”

“They’d say it’s your word against Jacen’s.”

Ben felt irrationally angry. “And I’d say, Look at the body of evidence I’m building up. But it’s Dad, isn’t it? You’re asking me if this is going to be enough to convince him.”

“If I were still in CSF, I’d say it was enough for me to arrest him for questioning. At least.”

“And then it’s circumstantial.”

“Take the droid,” Shevu said. “And let’s get you back to wherever it is you’re hanging out.” Ben opened his mouth to say Endor, but Shevu held up a hand for silence. “I don’t need to know. Okay?”

Ben pondered the nature of reasonable doubt. He was sure now. He didn’t know if Dad would be.

He really needed one more clincher. But he had no idea what else there could possibly be that would prove beyond any doubt that it wasn’t Alema Rar who had killed Mara Jade Skywalker, but Jacen Solo.

## FLEET HQ, OPERATIONS CENTER, CORUSCANT

Niathal made sure she was a daily visitor to Fleet HQ, but this was her second trip today, made without notice.

Her arrival had thrown the center into a quiet, barely noticeable panic, but it was panic all the same. Personnel tidied consoles and emptied cups of caf discreetly, thinking she wouldn’t notice their attempt to bring the place up to captain’s walk-through standards by the time she looked up from the screen she was studying. They never seemed to realize how wide a field of vision a Mon Cal had.

It’s just caf. Forget it. We have much bigger problems.

“Admiral, is there anything I can do?” The Sullustan op center commander hovered, uneasy at having a full Admiral of the Fleet ensconced in the ops room at a terminal, let alone one who was also joint Chief of State. He had the air of someone who was waiting for the ax to fall, and to be told that he had failed a surprise inspection for reasons he would never grasp. “There’s always a private office available for you.”

Niathal could also have sat back in her own chair and watched Jacen’s progress on the repeater holochart in her suite at the Senate, but the big picture wasn’t what she was interested in. She wanted to see the detail. She wanted to see the way crews were prepped and briefed before Jacen jumped to hyperspace, and she wanted to see if he’d slipped in any little extras that he’d neglected to mention—like the way the timing of the assault had slipped his mind. It would take a month or more for the orbital yards to use up their supplies, and even then they had sufficient water recycling capacity to

hold out for another month on half or quarter rations without resupply. Fondorian yards were staffed mainly by humans, who could live on very few calories for a long time as long as they were hydrated. A week was far too soon.

She couldn't believe Jacen hadn't learned the lesson of

Corellia. She was sure he had. And if he was half as sly and resourceful as she knew, he would have gone with the intention and enough troops and materiel to move to the assault phases-orbitals, then planetas soon as he could.

Did he already know she was slipping information to Luke? Was this part of his test?

Stop thinking that way, or he's got you where he's got everyone else. You're a better tactician than that.

"Don't you have oversight of Colonel Solo's plans?" asked the commander. His name was Kenb but she could only see the K and the E on his tunic because his arms were folded tightly across his chest, creasing the fabric. "If there's anything wrong..."

"If there is, then it's my problem rather than yours, Commander," she said kindly. Caf cups scraped faintly; flimsi rustled. When she turned her head, consoles were immaculate again. I'm not Jacen. You don't have to be afraid of me. "I've been neglecting logistics, and I want to get up to speed again."

"Certainly, Admiral." Sullustan faces weren't as obviously mobile and expressive as a human's, but she knew disbelief when she saw it. "Call me if you need anything."

Yes, in any normal government, the head of state and the defense secretary would discuss with the chiefs of staff how a major engagement was to be fought, and how it would be resourced. Yet here they were, a duumvirate combining all the roles of state and military, and still he was economical with information. It was rather like beings trying to pretend they were alone in a crowded turbolift; as long as eye contact could be avoided, the illusion of anonymous privacy held. Jacen made vague noises about strategy, grabbed an assortment of ships, and ambled off to play. And she let him, because she had no idea how to stop him with her first shot.

She'd only get one chance. Wounded, he'd be a terrible enemy.

And I want to see what you packed for your little trip.

Jacen always had the Anakin Solo, of course; and Fon-dor was a relatively small world, a speck compared with Coruscant. Its neighbor Nallastia was even smaller, and might not even try to ride to the rescue. Niathal called up the holochart from Jacen's office node and tried to work out what was inappropriate for Fondor. Because something didn't fit.

Mines-especially the latest self-dispersing Merr-Sonn Vigilante type-were quick and easy to lay, and Jacen didn't need many ships to do it; two for the planet side, and perhaps three for the outer cordon, simply because so many mines were needed to create a double shell around a planet. Other

than that, it was simply a case of telling their program what they needed to do and where, scattering them, and the clever little things made their own way into position and formed their own communications net. They would stand guard for as long as it took, killing anything that tried to pass. They could even be deactivated and rounded up later, like an obedient flock.

Would have been a great idea to do that with Corellia.

But mines were indiscriminate killers, designed to be so, to send out a clear message that nobody could pass. The whole Corellian blockade had been as much a psychological lever, conceived at a time when Cal Omas had really thought that the war could end with talks, and when Jacen could be curbed, and when casualties could still-so they had thought-bring everyone to their senses.

“The minelayers are an hour into hyperspace, “Kenb said. “Give them an hour to deploy on reaching the target and pull back outside the Fondorian limits.”

Niathal had to let Luke know the full picture. He would only target Jacen, but any commander needed wider context.

She'd struggled with that decision on the short journey to HQ, because it would be as good as warning Fondor and the crews and troops dragged along for Jacen's jaunt were her people. She might have been signing their death warrants.

But if I balk at this-is there any useful intelligence I can safely give the Jedi? GA personnel will almost always be involved.

No, she couldn't be selective. She had to choose now. It was literally a sickening sensation.

If Fondor doesn't roll over when faced with the prospect of having one or two of its cities turned into a transparisteel parking lot.... how is Jacen going to occupy the planet?

He'd embarked with 150,000 troops. Taking ten orbital yards would tie up most of them; and assuming they succeeded, it was labor-intensive to keep an eye on an industrial process where disgruntled workers would sabotage operations in a thousand small places. It wasn't enough even in the short to medium term. Jacen's battle awareness was extraordinary-a Sith skill, Luke said-and he might very well have known something that she didn't; but it didn't guarantee he wouldn't run into problems, or that his crew would try quite as hard as they had before Tebut was killed. Morale was a subtle thing. It was often the difference between inspired actions and failure.

“What's the latest estimate of the strength of the Remnant task force?” she asked.

“They're standing by with twenty Star Destroyers and carriers with air group embarked. Assorted cruisers, auxiliaries, landing craft, and fast patrol vessels. No firm numbers on personnel overall, but a first wave of fifty thousand troops for the blockade, and they have small special forces units embarked to take strategic targets as required. They plan to join Colonel Solo just before the assault.”

“I'd better talk to Pellaeon. See if he thinks this is genius or madness.”

“I think I can guess what Gentleman Gil will say...”

It was rather touching; most personnel still had a soft spot for Pellaeon. Niathal didn't, but now that she had to work with him again, she'd find one temporarily. “Very well, I'm finished for the day. If anything changes, comm me.”

Niathal valued the transit time from HQ to the Senate. Her official speeder had tinted screens and soundproofing, and so it was a haven, a few minutes each day when she could clear her mind.

Jacen isn't stupid. Not stupid enough to try to take Fon-dor with a fraction of the troops he needs, anyway. I just hope the Imperials are as good as their word. I bet they think they're going to get Fondor as a bonus for their trouble...

Jacen's vagueness about operational orders, part of his ad hoc way of running things lately, frustrated her immensely. It was all intangible feeling, Force intuition, and too few hard numbers; it worked more often than not, but she still didn't like what she couldn't see and measure. Jacen couldn't hold Fondor with those numbers unless the whole population capitulated, and even if governments did, citizens often had their own ideas about resistance. Either the Force was telling him Fondor was going to shrug and take it after a token exchange of fire, much as they skirmished on the limits of Fondor space and didn't take it much farther, or he was overestimating his chances.

Maybe he had some Sith secret tactic that nobody had seen before.

She rubbed her face wearily. Either way, Luke Skywalker needed to know the attack was imminent. The chauffeur dropped her off at her club for the evening, and instead of savoring that brief respite when the biggest decision she had to make was what to order from the menu, she swept her room for eavesdropping devices and then composed an encrypted data sheet for Luke Skywalker with every detail he might need.

She wasn't sure how many Jedi had regrouped on Endor, but they had a way of punching way, way above their weight.

Give him a punch for me, Luke...

When Luke appeared, she spoke quickly. “Master Skywalker, Fondor will be ring-fenced by Vigilante mines. Double shell. I estimate four or five hours and the fleet will follow shortly afterward.”

Luke paused as if he was visualizing that. “I think Fon-dor was expecting something after the skirmish with the Anakin Solo.”

“Yes, that was provocative. But there's more. Jacen's following at twenty-three fifty-nine with part of the Fourth Fleet and a hundred and fifty thousand troops. He's planning to isolate the orbital yards by mines and force a surrender, or so he says. The Imperial Remnant is backing him up. I'm sending you the data now-I'll update it when I can.”

“What makes you think he might be lying?”

“He’s Jacen. It’s what he does. I don’t believe he’s stupid either. Too few troops to take and hold both orbitals and planet, but a lot of capital ship firepower. My personal view is that he plans to draw the Fondorian forces out and then pound them so that the Imperials can move in.” The thoughts were rolling out as she spoke, ideas breeding. “But he’s not invincible.”

“Is it a decoy attack?”

“I’ve seen no other ship movements or troop deployments that even hint that he’s going to stage a bigger operation elsewhere.”

“Or a smaller one?”

“I just don’t know. But I’m going to spend the evening briefing a few captains to get my people out if this all goes to rot.”

“Thanks, Admiral.”

“You’re welcome, Master Skywalker. Go ahead and ruin his day for me.”

And maybe my own people’s day, too. I hope not. I really do.

Niathal wandered down to the dining room and tried to work up some enthusiasm for the menu, but she had lost all desire to eat. She sat gazing in defocus at the fine linen and gold-rimmed Naboo porceplast plate, and found that even the water she sipped stuck in her throat.

She had been so certain that undermining Jacen Solo was the right thing to do. But collateral damage could never be avoided. It was part of war. She sent beings into battle, and some didn’t come back.

But that was when she looked them in the eye, and more often than not stood on that same deck with them.

She had never felt less worthy of the uniform in her life.

# Chapter 9

You've probably heard this before, but it's a trap.

-Luke Skywalker, to the President of Fondor, warning of minelaying activity in Fondorian space

BRALSIN, NEARKELDABE

"It's hard not to hate the Vong," Jaina said.

She slipped off the pillion seat of the speeder bike and looked downhill, hands shielding her eyes against the sun. The broad shallow valley that sloped away from her was a patchwork of cultivated fields, woodland, ancient circular fortified homesteads, and a rash of small round roofs that marked new homes being built.

But there were still huge swathes of dead land, poisoned by the Yuuzhan Vong, where nothing grew.

"I don't try." Beviin unloaded the panniers and stacked armor plates. "I have a good hate and feel better for it. Better out than in, that's what I say."

"Did you bring me up here for the view?"

Jaina picked out MandalMotors' tower in the distance and an ungainly vessel tracking across the sky behind it; it was the tank-like thing that had given her a surprise when she entered Mandalorian space. There were two of them, in fact. She was intensely curious, partly because she had a feeling she might face one from the wrong side of a border one day, and partly because she was a pilot. It must have felt like flying a permacrete slab.

"Not really," Beviin said. "But we won't have an audience, and it's a spot with its own history."

"Yeah, I do seem to draw a crowd in your barn. You should sell tickets."

"A lot of folks haven't seen a live Jedi before."

"That's not very reassuring."

"Just a figure of speech."

Jaina followed Beviin to the top of the small hill, a gently rounded dome that flattened out into downs dotted with trees and bushes. The feel of the place made her nape bristle in the way that battlefields did, but many times magnified. It wasn't actually a feeling of dread; just a sense that terrible things had happened but that it had somehow been triumphant, even oddly content in the end. Across the expanse of short spongy grass was an avenue of trees. She couldn't see what it led to, but it led to something. She felt it.

“Sacred site?” she asked. Beviin bent over and took a few swings at the turf with his beskad. He looked as if he was digging for something. “I can feel something happened here, a battle maybe.”

“Vongese. But no prizes for guessing that.” He walked off to another patch of grass, scouting around for something. “Ah, look. They turn up all the time. Come over here.”

A skull seemed to have worked its way out of the soil. It wasn't Mandalorian-Jaina could tell from the odd ridges that ran from brow to crown on its one clean side that it had been a Yuuzhan Vong soldier-but it still looked quite human: far more human than the Yuuzhan Vong had been in life, when they were so proud of the ritual facial mutilations that made them look utterly alien. Beviin squatted to pull the skull free. When he poked a finger into an empty eye socket, a pale yellow worm tumbled from the clinging soil and made a frantic, squirming bid for safety on the ground.

“I think there were a few thousand of them,” Beviin said. “And this was a poor place to defend, but we took them on. You fought the vongese, didn't you? You understand.” He tilted the skull and picked off the soil still clinging to the right side, revealing a huge split over the orbital ridge. “Ah, ner vod, we've already met. How have you been? Rotting, I hope.”

Beviin drew his saber and lined the blade up carefully with the split in the bone. It slotted into it neatly. Once Jaina had proved her worth in the workshop and worked until she dropped, Beviin had been the most gracious host imaginable, and she found it hard to square that avuncular charm with the man he could become when he picked up that beskad.

“And that,” he said, pointing to the avenue of trees, “is Fenn Shysa's memorial. Your mother knew him, and your uncle Luke, too. Pay your respects and we can get on with your lessons.”

It was a battered red-and-green helmet on a plinth; no inscription, no railings, nothing that indicated its owner had been a head of state or even who was commemorated. Jaina was struck less now by the intimidating face that Mandalorians presented than by their apparently anarchic society and-despite the credits flooding in now from their beskar mining and sales of the Bes'uliik-grim rural poverty. Then she remembered little Briila, able to handle a tiny blaster at five years old, and old man Fett nearly taking her spleen apart with a gut-punch, and decided that caution was still the best option.

It was hard to know how to be reverent toward a helmet. She did what she would do at a state funeral, and simply bowed her head for a moment, as Jedi did.

“Shysa led us to kick out the Empire,” Beviin said. “Didn't you, fen'ika?” He walked up to the helmet and patted it fondly. “A great Mand'alor. But he always wanted Fett as the front man, and Fett wasn't having it. Shysa got his way in the end, though. Hey, do you want to record a holoimage for your mother?”

“Some cultures would find that disrespectful.”

“Ah, we don't. Shysa would have loved it, if it was for Princess Leia. You could even have been a Mando if your mama had said the word-and if she hadn't met the space bum, of course.”

Beviin said it with a big grin, and it didn't sound like the insult it would have been in Fett's mouth. "Why did Shysa think Fett should be Mandalore? Because his father was?" Jaina didn't add that Fett didn't strike her as the community-minded kind. "Bloodlines don't matter to you."

"True, but Jango had a fearsomely good fighting reputation, and he was Jaster Mereel's chosen heir, so the Fett name has some power. When things were as rough as they were when the Republic fell—well, even we needed icons. You know that Shysa even got a clone deserter to pose as Jango Fett's heir, just to give the ametuse the idea that we were solid again? Nobody really knew who or what was under the armor. Worked.... for a while."

"And then Fett ruined all their national solidarity by showing up as my grandfather's right-hand thug." Jaina knew her own dynastic moral high ground wasn't all that farther above the waterline than Fett's. "What happened to him?"

"Shysa?" Beviin winked. "Or Vader?"

"The deserter."

"Spar? Oh, Fett's daughter killed him. He was a good Fett double, all right... too good, may he find peace in the manda. Ailyn hated her papa."

"That's tragic." Was Beviin joking? No, he wasn't; but why would any man put himself in harm's way for Fett? "So, there's Shysa..."

"You'll have to ask Fett about that yourself."

"I'll put it on the list after I ask him about his not-dead wife." Jaina fought down a bitter anger that Sintas Vel was alive and Mara wasn't. "I think Uncle Luke might advise him to seize that blessing."

"If his granddaughter tried to kill him, and his daughter even killed a man who looked like him, what do you think his ex-wife's going to do if she remembers who he is?"

Jaina didn't know what to say, but she thought of Jag, and her parents, and knew she had plenty that Fett didn't. He was too old and isolated to even hope to have it. But it gave her no sense of satisfied vengeance that her father's old enemy was so damaged; all she could feel was pity.

"Let's get on with it, then," she said, wanting to forget a miserable story. She had enough of her own; there were surely more to come. "Call me a Twi'lek dancing girl one more time, and I'll show you how mean they make us at the academy."

Beviin grinned and slipped on his helmet. "Talk's cheap, Jedi. Get your plates on."

The training armor wasn't custom-fitted and the helmet was just a head guard, but it was beskar. The worst injury she could get while sparring was bruising from impact. Beviin took out two metal sabers and handed her one, hilt first.

"Durasteel," he said, "and so is this one, because we both want to see our grandchildren grow up."



Come on.”

“So you think I should try to face down my brother with a real saber,” Jaina said, hefting it and testing the weight.

“No, I think you should learn a different technique, because you’re predictable.”

“Because Jedi all learn the same basic moves?”

Beviin demonstrated a few mock lightsaber passes. “It’s all long sweeps. Every part of the blade cuts, so you don’t have to think about the angle, and it’s light, so you don’t put much weight into the blow. And you spend a lot of energy leaping around opponents, just trying to get past their defense. See what happens if you get used to a beskad. It’ll change how you handle that shiny stick.”

Jaina examined her beskad; a blade forty-five centimeters long, maybe five or six centimeters wide, with a single cutting edge curving to a point-and much heavier than it looked, perhaps more than two kilos. The leather-bound grip with its plain guard and weighty pommel made it feel like a well-balanced hammer-no, more like an agricultural tool, meant for hacking down grain or undergrowth. She could see how easily it could embed itself in a Yuuzhan Vong’s skull.

Jaina tested her balance to allow for the extra weight. Immediately she missed the reach of the lightsaber-two-thirds of it, in fact-and she also found that she couldn’t grip the saber two-handed. It made her feel suddenly exposed. Beviin just stood relaxed, tapping his blade against his thigh plate. If he’d been a Jedi.... both of them would have adopted opening stances and begun the careful maneuvering to find the optimum moment and angle for the first strike.

Beviin stood still for so long that Jaina found herself unable to stay back, and began sidling up to him, not sure what to do with her left hand other than extend it for balance. As she swung the beskad around in a horizontal arc into his chest, she felt the tip hit his plates-she was too far back, still thinking with a longer weapon-and he simply smashed his saber arm down on top of hers, brought his left fist up into her sternum and punched her back a few paces. He followed through and flattened her simply by jumping on her. It was over in two seconds, and he hadn’t even used his blade.

“Great start, Solo,” she said. It was the first time she had been taken down in a saber fight of any kind for years. Beviin jumped to his feet and pulled her up. “I can’t be that stupid.... can I?”

“The only point I’m making,” Beviin said kindly, “is that you know none of my moves-yet. I made you come to me, and that led to a few mistakes. Next time, anything goes as long as we don’t hit unarmored body parts. Ready?”

“Ready.”

This time she just took a couple of steps back and slashed diagonally without squaring up. The blade rang on impact, painfully loud, and suddenly his beskad was in his other hand, she couldn’t get past his blocking move, and he ducked low to ram her with helmet and shoulder. Every time she got up, she ended up flat on her back again after a few thrusts and slashes, and yes, he used that left hand

a lot; a follow-on punch, a one-two maneuver after a bone-shaking saber blow, kilos of dead metal slamming into her. The blade didn't even have to cut her. She was being hammered every time she was hit. All she could do was Force-leap out of the way.

Beviin was heavy, confident, and used his greater body weight as another weapon, as a battering ram. She couldn't find a way to get inside his reach that wasn't blocked by his free arm-armor changed the game, making any limb both a shield and a weapon-and didn't leave her wrong-footed. Eventually the only way she got in two consecutive blows and still stayed standing was to Force-push him to compensate for her lack of weight and momentum. She knocked him down and pinned him with the Force, panting.

"I wondered.... when you'd do... that," he said, equally breathless.

"You're taller.... and heavier than me."

"Not saying.... you cheated."

"What have I learned?" She knelt to one side, and he sat up. "This is like nothing I've ever seen. You break every rule of close combat."

"Exactly." Beviin gripped the beskad by hilt and tip, holding it up to the light as he lay on his back. "I use it like a hammer that also cuts when you pull it back, and you're expecting conventional blade techniques. And you're ham-pered by muscle memory. You've been so well trained that your body responds instantly without consulting your brain, every time."

"Oh, we're even trained not to think, just to feel intuitively in the Force." Jaina felt a little robbed. "Hey, I'm teaching you how to kill Jedi. Smart guy."

"I already know. A Jedi taught me."

"Well, aren't you Master Useful..."

"Don't tell the galaxy, but Fett and me, we fought alongside a Jedi Master plenty of times in the vongese war."

"My enemy's enemy is my friend, right?"

"My enemy's always my enemy but we can both get smart and put that aside while we deal with a common threat."

Jaina had to know. She kept thinking of the old man in armor, strong in the Force, and whether anyone knew what he was. "And am I your enemy, Goran?"

Beviin sat up, saber across his lap. "I'm not Fett. First, I'll ask who you're fighting for. It's not the Mando way to judge someone on their genetics."

"Fett's not like the rest of your people. I can see that even after a few days."

“No. He’s a Fett. He’s his own species.” He stood up and changed the subject. “So, here you are, a master at a very demanding martial art, and you’ve had your shebs kicked by an old scruff-bag of a Mando mere. Because you had no idea what I was likely to do. Because you never fight that close in and I was right up in your face, inside your reach, so all your parrying skills didn’t help. Because I don’t use a saber like a saber. In a week, though, you’d end up killing me, because you’d get good at this, you’re young, and you’d use the Force.”

And she wasn’t likely to take a beskad to hunt Jacen. She tried to filter the welter of impressions from that morning and leave only the lessons that brought her up short, “If you met me in a real battle, would you kill me?”

“Yes.” Beviin didn’t even pause. “Sorry. And you’d better be able to look me in the eye and kill me, too.”

Jaina eased off her helmet and wiped her face on her sleeve. “You’re a nice man. I’d have to really think you were going to kill me before I went that far.”

“So, how the shab are you going to tackle your brother? Because it’s going to be even harder to capture him than kill me. It always is. There’s plenty of ways to kill someone without even going near them.”

Jaina didn’t need a translation. “Ah... well, he doesn’t draw the line at hurting his own. Ask my cousin Ben.”

“But could you look into his face, and then cut his legs from under him with that lightsaber of yours? Because if you want to grab him, you’re going to have to lure him into a trap, or injure him so badly that you can get beskar man-acles on him.” Beviin stood up and prodded her leg with his boot. “And then what are you going to do with him?” He kicked her casually again, this time in the base of the spine, just under the edge of the back plate. “Put him in a beskar cage for the rest of his life?”

“I don’t know,” she said, getting annoyed with the kicks. He was trying to get some reaction, and she found herself automatically suppressing anger. “Ow, cut it out.”

“You think Jacen will cut it out?”

“Okay, point made-oww!”

This time, the kick really hurt. She was on her feet in a heartbeat and ready to put the beskad hilt-deep in him. She shut the anger down right away.

“Sorry, I seldom lose my temper in a fight.”

“You lot think that anger leads to the dark side, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“So how come you’re taught to feel a fight and not think it?”

“That’s how we use the Force. It guides us if we surrender to it.”

Beviin mimicked a Twi’lek dancer’s circling hips. “That’s dancing talk, Jedi.”

“We still win a lot.”

“Okay, try it my way. Visualize your actions before you even draw the blade, start to finish. Then just go at it and don’t stop short, not for anything.” He took the blade from her and rummaged in the pannier of the speeder, pulling out two short wooden sticks. “These won’t hurt, so you can really, really go crazy with them. Okay? Learn to let go, and not to the shabla Force. To wanting to finish off your enemy.”

“Hate,” Jaina said, taking the club. It felt like a feather after the beskad.

“No, not hate. Me or him. Total war.”

It sounded rote; it sounded like what she’d been warned to avoid from the time she first held a lightsaber. About Briila’s age. Yes, I was. It was just another way of saying that you didn’t give up when you got knocked down. It was resilience. Jaina stood a couple of meters back from Beviin, less self-conscious now and ready to give him a pounding. She couldn’t kill him with this.

Jaina lunged first, smashing Beviin as hard as she could Force-unaided across shoulders, forearms, even his head when he dropped his guard. It was such a light stick. She drove him back, grunting with the sheer effort of putting all her weight into the blows and not feeling that they were making any impression. He didn’t fight back. She ground to a halt, pulse pounding.

“Good try.” Beviin sounded a little different. “Now feel this.”

He came straight at her, stick raised, with an animal explosion of breath. Instantly she felt him change in the Force into complete lack of all emotion except a single... word, yes, almost a word: end. He closed in and rained blows on her like a machine, no style, no grace, no pause, until she fell back and he still kept hammering her while she lay in a ball and instinctively shielded her head. She wondered for a terrifying irrational moment if he really was going to beat her to death with this small stick. Was he ever going to stop? There was no hatred in there, just a terrible focus, the rest of the world shut out. Then something flipped a switch in her and she threw him back with the Force, scared for both of them.

When she finally uncoiled and looked up at him, he had his helmet in one hand and his face was red. He felt embarrassed. She could sense it.

“There,” he said, getting his breath back. “Just as well you did that. I’m not getting any younger. If I dropped dead after a Jedi hit me with a shabla twig, I’d never live it down.”

“You’d be dead anyway.” Jaina laughed, not finding it funny but on that edge between giggling and tears.

“So... I wouldn’t stop in battle until I saw you were dead or completely out of action. Did that feel

different to you? I lost it.”

“If you’d had a saber.... yes, I can feel the difference.”

“Can you get yourself into a state of mind where nothing, but nothing will stop you? Not even your opponent screaming at you to stop? When all you can see is blood and stuff that’ll give you nightmares?”

The silence that followed was the lesson, and she learned it. Beviin seemed quite disoriented by it.

“Food,” he said, packing away the weapons and hauling her upright to take off her plates. “Medrit hates it when I keep the kids waiting for lunch.”

Jaina swung onto the saddle behind him and couldn’t pin down what she felt. They skimmed over fences and hedges, catching strong scents of cut wood, manure, and wood smoke. Nerfs seemed to be watching suspiciously in every other field. “Can we talk about what just happened?”

“Scared you, did I? Scared me, too. Always does.”

“You went nuts for a few minutes. And then you went sane again. And you can choose when?”

“It’s a technique. We start young.”

Well, that’s a new one in meditative technique. “First guy to die loses, huh?”

“Pretty much. I don’t see anything except the end of the fight. I don’t even see a living being. I don’t have any con-fec-tion to the opponent at all. I just see something I have to remove, stop, get past, any way I can, to get what I want-or die.”

“Wow.”

“Some fancy doctor said we can switch on psychopathy.” Beviin banked the speeder bike so steeply that Jaina had to hang on with both hands and her knees. “We all seem to have that trait, whether we inherit it or learn it. Maybe we even adopt kids who show it. I don’t know. But we’ve been a fighting culture for so many centuries that we’ll never really be sure.”

He started whistling to himself, a pretty tune whose rhythm Jaina couldn’t work out because he kept breaking and picking up again. Jaina had heard of many cultures where the warriors stoked up their aggression with strange herbs and infusions before going into battle, but this berserker tactic was new. They seemed to visualize their way into psychopathy.

Do I have to do that?

This was the dark side. It truly was. Beviin could switch it on when he really needed it, and then switch it off and become a man that anyone would welcome as a neighbor or uncle. Jaina wondered if this was how Jacen started, with just a quick desperate need to win, to survive, and then he fell to it a

step at a time.

It all sounded so reasonable. She couldn't hate her brother; she'd just seen how it could happen.

But Beviin stopped. Jacen hasn't. And if I can learn to do that - I'll have to learn to stop, too.

And Beviin was just an ordinary human, with no Force powers to exploit, just his hands and whatever mundane weapons he could use.

"You still held back, anyway," he said suddenly. "If I'd had Force powers, I'd have used them, too."

Tell me they're not telepaths. Please. "You have no idea," she said, "how much you're teaching me."

Medrit was standing at the table with his arms folded when they got back. Dinua, Jintar, and the two kids were chattering in Mandalorian-Mand'oa-and seemed excited. The kids were instantly riveted when they saw Jaina.

"Ahhhh, she's got a cut on her nose!" Shalk gasped, fascinated. "Wow!"

"Loose helmet," Beviin said, washing his hands in the duraplast bowl on the counter. "And I'm going to be covered in bruises tomorrow. Fett can have her back before she does me some permanent damage."

Medrit sliced the nerf joint with pretty impressive violence himself. "You showed her your no-prisoners."

"Nasaad merci't!" Shalk said. "No prisoners!"

"Jedi use reasonable force," said Beviin. "With a small f. It's not good for them."

Dinua laughed. This was the one who had fought Yuuzhan Vong at fourteen. She could afford to. "The trouble with getting attached to Jedi, Buir, is that it's like making pets of the nerfs and nuna-really upsetting when you have to slaughter them."

Everyone laughed. Jaina managed to as well, a little stung, but that was just their humor. Nothing personal; no worse than all the head-rolling jokes her father had made about Jango Fett's demise. They ate heartily, totally at ease with her.

"If you ever get a Force-using Mandalorian," she asked carefully, "how would they be treated?"

"They'd be in demand for getting stuck lids off cans," Medrit said. "Or improving crop yields."

None of them reacted as if they knew what she was getting at. She was being eaten by her desperate curiosity faster than she was devouring the chunks of nerf and veg-etables. "Who are Venku and Gotab? Why that armor?"

“Oh, Venku...” Beviin put down his fork. “Kad’ika. Dearest we have to a political agitator. He’s the one who’s been pushing the Mandalore-First agenda for years. You know, let the galaxy find some other dumb mercenaries to die for it. We’ll stay home, look after our own, strengthen the Mandalore sector, and laugh.”

“And the armor?”

“Tradition. Extreme version. We often wear a plate of a loved one’s armor after they die, sometimes during their lifetime, too. He wears his whole family.”

“He’s nuts, “Jintar muttered.

“He’s right, “said Beviin.

“Yeah, he’s right as long as the new beskar ore lasts.”

“Fett listens to him, Jin’ika.”

All families were alike at meals. Jaina’s mind was now a blur of new and disorienting combat tactics, political argument, wondering if it was polite to grab an extra slice of nerf, and wanting to weep because she remembered Aunt Mara.

“And Gotab?” she said casually.

“One of the Kyrimorut wild men, like Venku, “Beviin said, rolling his eyes. “Don’t even ask what they do up there. They keep apart. They come and go, but they’re there when we need them to fight, so no questions asked. Fair bit of Fett clone blood up there, because the place was a haven for deserters during the wars. Like Venku’s dad, I assume. Now Fett says Gotab’s a Kiffar. He read the heart-of-fire stone. Kiffar-Sintas is Kiffar, too.” If only he knew.

“Can all Jedi do healing?” Dinua asked. Jaina shrugged. “We can heal ourselves, but some Jedi are better than others at healing other people.”

“You’d be so useful...”

Jaina had to put on the mental brakes to see what was happening. Mandalorians were compulsive adopters, and not just of kids. They seemed to want to collect skills, qual-ities, technology, any advantage that wasn’t nailed down. And it was all too easy to let them. Maybe that was how Gotab had found himself stranded here in a metal suit.

“So...” She was piecing it together now. “What happened to the Jedi you fought with in the Vong War?”

“Kubariet, “Medrit said, looking sad for a moment. “He’s dead. I wonder how many folks know even now that we fought secretly for the New Republic.”

“I know, “Jaina said. “And I’m very sorry that you never got any help from Coruscant after the

war.”

“I’m not. It means we don’t owe you naas.”

So Gotab wasn’t Kubariet. There was something in his Force presence that stuck in her mind. It wasn’t the resentment and suspicion, which was odd enough in a Jedi, but the... the...

It was like identifying a few bars of a tune; familiar enough to re-create the whole song, but just out of reach of memory...

Healing.

Gotab could heal.

She saw it now. He had that same Force impression of quiet weariness, of being a buffer against adversity, that she’d encountered in other healers.

That just intrigued her more, but she wasn’t here to be fascinated. She was here to improve her chances of arrest-ing her brother and stopping his self-destructive, galaxy-destroying descent into total darkness.

She stuck her fork in the last slice of nerf on the serving plate, something she would never do at home.

Be a different Jaina.

She could.

IMPERIAL DESTROYER BLOODFIN, IMPERIAL DOCKYARD, RAVELIN

So, Admiral, “said the executive officer, “you approve?” Pellaeon surveyed the new Destroyer’s bridge, a tableau of definitive standards frozen in a moment of paint-scented perfection.

“She’s splendid, “he said. “I still have misgivings about using the best tableware when we have such rough company for dinner, so to speak, but she can’t remain a decoration.”

He wandered into the holochart. The projection was big enough to stand within. He had his doubts about that refinement, too, because he didn’t feel it gave him the best theater overview to fight the ship, but he could always use one of the bridge repeaters. That was more his scale.

“Let’s try the comm system, shall we? Get me Admiral Niathal.”

“Very good, sir.”

Cha Niathal should have had contacted him by now if only to vent her spleen. His sources-old friends and comrades simply staying in touch, never spies-said that there was now a bigger war going on between Niathal and Solo than there was on the front line. She’d be looking for an ally.



Well, there was only room for one backside on that big chair. What did they expect from power sharing?

If Niathal had any sense.... she'd be looking for a tri-umvirate. Pellaeon had sense, and he wasn't sure he'd want to make up the numbers.

“Gil, “said Niathal’s voice.

He turned and smiled at the holoscreen. She looked tired. Mon Gals’ eyes were indicators of their fatigue; hers were dull and had lost their shine. “How are you, Cha? Has the boy left you in charge?”

“We all miss your humor greatly. So this is Bloodfin.”

“Indeed. Turbulent-class. Smaller and more agile. I thought I’d give you the holographic tour.”

“Actually, I’m glad you made contact. Much as I’d love to scrutinize Bloodfin, could we discuss a confidential personnel matter?”

Pellaeon gestured to the XO to indicate he was moving to his day cabin to continue the conversation. Hatch closed behind him, he diverted the link.

“Go ahead, Cha.”

“By all means say I told you so.”

“Ah, Jacen. Very well, I did mention it, but let’s move on. In a few days, we’ll be committing ships and troops to Fon-dor. If there’s anything you want to tell me, now would be a good time.”

“He’s prepping to mine Fondor’s approaches and cut off the orbitals in a few hours, and he’s talking about a first-assault phase within a week. Has he discussed his detailed plan with you?”

“He tells me he’s getting under way at twenty-three fifty-nine Coruscant time, which is... let’s see... three standard hours’ time. Isolate the planet, secure the shipyards, then move on to the planet itself.”

“Define move on.”

“He expects a surrender, he says.”

“Do you?”

“No, I think he’ll have to occupy it, and first he has to take the capital.”

“I estimate he has enough troops to take the orbitals, and that’s all. So level with me, Gil, because I don’t trust Jacen to value my crews’ lives now-has he offered the Imperials Fondor? Are you planning to occupy it?”

Pellaeon didn't have a yes or no answer to that. An I-thought-about-it-and-we-might-have-to wouldn't help.

"He has made no such offer," he said, "nor hinted. He may want us to interpret his silence on the matter as a hint that it might be on the table, to ensure our attendance, but unless he has some elaborate plan for troop deployment that he hasn't shared with me, then once his troops are committed to the shipyards, the only forces left to land on Fondor are mine. In which case... he's left the doors open for us to rob him."

"You're very honest."

"I'm too old to want glory. At my age, you worry more about what might be said about you after you're dead. I'd like to be recalled as an admiral who left the galaxy a little tidier and quieter than he found it."

"Meaning?"

"Is he going to foul up?"

Niathal looked down at the floor for a moment. "You know he's a Sith?"

"Force-users do complicate things for us ordinary mortals."

"I think he might overplay his hand this time. But I might also not be aware of some second plan he's going to put into operation and leave us all standing."

"You want me to do something."

"I'm just sharing my fears that this may well be very costly in terms of lives, and that Jacen can be extravagant. I have elements of the Third Fleet standing by for Fondor. I'm thinking more of enabling withdrawal than pouring personnel into a battle."

"Ah." Pellaeon sat back and felt a little cheated. "You want me to stay at home."

"No, I was genuinely expressing concern and seeking information. Would you prefer not to join him? I know some of the Moffs are more expansionist than you."

"If I were to say that I wouldn't shed tears if Jacen were to crash and burn, in any sense, and that I would accept responsibility for cleaning up the mess he's left, would that answer your questions?"

"So you'll wait for his next big mistake and go in for the kill."

"If I felt it stabilized the galaxy." Pellaeon didn't think it was the time to explain that he doubted the GA's ability to hold down the job with or without Jacen, given that it had enabled Jacen to thrive; Niathal probably knew that any-way. "But one thing I'll promise you is that I have a line I will not cross, and while the Moffs and I might be pursuing the same course at this moment, we don't all share one ideology."

“Stiff upper lip and do the decent thing...”

“Yes. If you want to put it that way.”

“I’ll join you in that.”

Pellaeon now knew how she felt but not what she might do. “Let’s hope for a better outcome.”

“Indeed. I’ll be in touch.”

Pellaeon closed the link and sat chewing over Niathal’s words for a while, wondering how much worse Jacen might become if Niathal were taken out of the picture for any reason. She seemed still to be a brake on Jacen-no small measure of her own strength-and Pellaeon could do business with her.

The Imperial interest is served by supporting her. Keeping moderates in power is a lot cheaper all round than battling down despots every few years.

If push came to shove at Fondor, and Niathal was salvageable, then Jacen might find himself alone.

How much support did Solo have from his officers and in the ranks after the Tebut incident? That would be the critical factor. Sith, Jedi, or god, he was still one man.

Pellaeon got up and walked the passages and flats of Bloodfin, noting where fitters were still sealing covers on conduits and engineering droids were busy in shafts.

“Sir? Sir!” The Junior Officer of the Deck-Lieutenant Lamburt on the current watch-strode as fast as he could without committing the sin of actually breaking into a run. “Sir, security has a visitor at the brow asking for you, but she’s reluctant to present ID.”

“Any cause for concern? Armed? Jealous? Blond or redhead?”

The officers laughed politely, seeming to think Pellaeon was joking about his eye for an attractive female, undimmed even now. He couldn’t have known that the blonde-Tahiri-was not someone he wanted on board, however charming, because she was Jacen Solo’s creature, and almost certainly not as sweet as she looked, or that the redhead was probably someone he was very anxious to see indeed.

The OOD let out another nervous laugh. “Good call, sir. The lady has red hair.”

Pellaeon tugged his cuffs to smooth his sleeves and walked aft toward the brow, a renewed man. “Then I shall welcome her on board personally. Have the steward droid serve tisane in my day cabin-perhaps some confits and a decanter of syrspirit, too.”

“Very good, sir.”

There was always a heady sense of optimism in a new ship, and Pellaeon could feel it. Junior ratings pressed flat against bulkheads to let him pass, even though there was quite enough room to walk by. He liked smaller ships. There was something tight and purposeful about them, the difference

between a vessel with a starship's lines and what might as well have been an office tower. The ship's comple-ment was small enough to get to know all hands properly. This was a ship he wanted to fight, a real warship, just for the exhilaration of being closer to the vibration, noise, and sheer mechanical life of a great fighting beast.

Pellaeon paused a moment before turning into the passage to face the hatch, and ran his forefinger over his mustache. It had been a long time. He took a breath and walked out to the brow. By now, a small knot of engineering ratings had gathered and were taking an excessive time to check hatch status lights while they stared at a woman who had been walking the decks before any of them were born.

"You haven't changed one bit," Pellaeon said, gesturing her on board with a sweep of his arm. "It's good to see you again, Admiral Daala."

ANAKIN SOLO, FONDORIAN SPACE, TAPANI SECTOR: 0500 GST

When the Star Destroyer jumped out of the comm silence of hyperspace, Caedus knew that something had not gone precisely to plan.

Battles never do. So we adapt the plan.

The comm boards and screens on the bridge burst into new life with restored connections; officers and senior rates caught up with signals and sitreps delayed by five hours. Caedus felt the mood change on the bridge in the ten paces it took him to reach the status screens, and it wasn't generated by fear of him. The crew's attention and growing dis-may was fixed on the updating status reports.

They hunched over scanners and monitor. Caedus walked to the viewport and looked into the starfield, seeking out the disk of Fondor in the foreground. At this distance, it looked as if nothing was happening.

"Sir, we can't contact the minelayers."

Caedus glanced over the shoulder of the nearest sensor operator to check the holochart image built up from the real-time scan. There was no sign of the five minelayers; they were supposed to disgorge their clouds of Vigilante mines and pull back to beyond Fondorian space to the RV coordinates. The Anakin Solo should have dropped out of hyperspace right on top of them.

Tahiri hovered at his elbow. He reached into the Force and felt the usual background disturbances of wars: there was fear, anger, danger, destruction, faint echoes of explosions, the same mix of collective emotions and aftermaths that he could sense any day, any hour, if he stopped to think about it.

A Force-user's ability to sense danger and concealed weapons was a wonderful asset in a Coruscant tapcaf or a strange city, but it was next to useless on a battlefield. Everything was danger and instruments of death; Caedus was a few hundred thousand kilometers off a planet that built warships and was on a high state of alert.

"Sir, Fleet Ops says they had last contact with the minelayers before the jump to hyperspace." The

lieutenant at the electronic warfare station didn't dare blink as he met Caedus's eyes. He radiated anxiety, and this time it was personal. "Then nothing, not even an emergency beacon. If they'd returned to Coruscant, they'd be back in port by now."

The stealth minelayers were small vessels with dispro-portionately powerful drives to enable them to punch in and out of hyperspace close to their target zones; the aim was to spend as little time as possible in realspace to avoid detection, drop the surprise on the enemy's doorstep, and jump back into hyperspace. With self-deploying networked mines that needed no conventional laying, it should have been a hit-and-run.

"Let me talk to them." Caedus, still only mildly concerned, took over the comlink to Ops and called up the data flooding in from them with a movement of his forefinger. It disgorged a shimmering list of blue text with times and coordinates of passive position checks of the whole task force, including the outbound minelayers. "Ops, what happened?"

"Colonel Solo, we should have had confirmation of the minelayers' position and intended movement by now if they completed their mission. We wouldn't have pinged them at the Fondor end as long as they were on stealth mode, obviously." There was a brief pause. While the ops room commander seemed to be taking a deep breath, Caedus felt a welling of dread around him as if the crew had seen something he hadn't. "I know this might sound obvious, sir, and I apologize for asking, but can you detect any mines in position?"

Caedus switched back mentally to the ordinary world of the measurable and the detectable. Nobody on the bridge said a word. Yes, they had seen something tangible.

Your fault, Lumiya. You nagged me to stop relying on my mundane senses. I used to check scanners first and the force second. What happened to my intellect?

"Sir, there's no signal from the mine net for us to activate it, so they never left the hold, and this is the medium-range scan of Fondorian space out to Nallastia." The lieutenant switched display modes so Caedus could see it not in columns of numbers, but in color-enhanced density and temperature mapping.

Fondor appeared as a patchy disk of temperature graduation with the orbitals passing across its face picked out as more regularly patterned bars-the side-on view of flattened arrowhead-shaped shipyards. But beyond the limb of the planet, the enhanced image showed distinct patches like miniature nebulae. When the lieutenant zoomed in to show Caedus a finer resolution, the patches resolved into concentric rings showing particle density and tiny temperature variations in space.

"What am I looking at?" Caedus asked, knowing perfectly well but needing to hear it because he wanted to be wrong for once. The rest of the bridge seemed to recede from his field of view; the scanners and sensors in front of him were all he could see. He was angry, getting angrier, but it was silent and smoldering.

"The residual traces of an explosion, sir. The spectrometer analysis of the particle cloud shows it matches the material used for the Nonvideor-class minelayers." The man swallowed. He was new:

Tebut's replacement. "The database, sir. We have a materials database to aid rescue and recovery missions, so we can tell which ships have been..."

All Caedus could hear was the faint machine chatter of the bridge instruments, and the quiet throb of drives and generators that was as reassuring as a heartbeat to the crew.

He felt they were expecting an explosion from him, too. But that would have been weakness. He felt that they were as shocked and angry as he was.

"How many are there... Loccin?" he asked, reading the man's name tab. "I see three."

"I'd have to get us line-of-sight with the other side of Fon-dor to be sure, but there may well be two more debris clouds out of vision. Just so you know I'm treble-checking... three of the jump exit coordinates match the three areas of debris."

"Bridge to Flight Commander," Caedus said. "Flight, get an X-wing out Core side of the planet and confirm debris fields and coordinates, please."

The response filled the silent bridge over the shipwide comm, even though the flight commander was a soft-spoken woman. "Very good, sir."

"Thank you, Flight. Now, someone tell me what's happening on Fondor. What are they saying? Any HNE news feeds? Diplomatic protests?"

"Nothing from the Chief of State's office, sir..."

"Yes, get me Niathal. She's been sitting around with full comms for at least five hours, so she should be updating us, should she not?"

The bridge started coming back to life. The buzz of normal working conversation rose from whispers to normal volume.

"Sir, absolutely no mention of any incidents on HNE."

"GA External Relations says no diplomatic contact, official or unofficial, sir."

"GAG monitoring says their agents are reporting a continued high state of alert on Fondor, and a lot of military traffic between the surface and orbitals, but that's been steady for several months."

They'd been waiting for the GA to kick them back into line; it was only a matter of when.

Tahiri, who'd been watching Caedus with the expression of someone waiting for a live detonator to blow, edged up to him. "The minelayers were intercepted as soon as they dropped, then. They didn't even get a chance to disperse."

"Correct, Lieutenant Veila, subject to the findings on the two ships unaccounted for."

“A hundred crew, yes? Complement of twenty per ship?”

“Yes.” The size and spread profile of the debris particles indicated massive explosions, as Caedus would have expected with mine-laden ships taking direct hits. The end was at least mercifully instant. I still care about my people. I’m not a monster. “Betrayed.”

“Fondor knew we were coming.”

“Lieutenant, Fondor knew we were coming for weeks, but they knew where and when we were arriving.” Caedus walked the width of the bridge and let his gaze fall on crew at random. All handpicked, screened for loyalty and the right attitude; and little opportunity to spy for Fondor this time. He felt no treachery, he really didn’t. If the leak wasn’t in this ship, the specific location could only have come from Fleet HQ, Comms, or someone directly in touch with the minelayers’ crews after they received their orders, and there had been very little time for that information to per-colate through the system. It wasn’t enough for someone to tip Fondor off that minelayers were coming. They’d had completely accurate coordinates that enabled them to destroy all the minelayers the instant they emerged into realspace. Fondorian patrols, even if they got very lucky, wouldn’t have been waiting close to the precise points.

“Ship’s company, “Caedus said quietly. “We have, at best, a criminally careless fool in the fleet, and, at worst, a traitor.”

Loccin turned to him. “Sir, we’re continuing with the mission, are we?”

“We are, “said Caedus. “We’re not turning tail and slinking home just because we haven’t established a cor-don. Battle plans always change. This is a setback, nothing more. I’ll be in my day cabin. Let me know when you get Admiral Niathal, and if Admiral Pellaeon makes contact, tell him nothing and patch him straight through. Let’s not alarm the Moffs, shall we?”

Caedus stood in his cabin and wondered how he had managed not to vent his anger. He started working mentally through the sequence from deciding the hyperspace exit points to the minelayers actually emerging, and whose eyes had seen the detail. He thought of flow-walking back into the ops center and listening, but it was effort he wasn’t prepared to expend when he had a shortlist of fools-no, traitors-and an invasion to replan.

He caught his own reflection in a mirror as he sat down, and suddenly realized why the young lieutenant on the bridge couldn’t look away from his gaze.

Caedus’s eyes were yellow. He had that brief disoriented moment when he thought he was looking at someone else, but then his own face-his own eyes-grew rapidly familiar, and he watched the citrine yellow darken into his normal brown irises.

Then he sat down and began work with the holochart, and a new but equally harsh plan for Fondor.

# Chapter 10

Yes, I regret that we did hear Mara Jade Skywalker threaten Chief of State Solo. She told him to “leave Ben out of it” and that she would “skin him alive, “and that it was his last chance to drop something called Sith, or “take what was coming.” It seemed most unlike her.

-Senator Nab H’aas, Bith delegation, to Captain Lon Shevu, GAG, logging threats against joint Chiefs of State Solo and Niathal

## FREIGHTER SPIRIT OF COMMERCE, EN ROUTE FOR ENDOR: CARGO BAY

Ben Skywalker reached inside his jacket to touch the small forensics droid again, avoiding the eye of the flight engineer. He wasn’t in the mood to chat.

But the two freighter crew were bored out of their skulls, and seemed to preserve their sanity by interrogating any ad hoc passengers. Ben was the only one hitching a ride this trip, huddled in a space between giant sealed containers lashed down to the deck of the cargo bay. He settled on looking angst-ridden and teenaged.

“I can only drop you at the trading base, you know that, don’t you?”

Ben looked up. The uncommunicative teenager act didn’t work any longer; he was tall, showing the first fluffy traces of beard, and he was suddenly aware that nobody had called him kid in passing these days. He must have looked as old as he now felt. “I know,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Have you actually been to Endor before?” Ah, the engineer was worried for him. “Yes, I know folks there. Someone’s meeting me.”

“Just checking. I wouldn’t dump my worst enemy in that place. Ewoks. Savages. I’d shoot them all, to be honest.”

“Some of my friends are Ewoks,” Ben said mildly, no-wanting a fight, but unable to let it pass. “And I feel safer in the forest than I do in Galactic City.”

“No offense.”

“None taken.”

The engineer walked away slowly, gripping hand-over-hand along the deckhead rail to pick his way between the tanks and containers that would be filled with plants and fungus for the pharmaceutical industry on the return journey. “Coruscant... yeah, I know what you mean. If it’s not the lowlifes and gangsters, it’s the secret police.”

And some of my best friends are secret police. They truly are. But Ben kept his mouth shut this time. It was the last leg of a tortuous route back to the Jedi base, and in a couple of hours he’d be safely among family and friends.



And so would the forensics droid, still holding its samples from Jacen's StealthX in its sealed compartments. It was encased in flexiwrap, just in case. Ben felt it was his last tenuous link to resolution and some kind of peace. Where do I start with Dad? Have I got all the evidence I need? And when-how-do I tell him that Mom came back to see me?

Out of all the things that plagued Ben in his quiet moments, when there was no distraction to stop him picking over events until they were just jumbled bones, that one was the most frequent. It was a privilege he was pretty sure Luke hadn't been given, and it made Ben more uncomfortable as the days passed. Why just me? He'd become less accepting of mysteries and the will of the Force since he'd lived in Lon Shevu's world of show-me and prove-it. He wanted to know why these days, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, and maybe every time from now on. The Spirit of Commerce set down in a clearing a few hundred meters from the trading post buildings; Ben did diplomatic hand-shaking and promised to use the service again sometime. He walked through saplings trying to re-claim the cleared land for the forest, bag over one shoulder, aware of eyes everywhere in the undergrowth and above him in the branches, and found himself thinking tactical thoughts about what a tough planet this would be to invade and occupy. Luke was already waiting for him; his father sat on a sawn-off stump as big as one of the huge circular park seats in the Skydome Botanical Gardens at home, wearing his flight suit. Home.

What did that mean?

"Dad..." Ben had no problem throwing his arms around his father now and crushing him to his chest. He couldn't remember why he'd felt awkward about it even a year ago. Grown men in the GAG, the toughest guys he knew, hugged and cried and didn't care what they looked like doing it. "I can't tell you how glad I am to get back." "You look whacked."

"Been busy." He'd tell me if Mom had appeared to him. Wouldn't he? Ben prodded Luke's flight suit, trying to get the banter going. "Been putting in flying hours, then? Worried about skills fade?"

"Going to be putting in more, Ben."

"What did I miss?"

"Jacen's lined up to take Fondor, and we've put one hydrospanner in his works, and we're going to add a few more. Oh, and Han and Leia are still scouting for a new base." Luke started walking to a rank of parked swoop bikes in various stages of decay. None of them gave a hint that the Jedi fighting elite was holed up here. He half turned as he walked, gesturing to his chest. "You taken up smashball? You nearly broke my ribs with whatever's in your jacket."

It was as good a time as any. "It's a CSF remote forensics droid. It's evidence."

Luke swung his leg across the saddle of the first bike in the line. Ben climbed up behind him. "My son the soldier, now my son the cop. Did you find anything? Your expression says you did."

"Yes, I did." The bike shot off. "Plenty."

Luke twisted his head to look at Ben. “And?”

“Hey, eyes forward, Dad!” The swoop swerved and straightened again. “Look, I’m not the jury or the judge. Remember that I wanted to kill Jacen on the spot? You stopped me, and I learned a big lesson. I’m just the detective, the prosecution. When I show you what I gathered-and Uncle Han and Aunt Leia, too-then you decide.” The swoop whipped through thin branches, and Ben ducked his head this way and that to avoid a smack in the face. Dad seemed to relive his wild Rebel youth whenever he got on a bike. “So I’ll lay out the case as objectively as I can. I’ve shown you the Force-hiding trick, and you know Jacen couldn’t have found me on Kavan by chance, but that’s not enough on its own. I’m laying out supporting evidence-and anything else I’ve found that’s relevant, whether it supports my theory or not, like Lon Shevu taught me. I want to know the truth, even if it I don’t like it.”

Luke didn’t reply, but his shoulders lifted as if he’d shrugged, and Ben heard him gulp a breath. He didn’t look over his shoulder this time.

“Ben...”

“Yeah?”

“Ben...” Stang, he was crying. “Ben, you make me so proud. You know that? You’re so... decent.”

“Hey, come on... come on...” Ben patted his back. “Doing the right thing isn’t something special. It’s the minimum. It’s where we start each morning, not where we try to end up one day in the future. You taught me that.”

Luke started to say something, but just shook his head and steered straight and more slowly.

“You asked me a question when you first joined the Guard.”

Dad was getting too serious. “How to fasten my boots? Which end of the blaster I had to hold? Hey, I was just a kid then...”

Luke managed a snort of laughter, the kind that could have tipped over too easily into a sob. “A rhetorical question, I think. How many people I killed when I fought the Empire.”

“Oh, that.”

“And I said, ‘But they were all.... and then I had to stop, because I hadn’t thought about it before as much as I should have. I should never have said ‘but.’ “

“Dad, if you slow down any more, we’re going to stall...”

“Okay. Sorry.” Luke landed the swoop and they sat in knee-high spiky grass listening to the ticking of the cooling drive and the chorus of forest noises from animals they couldn’t see. Ben laid his hand on his lightsaber, just in case. He didn’t feel quite as safe in the wilds as he’d thought. “And you were right-most of them were just ordinary troopers, or ship’s crew, who maybe didn’t like the Empire

very much but had to earn a living, or couldn't say no. They weren't all Imperial fanatics set on galactic oppression. They were just people, and I was nineteen and I probably felt deep down that if they weren't as ready to re-sist Palpatine as I was, then they had to be cowards, or evil, or something that made them unlike me... made them Worth less than me." Luke swiveled as far as he could in the saddle to face Ben. "I hadn't a clue about the politics, Ben. It wasn't really a cause I thought hard about. I just felt I had to save someone in trouble. So... yes, I killed a lot of people I wish I hadn't. And their lives weren't cheap or meaningless. And now... five crews are dead because I let Fondor know too much, and I feel terrible about that, too."

Ben hadn't been expecting to unleash the floodgates. While a hug and tears didn't feel soppy or embarrassing now, complete baring of souls was another matter. He didn't realize Luke had taken the comment to heart and fretted over it. He was mortified; he'd burdened his father at a time when it was the last thing he needed. He should have kept it to himself.

"I don't know what to say, Dad."

"You were everything to your mom." Luke just sat there, nodded as if he'd answered a question Ben hadn't heard, and started up the swoop bike again. They lifted clear of the grass and shot off. "Rightly so."

It had to be now. Ben had to say it, but it would have been better to look into Dad's face than stare at the back of his head. "I saw Mom on Kavan. I mean I saw her. Not like thinking you see someone in a crowd. She was a Force ghost. She spoke to me."

Luke's knuckles were white as he gripped the steering vanes. "What did she say?"

"She said she loved me."

"Yeah, she would. What did you say to her?"

"Same."

"You feel any easier now?"

Go on. If you can't be totally open with your father now, when can you be?

"Have you seen her, Dad? I didn't want to say in case you felt-ignored. No, that's the wrong word..."

"No, I haven't seen her. But that's okay. The Force gives us what we need. I've learned that."

Luke didn't say anything else. Ben struggled not to think of Jacen, because all he could do was rage silently; how could he have done this to Dad? How could he have made him suffer so much? If Jacen had wanted to destroy Luke Skywalker, killing Mom was the way. It was worse than killing Luke himself. And Dad knew that, and yet he didn't let it finish him or change what he believed in. So Ben drew strength and example from that, and when he had these backsliding moments of angry, chest-crushing grief, as he probably always would, he reminded himself that this was why Dad

always knew what was right, and why Jacen either didn't know or didn't care. It was that start of the fork in the road, one atom's deviation that became two and then four and then diverged into different roads and then to different worlds. It was that baseline of right that Ben and Luke had just talked about. It was every new moment when you had to ask: Is the next thing I'm going to do right, or is it wrong?

It was a hair's width of a gap, and yet repeated with each breath, in each being, it became a chasm wide enough to swallow a galaxy.

I don't know why Jacen did it. I don't even have one hundred percent proof. No point getting more upset about motive. Stay objective. Stay with the facts.

Luke headed into the approach to the old Imperial outpost. Ben could now see two StealthXs being towed into launch positions and milling activity through the screen of trees and vines; loyal ground crew who had abandoned everything they had on Coruscant to keep the Jedi squadron operational—droids, pilots, stewards, even the occasional Ewok party ferrying rustic packing crates out of sight.

Ben walked around the landing gear of the nearest StealthX and rehearsed how he'd recount the mission with Shevu to his father.

"We voted to evacuate to a less accessible planet," Luke said. "Depending on how Fondor goes."

"More remote than Endor? That'll take some doing."

"Less findable. The Mists. Han and Leia really know how to pick a hideaway."

"Good move. How much time do I have to collate my evidence before we deploy to Fondor, then?" Jag was wandering in their direction, hands thrust deep in his pockets. Ben patted his jacket. "I don't want to have to take the forensics droid around with me just in case. Losing evidence is..."

"You're not coming on the Fondor mission, Ben."

Usually—or at least until recently—Ben would have launched into an argument about why he wouldn't stay behind and how much Luke needed him, because he didn't want to miss anything. Now he had just felt a pang of alarm at yet another separation from his father, but his gut said Do what he needs you to do. He listened.

"Okay, Dad."

Luke waited a moment and then smiled, as if he'd been expecting the wrangling to start, too. "I'm not cosseting you, you know that. This is for operational reasons. Not protecting the boss's son."

"Understood. What do you want me to do while you're gone?" And you're coming back. "Have you an estimate of how long you're committing the StealthXs?"

"I want you to plan the evacuation so that we're ready to hit the button and go at a moment's notice. I'm leaving at least half the Jedi pilots here, too."

“Relocation,” Ben said. He’d never planned and executed anything like that before: with the ancillary staff, there were nearly a thousand beings and droids to move, plus equipment. He’d make sure he learned fast. “We’re not running from anyone.”

“I’m glad you’re not daunted by the task.”

“It’s common sense, Dad.”

“You’ve got plenty.” Luke patted his shoulders with both hands. “And you’re a moral compass. If some of us don’t come back, I want someone around who’ll keep asking hard questions and saying, ‘Should we do that? Is that right? and who won’t quit unless he gets answers.’”

Ben hadn’t seen himself in that light. He was the methodical one, the problem solver, the one who unpicked an issue, looked at the components, and tried to rebuild it better. Logistics—he knew he could do that. But moral certainty—Jacen probably had his, too.

I got this far on how Mom and Dad raised me. I’ll deal with that as it comes.

He focused on his task, and not the fact that the maintenance crews were running up the StealthX drive.

“Now, Dad? Right now?”

“I waited until you came back. It’s okay. The rest of the flight should be at Fondor by now.”

“What are you planning, Dad?”

“The usual. Help Jacen see the error of his ways.”

Okay, if he wanted to play cryptic, Ben could handle that. A tech jogged up to Luke and handed him his helmet, which somehow made it all much more imminent and final. “And.... Jacen’s enlisted the support of the Imperial Remnant,” Luke finished.

“Admiral Pellaeon? Wow. I’m not sure if that’s good news or bad.”

“Yes, I hope everyone’s moral compass is working...”

Ben found himself doing what the GAG troops did before an operation kicked off. He locked down the inevitable dread and let his mouth take over, laying a veneer of grim jokes over the anxiety to keep it from being seen. “Don’t get killed, Dad. You know what it did to Fett. I don’t want to end up like him.”

“Filthy rich?”

“No, polishing my dad’s old ship and hassling Uncle Han.”

“It’s okay. Jaina can get you a good deal on property in Keldabe.”

“I mean it, Dad.”

“So do I. Now go, and stop worrying, or I swear I’ll come back as a Force ghost and bug you while you’re on a date.”

Ben winced inside. “Love you, Dad.”

“You too, Ben.”

Ben followed orders and didn’t look back, but it hurt. Having Jag’s grim face to focus on was a big help; the two of them walked on a collision course across the compound and ended up almost nose-to-nose.

“You’re grounded, too, then,” Ben said. “Never mind.”

Jag looked a little frayed. “I love being rear party. I live to stand around waiting for the comm to buzz. Have you heard from Jaina? Because I haven’t.”

“No. But it’s only been a week or so.” Ben had been too tied up to think too much about Jaina. He added that to his list of things to feel bad about. “She got there okay, didn’t she?”

“I got a pre-composed ‘arrived safely’ alert, yes.”

“Jag, if she’d had problems-Aunt Leia would feel it.”

“Maybe Fett’s sold her off to the highest bidder.”

“She can look after herself.”

“What if she…”

“We’d know. We’d feel it.”

Jag parted his lips as if he was going to expand on it, but stopped. “Okay. I’ll rely on you to tell me if you feel anything.”

Sometimes, even with his closest friends, even though he worked so closely with guys like Shevu, Ben forgot he had senses that Jag didn’t. At times like this, that must have frustrated Jag. “I’m going to draw up an evacuation plan.”

“How come you suddenly got older than me, Ben?”

“Never underestimate the calming power of a list.” It was a Shevu-ism. Shevu was full of commonsense one-liners that were easy to digest and apply. “Can you get all the senior personnel together for me? I’ve got something I have to do now, but we ought to make a start on scoping the size of the airlift and putting deadlines and names on tasks.”

Jag just looked at him. Then he broke into a big, surprised grin: “Ben, you’re middle-aged! Captain Sensible! Overnight!”

“I still reserve the right to revert to being a goofy kid and not tidy my room when the pressure’s off.”

Jag seemed to forget his black mood about Jaina’s absence for a while. “I’ll get your meeting set up, my lord...”

Ben walked on a few paces before it struck him that he’d just slipped automatically into the organizing, order-giving role that his dad often did. Because Dad never doubted I could do it. That was the kind of confidence his father could instill in him.

But he still had a task to complete first. Back in his quarters, he washed down all the surfaces with stericlean, then laid out clean flimsi sheets to cover the table so he could open the droid’s sphere.

Did a sterile area matter? The instruments and sensors had already analyzed what they needed, so contamination wasn’t an issue. He had the readouts on his datapad; he knew the chemical composition of every trace the droid had collected. But he felt he had to show some respect-it was the only word he could think of-for the procedure, and set the sphere down with a degree of reverence. It held destinies.

Hair. Ben needed a hair from his mother’s brush.

It was all he had to do to confirm that the hair collected from the StealthX was hers. Grubbing around in his father’s quarters felt like an intrusion. Luke kept the brush, a utilitarian gray plasteel thing with bristles extruded from the material, in a box with a few trinkets and other personal effects he’d grabbed from the bedroom, and Ben suddenly found himself worrying about the apartment, and if it had been left intact. His mother’s clothes and possessions were still there. He didn’t care about his own. He just couldn’t bear to think of Jacen’s bureaucrats clearing out the place or even touching anything personal.

It’s just stuff. Forget it. Shrines are unhealthy. You know Mom’s okay where she is. You’ve seen her.

Just thinking that lifted his spirits more than he would ever have believed possible. I know. I really know. Jedi suddenly seemed the luckiest beings in the galaxy. Ordinary beings never knew for sure what happened after death; many sentient species believed in some existence when the body was no more, and some didn’t, but only Jedi had the absolute proof of what happened to them-at least some, anyway. There were all kinds of priests and mystics who claimed they could put grieving families in touch with their loved ones in some afterlife, and maybe they could; but only Jedi knew and could prove it.

It seemed both a breathtaking comfort and privilege, and also sadly unfair for everyone else. Certainty. There was so little of it in life, but Ben had his.

Apart from the brush, its bristles tangled with a few-long, curled, copper-red and white hairs, there were two rings, a datachip-family holoid images, Ben decided-and a platinum locket. Inside was tiny, meticulously folded flimsi sheet; when he smoothed it out on his knee, it showed signs of having once been crumpled. His mother's writing was on it: Gone hunting for a few days. Don't be mad at me, farmboy.

Ben stared at it, imagining her hand moving across the surface, and put it back in the locket. He took the whole box back to his quarters and laid out the brush on the flimsi to tease out a hair with a pair of forceps.

It was just a matter of inserting the hair into a small slot in the casing of the droid and letting the mechanism re-move a section to process it. It took a minute or so.

Ben waited.

The droid flashed indicator lights and transmitted the analysis to his datapad. POSITIVE MATCH.

That was it, then: all over. Once he cracked the security seal on the droid, the sterile environment inside was compromised, and-if he played by the Justice Department and CSF rules of evidence-anything else tested by the same droid would not be admissible as evidence. If he wanted to test more material after that, he'd have to sign out a new unit, sealed and authenticated.

"No, that's it, my friend," he said, and overrode the contamination warnings. "I just want the hair."

The droid was tiny, and its internal mechanisms were like some intricate chrono maker's art. Ben had to use the forceps to extract the sealed chamber with an almost invisible length of his mother's hair inside. Instead of being the glossy, coiled lock he had somehow imagined-which was crazy, there was no room for something that big even if it had been lying around in Jacen's cockpit-it was a single hair. Ben had a brushful of them, but somehow this one mattered; he wanted to keep it. He wound the hair around his finger into a ring shape and shut it in the locket with the flimsi note. He'd tell Dad he had it when the squadron returned from Fondor.

Dumb thing for a guy to carry around, but I want to.

While Ben was copying the data to another pad for collation into a report, he checked his encrypted messages. Shevu had sent an update.

Ben, this might upset you, but you need to see it. I spoke to two Bith Senators. They witnessed an argument between your mother and JS shortly before she left Coruscant for Hapes.

Ben opened the file anyway, feeling immune to whatever might leap out at him. So... Mom had bawled out Jacen in front of witnesses. She'd even accused him of being Sith and threatened him. But Shevu knew him well enough to know what would sting.

It was over me. It was all over me. Oh no. Mom, I was never worth that. It's too high a price.

Seeing the cold evidence that she'd warned Jacen to stay away from him threatened to crumble his



fragile and newfound sense of peace. But then he looked at it through Shevu's eyes, and wondered if the captain had thought this: that it could have looked as if Mara was the one who went after Jacen and attacked him, not the other way around.

It was subtle twist to what Ben had already thought-that his mother had gone after Jacen because she thought he was dangerous and had to be stopped-but it introduced a possibility that she might have intended to do more than arrest him.

Ben knew Mom was tough. She was a trained assassin; she didn't shy away from fights. He wanted to cherish her memory as a blameless victim, above dark emotions like lethal vengeance.

Am I upset?

Part of him was proud that his mother had faced down a Sith Lord in combat. Part wondered how that squared with his recent understanding that vengeance wasn't justified. And part felt devastated that he was the motive, and that if only he'd seen Jacen for what he was and shunned him, his mother might still be alive.

A message came in on the datapad. Dad had just sent it before he jumped to hyperspace.

Ben, I forgot to take Mara's locket with me. It's in the box in my quarters. If you have to clear out before we get back, please take good care of it.

Ben clasped the locket in his closed fist and pressed it to his chest.

"I got it, Dad," he said aloud. "I got it."

ADMIRAL'S DAY CABIN, IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER BLOODFIN; RAVELIN DOCKYARD, BASTION

"How many years?" Pellaeon asked. "And I can't get over how lovely you still are. You've worn very well."

Daala drummed her fingers in the exact rhythm he'd transmitted as the emergency call. She smiled; a real smile, genuine warmth. "You called. I promised you I'd always come if you used that code, just like Daerkaer. What's the problem?"

"The Galactic Alliance."

"Yes, Jacen Solo, unhindered by Admiral Niathal. Going for the galactic record for the fastest plunge into bloody anarchy and most stylish black outfit. So, are you all dressed up to go to Fondor?"

This was why Pellaeon was happy to admit that he was in awe of her. Daala had vanished for what, twenty years? Twenty-five? And she still had up-to-date intelligence. He'd lost count of the times she'd been written off, apparently defeated, even presumed killed, but still kept coming back to put a serious dent in the New Republic. It was almost thrilling to watch her beat the odds so consistently, even when she was a threat.

And as far as Pellaeon was concerned, she still held an Imperial commission. “Impressive. Most impressive.”

Daala laughed. “You never could quite do the voice, but the intonation is perfect.” She reached across the gap between their chairs and patted his hand, still the accomplished seducer; not in a coy, subservient way, but with the absolute confidence of someone with real physical power who just happened to be a good-looking woman, and knew it, and understood that even the most resistant weren’t wholly immune to it. “Yes, I might prefer to live in obscurity, but I’m neither deaf nor blind.”

“I won’t even ask about your intelligence network, my dear...”

She smiled and lit up the cabin again. “I never reveal my age or my sources.”

“I’m pleased to see that the Ryn intelligence community still makes a good living.”

“And they’re not the only ones.”

“I miss our little verbal sparring sessions, my dear.”

“So do I, Gil. But I’m here. What can I do for you?”

Pellaeon had no idea if she had come empty-handed or if she still had a fleet. She took ships with her every time she escaped. Vessels and experimental weapons technology had vanished into the Maw Installation when Daala was running it as Grand Moff Tarkin’s bit on the side, as the bitterly resentful male officers had called her—one of the less offensive names she’d been called—and Pellaeon had no idea how much she could roll out today. It might all have been rust, dust, and perished plastoids; it might have been the most advanced fleet in the galaxy, just waiting for the ideal moment to emerge and smash the concept of re-public for good. He had no way of knowing unless she showed him.

She was still here despite the Yuuzhan Vong War, and that told him a great deal.

“I’m asking you to watch my back,” he said. “At Fon-dor, and probably for some time after that. Perhaps some sweeping up if Solo can’t hold what he tries to grab. If he keeps winning, I want a counterweight ready to throw in before he turns on us like he turned on his allies and family. If he gets too cocky and loses, we’ll have to step in and restore order, because the Confederation isn’t capable of forming a galactic administration, and the remaining unaligned worlds are a complete shambles.”

“We do at least know how to run things.”

“How much weight can you add, Daala?”

She crossed her legs and leaned back in the chair. The eye-patch bothered him. It wasn’t because it disfigured her—it lent her a rather raffish chic, in fact, and gave her one visible eye the impact of an emerald laser—but because he couldn’t imagine what kind of injury required it. Eyes could be replaced. And she wore the patch as if she had been used to it for a long time.

“I can, “she said at last, “have a full fleet at Fondor with one standard hour’s lead time.”

“How much? How many?”

“Let’s just say I don’t waste resources I find, and a lot of worlds the GA doesn’t notice owe me favors after the Vong War. The fleet won’t be modern, but it will be deadly. Does that answer your question?”

Pellaeon thought of all the prototypes and technology that the old Empire had funded and that had vanished and never seen the light of day. Daala must still have had capital ships in readiness; she’d escaped with Scylla, at the very least. But a battle was a lot less about big ships these days, and more about flexibility and agility-small vessels could be much more of an asset.

“Jacen Solo has half the GA Fourth Fleet, “he said.

Daala nodded. “Fondor can rival that firepower. Not beat it, but it can give a good account of itself.”

“But the GA hasn’t committed enough ground troops to take and hold Fondor, just the orbitals. Solo’s heavy on ordnance, though.”

“So he’s either going specifically to destroy their fleet, or he’s not too choosy about the state he leaves the planet in.” Daala hadn’t touched her syrspirit. “Because if he doesn’t destroy their fleet and subdue the planet, he won’t be able to hold the orbitals. He’ll be occupying them and fending off attacks-busy job. Unless he plans to destroy them as well.”

“If you’re asking me if I know his ultimate intention, no, I don’t.”

“And you’re committing Imperial forces on that basis?”

“I’ve gone into battle with far less.”

“And we’ve both seen governments start wars with no idea how they plan to end them, or even what to do once the initial targets have been taken. Gil, I hope that all you’re planning to do is stand there holding Solo’s coat while he has his scrap, waiting to see who wins.”

Pellaeon believed in the value of his word. Integrity was a matter of honor, but it was also a pragmatic thing: if you did what you said you would, then your threats carried as much weight as your promises, and your pledges to allies secured tangible benefits. A liar lost friends fast in war. Pellaeon walked the fine line between not admitting that he had doubts about Jacen and contingency plans if things went wrong for him, and misleading an ally.

If Bastion were attacked, would he risk his fleet for us? Pellaeon was sure the answer was no. Jacen Solo flew by the seat of his Force-sensitive pants, which meant conventional planning with him was impossible. Pellaeon’s only option was to be ready to pick up the pieces. The prize of Bilbringi and Borleias was looking increasingly irrelevant, a free gift that had a price tag all the same.

“Gil, are you still with me?” Daala asked, tapping his knee.

“Sorry, my dear.”

“Do you want me to make you feel better about getting into this spot?” She stood up as if to leave. “This is about your sense of responsibility. Your home is safe, but there’s a riot in the street. You feel you have to step outside and stop it. It might even damage your home if you don’t.”

“I’m not sure if that’s welcome clarity, or indulgent comfort for an old man, Daala.”

“And then you’ve got your greedy children clamoring to loot the stores that the riot has trashed. The Moff’s are a handful. You should try my method of enforcing consensus.”

“Ah, my queen of analogies...” Daala had brought feuding Imperial warlords into line by gassing them. She never wasted time. “I’ll try reason first, I think.”

“I have no love for Moff’s, Gil, and I plan to kill some of them.” Daala opened the hatch and stepped out into the passage. “Show me the ship.”

Daala was conspicuous. She didn’t seem to care. By now, word of her arrival in port would have reached some of the Moff’s, and those who weren’t immediately panicking or huffing with outrage would at least be asking why she was back. Pellaeon escorted her through Bloodfin’s decks as if she were a routine visitor, showing her the most interesting aspects of the Turbulent-class design; the young crew had no idea who she was, but some of the veteran Moff’s would recognize her, and all would know the name Daala.

Pellaeon didn’t have to tell them about the assets she was ready to contribute to the Empire. If some Moff’s were already being wooed by the GA before he was formally told a deal was on the table, then Jacen would get to hear what Daala’s role might be. Pellaeon wanted his tactical surprise if he needed it.

“Are you serious about killing Moff’s, Daala?”

“Yes,” she said, admiring a spotless cannon bay that gleamed. She ran her hand over a bulkhead and followed the curved line of the cannon housing. “Because they killed Liegeus. When I work out the full list of who was behind it, then I’ll call them to account. Today I’m here for you, and, to a lesser extent, for the Empire.”

“Oh.... I’m so very sorry. So very sorry.” Liegeus Vorn had been her first love, a pilot-something of a rogue, to be frank-and when Daala had retreated to Pedducis Chorios after yet another spectacular escape from a lost battle, she had found him again. The lovers had been separated for years. It was upliftingly romantic, the promise of rediscovered happiness that every broken heart secretly longed for. “How, and when?”

“A thermal detonator. I’ve waited five years to pursue the matter.”

Daala collected enemies. It went with the job. Her patience was frightening. “Is this how you

acquired your eye injury?"

"I still don't know if he was the main target, to spite me, or if he was collateral damage in an attempt on my life," Daala said, seeming to ignore the question. "I shall find out when I identify all the conspirators, and I'll make sure it takes some painful time. Then I'll have my eye repaired properly, but not before that day, so that I don't forget."

It didn't bode well for the Empire that its new ally was still at war with some-perhaps most-of its leaders. The Moffs had always been ferociously hostile, initially because she was a woman, and later because she was Daala, and she did not suffer fools or less talented officers gladly. They were going to regret it now. It was their own fault. She never forgot, forgave, or gave up.

"Had I known, I wouldn't have disturbed you." He put his hand gently on her back to steer her this way and that. They were approaching the portside brow again, and an officer of more mature years did a double take, a real head-turn followed by slightly parted lips. Pellaeon met his eyes, and it was clear that he thought he knew who she was. "Just be aware that some of the Moffs are a little more enlightened these days, and you might even find them helpful. A powerful woman doesn't send them screaming to defend their manly territory. Lecersen, for one. The new breed."

"I'll make a note of his name, and leave him intact," she said.

"I'll pick my moment, but I'll inform the Moffs that you are officially back on active service, and advising me." "Yes, the word fleet would start panic..." "Might scare Fondor into compliance, of course." "Let's keep it as our little secret." Daala took his hand in both of hers and squeezed it. "You keep a secure comlink open to me at all times, you tell me as early as possible when you plan to jump, and I promise I will be there in minutes." "Minutes."

"I have a marshaling area in mind. One final short hyperspace jump. Trust me."

The brow security detail watched her stride down the gangway onto the jetty. Pellaeon estimated that the news of her visit would be all around Ravelin within three hours. The commander who'd turned ashen on seeing her walked up to Pellaeon and almost stood to attention. "Sir, is that who I think it is?"

"The older sister of my unruly children," said Pellaeon. He felt a little urge for a joke at the man's expense. "Do you think it might be time to have our first female Moff?"

The commander was wisely lost for words. Pellaeon was pretty sure that Daala was happier being an admiral, but it was an amusing idea nonetheless. He smiled all the way back to his cabin, where he sat down to await the latest intelligence report.

Daala hadn't asked about Niathal. She must have known the Mon Cal admiral's situation, though. It was as if everyone had separated the two GA Chiefs of Staff into the mystic in black who might turn rabid, and the sensible naval officer in white with whom they could do business, even if-in the Moffs' minds, anyway-she was inconveniently female.

Daala and Niathal would have a great deal to discuss if they ever met.

Pellaeon poured a small measure of syrs spirit, dark as tar-wood varnish, and splashed a little water into it. He raised the glass in a private toast.

“To ladies on the bridge, “he said, “and gentlemen gone below.”

THIRD FLEET STATION: OPS ROOM, FLEET HQ.

“Admiral?”

Niathal was aware of the young lieutenant waiting at her elbow. Nimbanese, a rare sight in the fleet, made excellent support staff, and this one was a CVO-a Casualty Visiting Officer.

It was a neutral, detached title for someone whose job was to give next of kin the worst possible news.

“Admiral....”

Niathal turned. “Apologies, Lieutenant. Did you want me?”

“Ma’am, the minelayer squadron-I’m making a personal visit to the base. Is there anything you want me to do outside the normal arrangements?”

Congratulations, Admiral. You got a hundred of your own people killed before they even had time to take defensive action. That’s what happens when you leak operational details.

“They’re all from the same area, I understand.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The lieutenant kept glancing at her datapad, and when Niathal caught sight of the screen it was a blur of text, a table of short lines. Names. “The squadron is a small and tight-knit community, as they often are in specialist units. It’s a large number of casualties for them in a single engagement. We’ll be offering extra support.”

Extra support. It was hygienic, unemotional language, which was the only real alternative to disruptive outpourings of emotion. There were thousands of dead in this war so far. Niathal had learned to accept that very early in her career, but today she was looking at her own handiwork, a datapad screen of information that had left her hand and had come back to haunt her as a list of names, real beings, real families-her own doing. Officers took decisions knowing that some crew members wouldn’t return, but this was totally new and shocking.

What did you think would happen to the information you gave Luke Skywalker? What did he think would happen?

Did you think Fondor would just send vessels to scare the minelayers away? A few shots across the bow?

They blew them out of the sky. As you would have done.

It was always the small, stark incidents that became the pivots that changed everything. They were on a scale that an individual being could comprehend, like Captain Nevil's son Turl, or Lieutenant Tebut. Niathal gave up examining the continuum of blame-inevitable combat deaths, deaths caused by having to sacrifice a mission for a more critical one, deaths caused by incompetence-because there was only one category left beneath hers, callous and underhanded tactics, and that was personally taking a sub-ordinate's life.

That would put her in the sewer currently occupied by Jacen Solo.

I spied for the enemy. The families of those crews won't be any the less bereaved for knowing that I gave intelligence to a decent, honest Jedi to thwart the plans of a little tyrant ready to do anything, expend anyone, to win some ill-defined war on chaos.

"Tell them I'm sorry," Niathal said at last. "Give them my personal and sincere apologies."

"Very good, ma'am."

Niathal had to make an effort to get her attention back on the status boards and charts in the darkened ops room. The elements of the Fourth Fleet that Jacen had deployed were one hour into the operation and should have been sitting out a blockade. Now the task force was exposed, the Fondorians knew it was there, and Jacen's options were to abort, to attack, or to hold position while a new strategy was cobbled together.

Battles went awry of plans all the time. But not like this. She had waited long enough at the comlink.

"Colonel Solo," she barked. "Will you talk to me now, or not?"

She had holovid and audio between Ops and the Anakin Solo. The holding screen shivered and Jacen appeared, standing with his hands clasped behind his back in front of the bank of weapons sensor consoles.

"Admiral, we have an intelligence leak."

Keep your nerve. "I realize that. What are your immediate plans? We have reports that Fondor is sitting tight and expecting an attack."

"I realize that."

"This might be the time to reopen talks now you have their attention."

"We've lost the advantage of locking them in." Jacen was totally calm. For a moment, Niathal was distracted by the arrival of Captain Piris in the ops room; another Quarren, the commanding officer of Bounty. Niathal didn't share the common Mon Cal wariness of Quarren, and now felt an increasing bond with them that was only partly due to their common homeworld. They seemed more resolutely

honest in the face of Jacen's growing eccentricity than most humans. "Admiral, I plan to begin simultaneous attacks on four orbitals spaced around the planet, draw out their fleet, and neutralize it."

Orbitals usually carried defensive cannon, but were outgunned by Star Destroyers. Fondor would have to send support. In that respect, Jacen made sense. But that was where it ended.

"You'll blow the yards to pieces."

"That may well happen."

"This is a complete departure from what we agreed. It's turned into a sabotage run. What are you thinking? Good grief, Colonel, you can't make up battle plans on a whim..."

"I trust my Force awareness."

"To do what, exactly? What?"

"To make an example of Fondor."

"Enough," Niathal snapped. She didn't care that this was being played out in front of the ops room staff. If she'd had any sense, she would have taken advantage of Jacen's absence from Coruscant to call an emergency meeting of the Senate, announce that she was relieving Jacen of his duties, and declare herself sole Chief of State. But that took time she didn't have, and created its own chaos and cascade of problems to follow-like where Jacen might go and what he might do with his task force. She had to go out there and intervene. She had no faith in the Force to stop him spending thousands of lives to send out a message, and this was as good a time as any to bring him down. He might never be more overextended than he was now. "I don't want to hear that you have a feeling, or that you have certainty, or that you can meld. I want to hear times, ranges, troop strengths. Colonel, I'm now activating the Third Fleet task force, and I will be at your position in a little under six standard hours."

She expected Jacen to snarl back at her or at least spite her by starting the attack right away. Instead he bowed his head a fraction, Jedi-style, and smiled.

"Very well, Admiral. With your assets, and the Imperial Remnant's support, we can attempt to isolate Fondor itself with part of the task force while the rest secures the orbitals one at a time."

Jacen never capitulated to a better idea. Niathal had her unspoken warning. She closed the link, furious-displaced rage fueled by her own guilt, she knew-and looked around at a silent ops room landscape of hunched backs as personnel tried to pretend they hadn't heard or seen the two Chiefs of State arguing, and that Jacen Solo didn't share basic information with her.

Piris stood waiting.

"He's gone too far. He has to go." Niathal knew everyone must have heard her. "Captain, are we ready?"



“Yes, ma’am. The fleet is ready to slip. Admiral Makin sends his regards and says he’s kept Ocean’s seat warm for you.”

A fleet speeder picked them up outside the building and whisked them to the fleet base. “You know what I miss most?” she said to Piris, wondering how she’d come to this after such a solid, predictable career. “Not having my own command.”

“You’re the Supreme Commander and Jay-Coss-One, ma’am. You’ve got your own navy.”

“It’s not the same, Piris. I move from ship to ship, like some visiting mother-in-law, trampling over other commanders’ territory, shoving them aside for the while, giving orders when they’re used to being the voice on the bridge... I miss the simplicity. I miss the days when I knew a ship was my personal responsibility, and felt like home when I came on board, opened the cabin hatch, and stowed my belongings.”

“Flexible and responsive fleet, they call it, remember.”

“I’m very old-fashioned.”

“That’s commendable, but you’re no longer required to go down with your ship...”

Jacen was very attached to the Anakin Solo but it struck her as being in an accessory kind of way, like wanting the snazziest sports-speeder in town. Suddenly she had a holotoon-type image of a caricatured Jacen in his black flapping cloak, scrambling into the Destroyer’s last escape pod while poor Captain Nevil stood bravely on the Ana-kin’s burning bridge, mouth-tentacles courageously straight, hand held rigid against his brow in a final salute as he did the decent thing that Jacen wouldn’t.

Let him burn, Nevil.

The Third Fleet element of the task force had been standing by to leave orbit and jump since the Anakin Solo had passed out of comm contact. If she told Piris that she hadn’t actually planned to confront Jacen Solo like that, he wouldn’t have believed her. What-ifs and contingencies had a habit of turning into reality for very good reasons, seeing as they were extrapolated from the possible twists and turns of the original plan, but sometimes.... they seemed to express a subconscious wish.

If Niathal was going to relieve Jacen Solo of command, then it was best done away from Coruscant, with space to let the fleet bring its power to bear.

Coups needed planning; she knew because she’d helped Jacen stage one. She’d been seduced a step at a time by what had looked pragmatic, and now she could look back and see how far she had fallen with him. It was time to halt the rot, as best she could.

“It’s the small things, isn’t it, ma’am?” Piris said as he followed her into the launch that would transfer them to Bounty and Ocean. “It’s a snowflake that triggers the avalanche.”

Or a son.

Or a hundred strangers.

Or looking back on who you used to be, before all this began.

“I don’t know how many of the commanders will follow me,” Niathal said.

She didn’t define her destination. Clipping Jacen’s wings would be opportunistic, a risk taken in an instant, and at least that left no conspiracy to be uncovered or others to be implicated if she tried and failed.

Piris ran his hand down over his mouth-tentacles like a human stroking a beard in thought.

“And we’ll never know for sure until the moment it happens,” he said. “But one thing I do know—we won’t be alone.”

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How can I insert troops without decent plans? Even if it all has to change at the last moment, I still need somewhere more solid to start. Solo used to be sharp, knew what we needed, and now it’s all vague Force stuff, and I can’t work with that. He’s changed. And what if it’s not the Force guiding him? What if he’s just hearing voices?

-Colonel Pichaff, Rapid Deployment Commander, GA task force at Fondor

MANDALMOTORS, KELDABE

“So the Jedi hasn’t come to buy any Bes’uliike,” said Jir Yomaget. “Too bad. The thousandth export airframe just rolled off the line.”

“She came to learn how to arrest her brother,” Fett said. The hangar was crammed with everything but Bes’uliik fighters; this was the prototype department. Some of the vessels around him were eccentric, to say the least. “I’m being helpful. So’s Beviin.”

“Subtle. I’ll build her a vibro-mallet.”

“She’s handy with machinery. If we’re saddled with her for much longer, she’ll earn her keep here.”

“Do we want a Jedi poking around in our technology?”

“It won’t help her much. She knows how a beskad works, but that doesn’t make her Beviin on a battlefield.”

It was much the same with the export market. The Bes’uliik fighters being sold to other governments—and the occasional wealthy gangster—were de-enriched spec, as Yomaget called it: slower, lighter beskar armoring, fewer Verpine-produced weapons refinements. They still beat an X-wing, so the customers were happy. But even if they’d been allowed to buy a top-of-the-range

Bes'uliik reserved solely for Mandalorians, they wouldn't know how to fly or fight like a Mando pilot.

"It's like sticking beskar'gam on a bantha," Yomaget said. "Good for a laugh, and the bantha might feel safer if it understood armor, but it doesn't turn it into a soldier."

"So..."

"Oh, yes. The Tra'kad. If you have an opening to field-test one, I'll grab it."

"Whole war going on out there. Plenty of room."

"We're neutral."

"It never stopped anyone doing mercenary work..."

"It's yours if you can find a use for it."

Fett thought the Bes'uliik was a work of art, but the Tra'kad—there was no other word for it but a brute. He'd seen one test-flying in the last couple of weeks, and grace wasn't the first word that sprang to mind.

But the slab sides and maneuverability—now, those were handy. Fett could see himself using the vessel to insert troops into high buildings, hatch flat against a window or a hole in a wall, or provide close air cover to troops on the ground. He climbed up on the hull and stood on a turret turntable. The ship was a twenty-meter slab of beskar plate with a cannon turret on each corner, topside, and lower hull, and rotating modular weapon platforms on the top. Fett did a few mental calculations and worked out that the ship had completely overlapping arcs of fire. It had no blind spots. Nobody was going to surprise it.

"And the Verpine didn't want a joint deal on this?"

"It's all old tech," said Yomaget. "No advantage to them, but ideal for us."

One of the top hatches flipped open and Baltan Carid's head emerged, plastered with a satisfied grin. "I hope you're not claustrophobic, Fett. Get in."

Fett squeezed through the hatch and dropped into a cramped compartment packed with machinery. There were pipes, hatches, and handwheels everywhere, as if the interior had been taken from an old holodrama. On the port side, light spilled from an open inboard hatch along with a faint metallic sound like someone spinning a handle. When Fett stuck his head through the opening, his assessment was spot-on. Ram Zerimar, the sniper he'd first met when Corellia had been keen to hire Fett's elite Ori'ramikade-supercommandos—was turning gear wheels to aim one of the cannons, winding frantically. He came to a sudden halt as if he'd hit an end-stop and checked a gauge.

"Keeps you fit, Mand'alor," he said. "Just seeing how fast we can acquire a target."

Carid pointed to more handwheels and valves. “See? The whole ship can operate on zero power for a while if everything goes to osik. If we’re fried, all the critical systems can be operated manually by gearwheels, cables, or compressed gas. We’ve even got zero-power fiber-optic screens that kick in so we can aim or see what’s going on topside. Okay, it’s hard labor, but this is a real beauty for getting out of trouble.” He winked. “Or causing it.”

Fett squeezed into alcoves and peered down a hatch that went straight through the belly of the Tra’kad, good for defended troop extractions. It was a perfect ship for a pes-simist or a very unlucky man.

Would have been good to have this when we fought the Vong. Dinua’s mother might have survived.

Fett wondered if Dinua thought about her mother as much as he thought about his dad. “How many crew?”

“One pilot can fly it in an emergency, and from various positions in the ship. Crew-five. How many bodies can you cram in? Haven’t tested that yet. Next one will have waterborne capability.”

“Another multimission vehicle,” Fett said. Yomaget squeezed in behind him. He was a man obsessed with mak-ing vessels that could do everything. It was a very Mandalorian attitude, wanting to be self-contained and ready for anything the galaxy threw at you, a kind of frontier mentality. “What’s the compromise?”

“Speed.”

“Okay. Next chance we get-let’s give her a workup.”

Fett hauled himself out of the top hatch and found that he was already thinking of ways to exploit the zero-power capability. You didn’t have to be dead in the water to make use of that.

Ambush.

Beauty wasn’t everything.

A vhe’viin skittered across the floor, a high-speed scrap of tan fur that triggered Fett’s HUD sensors. The small rodents were also enjoying a prosperous time, gorging on the new fields of crops. Everyone was doing better; when Fett walked out of the rear hangar doors, he could see a snaking line of dark soil, excavations to lay a water pipeline to the new settlement five kilometers south. Being Mando, they were digging wells too, ret’lini-just in case, a Plan B.

“So you paid for all that, too, Yomaget.”

The MandalMorors boss stood beside him and took electrobinoculars from his belt. “Yeah. I ship in food for the workforce, too. Farm output isn’t keeping pace with the incoming settlers. It’ll catch up in time.”

Fett was fascinated by the way that Mandalorians, who liked credits as much as any species in the

galaxy, needed no law to make them share what they had with the community when times were good. It was a survival trait. It didn't come naturally to Fett, but he'd finally learned it.

"If Jaina Solo tells me what barbarians we are, I'll show her all this." Fett fired up his speeder bike's drive. "Time for me to continue her higher education."

He was glad that Beviin had been willing to take her off his hands for a day. It gave him breathing space, something he needed with Sintas around. Mirta seemed to expect him to sit patiently by the bedside, but there was nothing he could usefully do. He could tell Sintas her life story, minus the years he hadn't been around-most of them-but it wasn't going to aid her recovery.

What if the Jedi could heal her?

Fett did most of his thinking on the speeder now. If he retreated to Slave 1, laid up on spare land next to his drying-shed quarters, folks came by wanting to ask him things. If he was moving, they couldn't. And there was something therapeutic about just swinging onto the saddle and heading randomly into the wilderness, the same as setting Slave I on a course and heading for the Outer Rim.

They could still comm him via his helmet link, though. The amber icon pulsed in his HUD, and he blinked to activate it.

"Been a long time, Fett."

It was a smoky patrician voice, one that got his attention a heartbeat before he put a name to it. Twelve years, more or less; she always resurfaced sooner or later.

"Admiral," he said. "Always a pleasure."

"So you're not dead, and I'm not dead."

She rarely had jobs for him, but when she did, they were always interesting. "Want to add a Bes'uliik to your collection?"

"You're so commercial, Fett."

"Well?"

"Good honest mercenary work."

That didn't quite offer the relief of filling his time the way it used to; he'd have been reassured by the offer before, confirmation that he was on top of his game and in demand. Daala was still A-list clientele. But old habits died hard. "Maybe. What is it?"

"Jacen Solo."

"Uh-huh."

“I heard about your daughter.”

“What’s he done to you? Wouldn’t have thought he was in your circle.”

“I’m back with the Imperial Remnant,” she said.

Well, that would make every Moff’s day, Fett thought. He almost smiled. “For how long?”

“Depends. Gil Pellaeon’s on his way to back up Solo at Fondor. I take it you know there’s going to be fleet action there.”

“I have my sources.”

“Want to help me out with your hundred finest?”

“Depends what you want to do.”

“Standby team. I’d like you backing me up for old times’ sake-I’m there in the wings in case things go badly for Pellaeon. The Moffs, of course, can rot, and so can the GA.”

But Sintas is here. And Jaina Solo.

Fett was quietly appalled at the thought. He’d never had to worry about things like that in his life. He had always been able to go where he wanted and do whatever paid him best because there was nobody else in his life, not even peripherally.

“Fett? Are you there? Is it a fee issue? I can still pay.”

“Just thinking. My-ex-wife was found alive.”

Now it was Daala’s turn to fall silent.

“I’m glad for you,” she said eventually.

“It’s not like that, Daala.” He reacted without thinking farther. Job. Business. You’re in control here. “Okay. Maybe not a hundred, but I’ll show with some handy hardware. Send me the data.”

“I’ll need you in the next twenty-four hours.”

Fierfek. “Deal. Usual terms.”

Fett parked by the main entrance to Beviin’s farm, still working out how he was going to handle the logistics, nothing more. Thinking about the emotional wreckage was one step too far today. When the doors parted, the big main room where all the cooking and eating and wholly alien family stuff happened was like the arena at Geonosis: exposed to attacks from all sides. Mirta and Jaina sat at the battered wooden table with Sintas between them. Beviin and Medrit both had their boots up on the bench, arms folded, chatting idly.

They all stopped and looked at him. The urge to retreat was almost too much.

Yow're seventy-one. You can't keep running from this.

Fett took off his helmet and nodded at Sintas, even though she couldn't see him.

"Sin, "he said, completely automatically. It was her pet name. He hadn't used it in decades. It ambushed him, but he blundered right on, hoping she didn't notice. "How are you doing today?"

"You're Boba Fett, "she said.

"Yeah." Here we go. The wheels are about to come off. He glanced at Jaina, because it was easier than looking at Mirta right then. "So you remember."

"You told me a day ago... or whenever." She looked okay: she looked great, in fact, but then she always did. The heart-of-fire necklace hung around her neck. "I lost track of the last few days. But I'm not forgetting the things people tell me right away."

She pushed her chair back and stood up, tottering a little, feeling her way along the backs of chairs and around the table toward him. Mirta jumped up to guide her; Beviin and Medrit scrambled to get their legs out of the way. She managed to walk right up to Fett and grabbed him by his biceps as she almost fell against him.

"Wow, you wear armor."

Fett could think of nothing except to deal with it as he dealt with combat. He followed the first impulse that came into his head. "Do you remember what I did to you?"

Sintas stared up into his face. "No. All I know is that you found me after a long, long time. And that means you're not going to look like I'd remember, anyway."

He couldn't wait for the ax to fall any longer.

"We split up, Sin. A year or two after Ailyn was born. I'm sorry."

Sintas had always been tough. She was a bounty hunter, for fierfek's sake; she could take a lot in her stride. She was going to have to live the rest of her life, starting now. Lying to her was a lousy way to begin it.

She frowned a little, creasing the top of her nose. "But you still came to rescue me, "she said at last. "You can't be all that bad."

Fett had to switch off or run. He looked to Beviin, who always hauled him out of the mire at times like this, and got a discreet thumb gesture to step outside. Mirta caught Sintas's arm and sat her down. Jaina followed Beviin outside, as if this mess was any of her Jedi business.

"Bob'ika, Sintas can remember things from the time she was revived, "Beviin said quietly. "She's

got nothing from before then, although she knows she's from Kiffu and that she had a daughter. Jaina thinks..."

"What do you think, Jaina?" Fett asked. "Come on. Share that Jedi wisdom."

"I'm just trying to help," she said, taking a step back, hands spread. "My dad went through this, remember? Mom talked about how bad he was."

"I do recall, funnily enough."

"Okay. I'm sorry. I just think someone could help her, at least restore her sight. Give her a chance to start again and not be dependent on..."

"Me?"

"Anyone."

Beviin stepped in. "At least hear her out. Jaina might be able to find her a Jedi healer. Someone who's good at it."

Jaina flinched as if she was expecting Fett to erupt, but maybe she sensed the way his gut twisted at the dilemma. If Sintas got her memories back-if he just filled in the gaps for her-she had terrible things to relive. But how could he not try? What would she be if she was forced to live like this?

It's early days. She might get better anyway. So why's it such a big deal for me? Do I want to keep her this way for the rest of her life, like some sick pet?

"It's me who's avoiding it," he said at last. "There's no easy way. She's got a family even if I'm not part of it, and she has to have her whole life back, even the painful bits. Get your healer, Jaina."

Jaina didn't say anything, and went back into the house. Beviin just waited, hands on hips, looking disappointed.

"You won't think so highly of your precious Mand'alor when you find out what I did to her," Fett said.

Beviin shrugged. "You can tell me when you're ready."

"I've got a job to do, anyway. Tomorrow. Daala called. Needs some backup for Pellaeon at Fondor."

"Shab." Beviin looked angry now. It was rare for him to react that way. "She comes out of the woodwork now? Great timing. Go on. We'll sort out Sintas. Go."

"Goran, stay with her, will you?"

It was obvious Beviin would rather have gone on the mission. "Okay..."



“I’m not blind. You think I’m running away from it.”

“Does that matter?”

“Yes.” Beviin was about the only man whose respect Fett would regret losing. “Your opinion matters.”

“Okay, then you get back in that room, and you tell Mirta and Sintas that you’re off fighting tomorrow, and you tell Jaina that her brother is in the lineup. Shab, Bob’ika, the Imperials are on Jacen Solo’s team now. The only reason I can think of for fronting up would be if you planned to take a crack at him. Am I right?”

Fett steeled himself to go back into the room. He hadn’t thought it through that far. “I won’t be cheering him on, that’s for sure.”

Mirta’s voice made Fett start. “I heard all that, you shabuir.” She stalked up to him and shoved him hard in the chest. “Don’t you ever learn? And if you’re going after

Jacen Solo, I’m going, too. For my mother. And what about Jaina?”

“You’re best buddies now…”

“She’s been here a few days. We talked this morning, about Mama. About having family members we want to love, but who make it pretty well impossible for us.”

Fett could comm Daala and tell her to forget it. But he’d said he’d do the job; he gave his word. And while he couldn’t change the past, he could see now who he needed to ally with to change the future.

“Maybe the Jedi wants to come too,” he said. “It’ll be good training for when she has to do it for real. You happy, Mirta?” Fett rarely used her name. He wanted to love her, too, but he didn’t know where to start loving anyone. She could at least manage to love Grade. It made him feel relieved that she could, and that might just have been because he cared about her. “You think that’s the best compromise?”

“Just do it,” she said.

Fett walked back into the room. It was going to be a long day, and he’d take it a piece at a time. Now wasn’t the time to tell Sintas he might be in battle against the man who killed her daughter tomorrow. That could wait until he got back, assuming he did. Mirta took Sintas back to her room and Medrit went to sit with her while Fett faced Jaina.

“Okay, Solo,” he said, standing over her at the table. She looked a different woman from the one who had strolled into Keldabe just days ago. Not disoriented or resentful, as he thought she might be by now, but with the expression of someone who was struggling to follow a complex explanation, watching faces intently for clues. “Got a training exercise for you. Tomorrow, we might pay your brother a visit. On the front line.”

## CAPTAIN'S DAY CABIN, ANAKIN SOLO; OFF FONDOR

If I were them, I'd have blown me out of the sky by now.

While Caedus waited for Niathal's task force to show, he used the time to gather Force impressions of the Fondorian defenses. They were waiting. He could wait, too.

I'm not omnipotent. I have to understand my limits. I still need people to carry out my plans.

There was nothing moving between the planet and the orbital yards now, not even routine shuttle traffic, but that was to be expected if they were battened down against an imminent attack. And there was no sign of the Fondorian fleet.

They'll come out of hyperspace. They had a warning, like they had warning of the minelayers, so they jumped.

And they'd be back when it was most inconvenient, but he'd be ready. He thought he could sense a great flurry of hyperspace activity, like the pressure he would often feel behind his eyes in the hours before a thunderstorm. There was movement out there, far more than just the elements of the Third Fleet or Pellaeon's Imperials converging on this position.

And she has to go.

Niathal. The leaked intelligence had to be one of Niathal's cronies-none of his own crew would be so careless or treacherous. It had to be one of her Mon Cal or Quarren buddies undermining him to shake his crew's faith in him, or even set him up for a defeat that would enable Niathal to take sole control.

Endex, Admiral. I just have to work out the least damaging way to get you out of my hair.

Caedus still expected her to try to oust him every time he left Coruscant, but she never had. Either she wanted the war won before she moved in to take credit for it, or she was waiting for him to get killed. That's your single biggest mistake. If you'd seized sole power in my absence, I'd have had a hard time retaking Coruscant. Not hard militarily, but a counterattack on my own capital, on top of the fragile recovery from the last war.... no, Coruscant wouldn't recover psychologically from that. It's the heart of my new empire. I need that heart unbroken.

Niathal was a fleet officer to her core. She could never think like a galactic leader. She'd want to do things by the naval rules riveted deep in her psyche, to engage him from the bridge of a battleship as if that somehow sanctified her actions. Her and Pellaeon, both: he trusted neither. They went along with him because the pressure from beneath them, the rank and file, the Moff's, the crews, kept them from openly opposing him.

Tebut.... yes, I wish I had done things differently. Was her destiny to show me that a Sith's true anger is meant for larger targets? I have to think she had a purpose. I set out on this path for all the Tebut's in the galaxy, the mass of ordinary beings crushed by the badly used power of a handful. I'd never waste a life like that.... would I?

Caedus had dreaded discovering that he might be sliding down his grandfather's disastrous path. Every day, though, he saw confirmation that he wasn't; there had been plenty killed like Tebut in Vader's day, people said, not just one shocking act. But Vader had been crippled by love, and his command tainted by a demented fool of an Emperor. In Caedus's here and now, there was neither distracting love nor any higher authority stifling him.

Yes. Tebut's death had been a wake-up call from the Force, he was sure of that.

Death? Say it. I killed her. Face it. Learn from it.

The past couldn't be changed, just observed. Watching history was pointless unless lessons were learned from it and used to shape what could be changed-the next moment, and the next, because that was all the future was, a series of decisions taken differently. Tahiri hadn't quite accepted that, even if her rational mind told her Anakin was gone forever, and that each backward glance paralyzed her life in the present; but he would wean her off that dependency on regret for her own sake, as much as for his.

Niathal is coming. It's not a threat. It's an opportunity. How do I take the chance that's offered to me? What have I learned?

In any war, officers died too.

He would recognize the chance when he saw it. No need to alienate Niathal's crews by making her look a martyr. I need them on my side. I can't do it all on my own, and fear doesn't keep order forever.

"Sir?"

Tahiri's voice filtered through. He'd known she was approaching-he was sure, he thought-but let it wash over him. "Yes, Tahiri?"

"Something's bothering me."

If it was about Anakin, he'd be disappointed. She appeared like a sharp edge in the Force sometimes. "Go ahead."

"When Niathal arrives, how can this assault possibly work? How are you going to be able to continue working with her after this?"

Not Anakin, then. The future; good. "That's rhetorical."

"No." Tahiri seemed to be making an active effort to learn as much as she could on this mission. "I don't understand what options are open to you. You can't get rid of her."

"Why?"

“Even you can’t control the whole fleet, all the time, every day, because even a Sith has finite time. So you need as many loyal officers as you can get. If anything happens to Niathal, they’ll worry that nobody’s safe from you.”

“You’re impressing me these days, Tahiri.” And you’ll want my job. And there I was worrying where I might find a worthy replacement for Ben Skywalker. “I think Niathal is going to make a mistake. I’m just giving her the proverbial cord with which to hang herself.”

Tahiri looked as if she were chewing the words and then digesting them, but not enjoying the taste.

“The landings on the orbital yards.... the assault force commanders are getting anxious. I can hear them on the bridge comlinks nagging Captain Nevil. They need the reassurance of times and coordinates.”

“I can’t give them that yet, but they have intelligence on the layout of the yards, don’t they?” Caedus thought of Nevil, given that he’d flung his captain against a bulkhead in the Tebut incident, and wondered just how low he’d sunk in the Quarren’s estimation. He’d have to get Nevil back on his side. “And Nevil is reassuring them?”

“Yes.”

“It’s just nerves.”

“Okay, sir.”

“Tell you what, Tahiri, “Caedus said, remembering the Jacen Solo who could get a whole hangar deck of troops cheering him, “I’ll show them that I’m not sitting here in comfort filing my nails.”

Caedus opened the locker hatch where his flight suit and other abandoned working kit was stowed. He used to look like one of his own troops; it was time to restore that comforting symbol for this task force. He slipped his black cloak off his shoulders and pulled his flight coveralls over his pants and tunic.

Caedus pressed the desk comlink. “Delta Hangar, ready my StealthX, please.” Tahiri looked as if she was expecting to follow. “Just a sortie to get a closer look. I know the kind of things they say on the mess decks. Commanders who hang too far back from the front line get awarded the Coruscant Star by the ranks. I don’t want them giving me that decoration. Ever.”

Niathal’s estimated time on station was one hour. That was ample to check out at least a couple of Fondor’s orbitals. As Caedus made his way through the Destroyer’s hatches and passages, he picked up the mood of crew members, their lack of confidence, their uncertainty, and he suppressed the anger that threatened to well up. On the hangar deck, the ground technicians seemed puzzled.

Make them believe by succeeding. You used to inspire them. It takes time to build a reputation but a second to lose it. It was just a second. Just a slip. Just a lesson.

“Time I did a recce, “Caedus said, blending back into their language and community. “I’ll never

ask anyone to do what I'm not prepared to do myself.”

The StealthX dropped out of the hatch into the void and hyperjumped for the orbitals. When it fell out into realspace moments later and within striking distance of Fon-dor, it was just a small black patch of undetectable nothing that blotted out stars-so vivid, so stark from space-for an instant as it passed. Sometimes Caedus wondered if this was what it felt like to be a ghost, seeing everything so clearly yet not being seen.

As he streaked high over the first orbital, a metallic arrowhead kilometers long, he could see the outlines of Star Destroyers flanked by buildings, cranes, and webs of pipes and cables. His senses told him that living beings huddled down there waiting for an attack. Around the curve of the planet, the next orbital ahead was oriented head-on, a slab with structures extending from top and bottom. It resolved into an industrial city as he passed above it. He could observe at his leisure. Again, a workforce waited for the worst, radiating anxiety and aggression in the Force; and everywhere, on orbitals and planets, Caedus felt weapons and vessels ready to repel him. Fondor was small in galactic terms, but the whole planet was a dockyard with billions of staff. It had to be the GA's asset again: or it had to be put out of action.

I really wouldn't trust the Imperial Remnant to play nicely with this toy.

The Moff's had Borleias and Bilbringi. They'd be kept busy admiring those baubles for a while, giving Caedus time to restore stability and remove any temptation to step in and impose their own kind of order, just to be helpful.

For a moment, Caedus thought he could feel familiar presences in the Force, but the sensation passed. It was replaced by his Sith battle awareness of his captains and commanders, a living grid of interconnected reactions that tilted, panned and zoomed like a holochart marked with transponder icons. Caedus had a better picture of the theater of war than instruments could give them, he knew; it was a hard act of faith for them to surrender judgment to something so nebulous.

Something blipped in his field of vision, and was gone again.

Maybe it had never been there. That was a drawback with battle awareness. The more he could see with the technique, the more detailed it became, and the harder it was sometimes to separate the images in his inner eye from what he could physically see.

The orbitals he managed to observe before running short on time were packed with ships, many looking as if they were near the final phase of construction, and more than he'd ever realized Fondor had in build. This wasn't just a symbolically important planet to bring into line. It was a legitimate target.

It would have been so much simpler with the mine network in place.

He hyperjumped briefly to bring him closer to his flagship. The technique alarmed non-Jedi X-wing pilots; they once said he'd fall out of hyperspace smack into the hull of an SSD one day if he kept bouncing around blind like that. But Caedus knew instinctively where he was in three

dimensions, and even in the higher ones. He knew.

There.

He was back in realspace and the Anakin Solo was visible in a constellation of frigates, cruisers, landing craft, carriers, and ten Star Destroyers.

Niathai's Third Fleet-a task force, but it was convenient to think of them in separate fleet terms, because they were not all one happy navy, not by a long shot-would need to keep the planet's defenses occupied while he captured the orbitals. The Imperial Remnant would need to prowl the outer boundary, alert for the return of the Fondorian navy. Caedus felt he'd planned it well enough. Even Niathal's outburst and insistence on rushing here to show him how to do it properly fell elegantly into the battle plan. He substituted Niathal for the mine net.

Caedus reached out to his commanders and spread a little genuine confidence that things would work out fine. Nevil... he could focus in on Nevil, and the man was deeply troubled. Oh, yes. His son was killed. I forget that. It was an unhappy mind, and Caedus moved on, concentrating on the threatening storm pressing on his sinuses, the vague sensation in the Force that told him ships were out there, massing somewhere-and Niathal should have been dropping out of space just about....

Now.

He looked around for the blooms of light as ships reappeared in realspace. As he slowed his approach, he caught the shooting-star effect in his peripheral vision, and rolled the StealthX slowly to look around. Yes, the Third Fleet was on time. The fleet gradually built up, star by artificial star, into a ragged constellation of navigation lights and harshly sunlit surfaces. Early warning systems on Fondor would have detected the emerging fleet by now.

They could still surrender. He'd go through the motions, but only to check the boxes. If they did surrender, he'd still have to occupy the planet for a period anyway, just to make sure it stayed that way. That devoured more resources.

There was still the Fondorian navy to account for, though.

He felt it out there. It was in hyperspace, and his awareness was nothing like the one he had in normal space; there was no real size or scope to guide him, just an impression, a little more solid than a hunch.

Now it was time to face Niathal.

He flicked open the comlink, perfectly secure this close to the ship. StealthXs almost always operated in complete comm silence, and nobody could monitor them without big clues like an open channel. The fighters really did van-ish. "Solo to Nevil, the Third is on station. Patch me through to Ocean."

She would be...

No...

Caedus had jerked the StealthX ninety degrees to starboard before his retina-fractionally slower than Force senses-registered a slab of ship filling his vision. And it wasn't the Anakin. He righted himself relative to the assembled fleet; but he was suddenly overwhelmed, ships popping into existence all around him in a complete 360-degree ring. Wherever he turned the StealthX, he was facing the spars and sensor masts and patchworked hatches of warships. Cannon turrets-he couldn't identify the type, the navy, anything. It was a fleet from another time and place.

He could feel the ships, but he had no impression of lethal, implacable mass. His passive sensors showed static, as if he'd been hit by an EM pulse that hadn't tripped the warning. He sensed danger, though; a real threat.

Caedus did what any pilot would, and signaled a warning as best he could, trying to work out what he had fallen into.

### ADMIRAL NIATHAL'S FLAGSHIP OCEAN; OFF FONDOR

Jacen Solo's open comlink spewed uncharacteristically loud chaos onto Niathal's calm bridge.

"Enemy vessels, I repeat enemy vessels, estimate five destroyers, type unknown, twenty light cruisers, no... fifteen..... range five hundred..."

She stared at her chart repeaters. Nothing. Just the ships she hoped and expected to find, the Third and Fourth fleet components. She looked up, searching for a simple explanation, and the electronic warfare control section-all ten officers-was staring back at her as one bemused being, equally dumbfounded, screens visibly devoid of frantic, blinking UNIDENTIFIED icons even from her position. One officer suddenly swung back to her screen and started punching in code. Nobody else said a word. Everyone with a sensor or screen was searching, cross-checking, looking to see what they'd missed and what bedlam was unfolding out there. Had the hyperjump disrupted all their calibration? Were they about to be vaporized?

"What is that man doing?" Niathal was genuinely thrown, wondering if she might have interrupted him on some morale-boosting dry-run pre-attack; that was the kind of irrational mystic stuff he'd do at a time like this. "Colonel Solo, this is Ocean, we do not see the targets, repeat, we do not see the targets..."

The officer of the watch and his juniors were at the forward viewscreen, physically searching through the transparisteel for whatever Jacen could detect but they couldn't. There was only so much a lookout could spot with the unaided eye against a starfield and from this position in the ship, but given what Jacen was calling in, they should have been able to see activity and the glitter of faceted surfaces bouncing raw sunlight back at them. And Jacen's voice-impressively calm, Niathal had to give him that-continued to fill the bridge, transmitting approximated ranges and positions relative to his own.

"I've got him, ma'am," said the EWO who'd been tapping at her console. "I've mapped his

comlink signal onto the holochart. Watch the purple trace.”

It was just a blob of violet light set a little way apart from an orderly pattern of blue transponder markers. The blue markers were in two distinct formations, pennant codes valid, showing two GA task forces. The violet light-Jacen Solo’s StealthX-was racing across the hoJochart, jinking and looping, as if it were navigating through a con-gested spacelane and avoiding bigger vessels.

Niathal’s initial shock, which had set her blood pumping hard enough to hear in her ears, was ebbing into disbelief and a different kind of worry. She glanced down at the comlink panel. Jacen was patched through to her and to the Anakin Solo’s bridge.

Okay. Let’s share your unique Sith insight, shall we, Colonel?

She flicked a key and the voice channel went to every bridge comlink in the two fleets.

“Ma’am, confirmed zero contacts.” The EWO seemed to hesitate, as if saying what was now on Niathal’s mind and probably everyone else’s was a little rude. “There’s nothing out there, unless someone has cloaking technology we don’t know about and Colonel Solo is able to see past it... being a Jedi, and all that.”

It was an outside chance, Niathal knew. Just to be on the safe side, she turned to the weapons officer.

“Bargos, lob the smallest torp you’ve got at one of those coordinates the colonel gave, will you?” she said. “See if we hit anything solid.”

“Very good, ma’am...” Bargos had a chartful of phantom targets to choose from. He keyed in a course with nothing to lock on to, and issued the standard warning across the task force. “Stand by, stand by, all vessels, live weapon, test-firing, bearing and course.... that... in five standard seconds.... and torpedo away.” They waited.

The torpedo’s sensor trace tracked steadily across the screen. It passed the projected impact point and carried on going.... and going. It looked like it would make it to Bestine in a few years, unimpeded by any mystery target.

“Maybe it’s moved..., “Bargos said, struggling to keep a straight face. It wasn’t humor; it was nerve-fraying anxiety, not about an invisible enemy, but about a commander who was behaving irrationally.

“Whoa, he’s lost it, “said a whispered voice behind Niathal, barely audible. “Told you he’d flipped, when he did that to Tebut...”

Jacen was still transmitting, calm but definitely confused.

“Anakin Solo, I have... lost visual.” There was a pause.

“Very good sir.”



“Anakin Solo, respond, did you confirm my visual? Anything?”

“Negative, sir.”

“One final visual check, and returning to ship.”

It was so silent on the bridge that Niathal could hear the collective unk of humans swallowing after holding their breath for a while. The whole episode had been played out live to the fleet. Everyone had heard how JCOS-2-joint Chief of State Number Two, as Jacen was known in memos-had been chasing ghosts. If they hadn't heard it live, the utterly reliable fleet scuttlebutt service would provide highlights for them for years to come. Niathal checked her chrono and the time codes on the signals. The bizarre incident had run for a little under eight standard minutes.

She judged that the time was right. “Anakin Solo, this is Ocean. Get me Captain Nevil. Now.”

Nevil must have been right next to the comm station. Niathal hardly had time to blink. She didn't even need to pose a question before he answered it. He did a fine job of sounding as if they hadn't spoken in months.

“Ma'am, we're no wiser than you are about what happened.”

“Tell me this was some ill-timed readiness drill, Captain.”

“I can't, ma'am.”

“Great gods of the waters, is Solo insane?” Her comlink was still transmitting to all bridges. She had a valid reason for doing that, if the threat really had been a cloaked fleet, but it was much more about enabling a bloodless coup. The ships' companies and their officers could now make up their own minds about which commander they would pre-fer to follow into a tight corner. “I know he doesn't drink liquor...”

“Ma'am, when Colonel Solo is available, I shall tell him you wish to talk to him.”

“Most kind, Captain.” Niathal smoothed her jacket, with the feeling of having found a thousand-denomination cash-cred in the street. She had paraded her contempt for Jacen across the task force, and Nevil had been seen as loyally supporting his superior officer. Honor was satisfied. “All vessels, stand defense watches.”

She stepped down from the slightly raised dais that spanned the deck, and paused. “And... if anyone doesn't spot anything that isn't there, don't hesitate not to tell me.”

A ripple of laughter ran around the bridge. Even though a battle was still imminent, the tension dropped a good few notches. She stepped into her day cabin and leaned back against the bulkhead, eyes closed for a moment, before comming Nevil.

“Captain Nevil, “she said. “Sorry about that. Thank you for sounding suitably noncommittal. I just want you to know you're not alone.”

# Chapter 12

Could I have stopped all this? If I'd told Cat Omas right at the start to let Corellia go its own way, would we be here now? Trying to force every Alliance world to pool its defense forces was a principle. We didn't actually have an external threat to face. But we created one.

And if another enemy like the Yuuzhan Vong had ever shown up-I'm certain that Corellians would have come running to defend the galaxy anyway. Like they always have.

-Luke Skywalker, to Han Solo

FIFTY KILOMETERS OUTSIDE FLEET ASSEMBLY AREA, NEARFONDOR

Caedus fumed.

He was no fool, he wasn't mad, and he had explored more arcane Force techniques than any member of the Jedi Council. He did not fall prey to tricks.

But even if that phantom fleet had been a trick and not some freak phenomenon thrown up by physics beyond his grasp-then who was creating it? He took one long loop around the area in the StealthX.

Caedus wasn't checking to make sure he hadn't missed any more humiliatingly nonexistent ships. He was scouting for the source of the illusion. And it was an illusion-yes, that was much, much more likely than the laws of the universe having a bad day.

He'd pulled off some remarkably convincing tricks himself; he'd hidden Lumiya right under Luke's nose, literally. He'd also been caught up in manufactured illusions and he could still feel the apparent reality of Lumiya's conjured world in her asteroid habitat.

Niathal, mundane rule-follower that she was, had simply tested reality by firing a torpedo, her mind unencumbered by any hall-of-mirrors thinking that would make her question if the torpedo failing to hit anything was also part of the same elaborate, convincing construction.

But I'm a Sith Lord.

I should be beyond this. I should be anticipating these strikes against me.

It had to be one of the renegade Jedi. Lumiya was dead. Who else might be able to fool him? Benno, Ben had his skills like vanishing in the Force, but he thought in honest, plain lines, channeling his Force power into extensions of ordinary talents like smashing down doors, locating explosives, and blinding surveillance holocams. Two burly CSF officers and a sniffer akk could do that. So it would be one of the usual suspects-Luke, probably, or maybe Zekk, because it wasn't his mother's or his sister's style. Where were they? How far could Luke extend his powers?

And why couldn't anyone else see it? Illusions could be made visible to many people. So it was

designed to disturb him, and him alone, not to lure his ships into shooting and whatever might result from that.

Caedus could feel nothing beyond a distant sense that there were still Jedi in the Force, much the way the lights of a city were a constant and unnoticed backdrop until they went out. He was chasing phantoms again. That was what they wanted. He had to focus, swallow his anger, and avoid being provoked.

The crew of the Anakin Solo had already heard him make a complete fool of himself. He'd have to work on restoring his infallible image.

Luke. After Niathal, before order being restored-he had to do something about Luke. Perhaps Luke would have the common sense of the last remaining Jedi after Palpatine's Purge, and go into exile.

Ahead of Caedus, an auxiliary vessel was hooking up to a cruiser to replenish supplies via a long tube-like tunnel, proof of how rapidly some of the Third Fleet had slipped their berths. They were catching up on routine tasks that would have normally been completed alongside. The Imperials would have brought forward their embarkation, too; as soon as they showed up, they could get this over with. Occupying Fondor wasn't an option. No... it would turn into Corellia, but worse. Worlds looked at Corellia, bruised but still Confederate, and might even be emboldened enough by the cocky defiance to try to emulate it. Fondor might do that while tying up hundreds of thousands of troops and their vessels. Caedus intended to make an example of Fondor, the sort that said: Don't try this again.

Torching Kashyyyk should have announced that, but the human majority on many planets probably took more notice of what happened to their own related species in nice clean cities.

He was among the scattered ships now. The light level in his cockpit-the light from the distant sun at his back-dipped slightly.

He couldn't see anything on his instruments. He couldn't feel anything near him beyond the general oppressive weight of warships preparing for battle.

Remember what happened last time. Caedus wouldn't be caught twice. If he leaned slightly to one side, the reflection at his six often appeared on the viewscreen in front of him. He shifted in his seat, but there was nothing. If] jump at every shadow now, he's got me. Ludicrous. The next moment, the sherrnkkk of tearing fiberplast vibrated through the airframe and his chest, and he was flung to port, spinning out of control. Something had hit him. He hadn't clipped anything through careless flying. He was too experienced, too good. He punched the StealthX into a short burn to stop the roll and peeled away under the ships to put some distance between him and whatever had rammed him.

Obviously-he couldn't see it. No point sending a distress signal; this wasn't something to share with the fleet again. He accelerated, trying to get some edge, looking for vwhat wasn't there: stars.

He was straining to find a dark area of obscured stars, the only way he could spot a fighter that was as camouflaged and undetectable as his own.

I've been hunted by a StealthX before, Luke. You think I'm stupid?

If he couldn't see Luke, he would maneuver where Luke couldn't detect him.

He wasn't going to get in the same position of not being able to use his cannon as he had with Mara. He'd risk being hit by fragments. He didn't have far to run for help if he got a slow decompression. This time, he'd use what he'd learned.

For the first time, though, he began to wonder if it was Luke out there.

Ben?

Caedus hadn't felt anyone. Luke-he could always sense Luke. But Ben had taken to Force hiding instantly. Mara had managed it for critical moments and nearly killed him, but this smacked of Ben.

Bang.

Something clipped him from underneath the fuselage this time, shaking his teeth. He corrected course. He didn't need instruments to tell him he had a breach somewhere. When he looped again, he caught sight of a thin trail of escaping vapor or fluid, probably coolant. StealthXs had traded shielding for sensor negation; they still had pretty tough skins in collisions, but hitting another vessel at these speeds normally tore off parts and ended unhappily.

This was incredibly precise wingtip ramming, or staggering luck twice in a row. And he was no longer undetectable. He had a vapor trail.

He opened a comm channel. There was no point trying for a meld, after all. The StealthX's comm system had seen more use today than it had in its entire service history.

"Face me, and let's finish it," he said. Ben, or Luke? If it's Luke, then he's got new tricks. It could even be Jaina, if Ben's teaching everyone to shut down in the Force. I don't care.

"Come about and head for the orbitals," said Luke's voice. "You'll make it. Then land, and we'll talk."

Caedus headed for the Anakin, wondering just how far Luke would go to force him to land. The odds were different now. This wasn't like Kavan. Caedus had a fleet right next door.

"Aren't you going to open fire?"

There was flash of blackness in the cockpit as the pursuing vessel blocked the sun for a moment. Luke's presence faded back into the Force like a sunrise. "If I wanted to kill you, I could have done it several times over by now."

"You think a stern talking-to, deprogramming, and the love of a good family will put me right again?"

“I’m prepared to try. You’d be amazed.”

Caedus was drawing Luke deeper into the fleet assembly area. Luke seemed to be simply hanging a wing-breadth off his tail, a suicidal tactic for anyone else.

“You’re going to have to shoot me down to stop me,” said Caedus.

“I always learn from history.”

“Try-ahh.” Caedus struggled to correct the StealthX as the damaged starboard wing cannon broke away. The escaping vapor was speckled with round droplets now. “Did you do that?”

Chunkk. The port cannon ripped free.

“You could retaliate,” said Luke, “and we’ll both end up dead. Come about and head back toward Fondor.”

Caedus was coming up on the fleet auxiliaries with their replenishment conduits strung between ships. If he could alert his anti-air batteries on the frigates, he could lead Luke’s StealthX between them and trust to the gunners’ timing.

“I’m not your father, Luke, and I don’t need to be redeemed,” said Caedus.

Luke reacted; it stung him, and Caedus actually hadn’t meant it to. He felt the flinch.

“Mara told me that about Lumiya.”

The name made Caedus flinch this time. “She was right, Luke.”

Pinpoints of light picked out maintenance pods moving over ships’ hulls. Caedus was preparing for a feint and a dash into the Anakin’s hangar bay now. Luke was too smart to mess around in the heart of the GA Fleet; Niathal must have done a deal. Caedus was being herded toward something here. He was being set up.

Luke hadn’t mentioned Mara’s death. Odd: he either had something worse planned for Caedus, or he didn’t think he was responsible. The ax waiting to fall kept getting bigger. Fett hadn’t come after him, either, and if one thing was certain, it was that he would find a way of getting at him.

But not this time.

Luke’s StealthX nudged him again from behind-how? Caedus couldn’t see. Force push? Something metallic inside the fuselage shrieked. He had a sense of someone rummag-ing furiously in the drives as if looking for a dropped hydrospanner, throwing fragments into the coils. He’s ripping the thing apart...

Caedus tried to block Luke in the Force and suddenly got an idea of just how much power Luke could muster. His seat shot forward, sheared off the runners, tipped to one side, and he hit the console

at an angle before he could buffer the collision with the Force. Something cracked in his chest. Pain flared, stopping his breathing. Then he was aware of brilliant white light coming right at him. In the moments before he managed to veer off to starboard, al-most blinded, he got a glimpse of a StealthX's uneven outline with two grappling arms extended, and the sense of a Jedi other than Luke.

They'd tried to cripple the StealthX and grab him, airframe and all, right in the middle of the fleet. Brazen; incredible. He'd never allow anyone but his own apprentice to fly a StealthX again, not even an ordinary pilot. Luke was still close behind, feeling as if he were actually leaning on his shoulder; Caedus switched to raw instinct. He looped around, weaving between cruisers spaced at regular intervals-someone must have picked him up on visual by now, surely? - and then maneuvered to line up the auxiliaries with the Anakin Solo, accelerating. He'd either hit it right or he'd crash, but if the other StealthX tried to take him at this velocity from a head-on intercept it'd rip them both apart.

Caedus aimed right at the fleet auxiliary replenishing a landing craft. It was crewed by civilians, merchant fleet, noncombatants; it had only a light cannon for self-defense. The Jong connection tunnel was actually an air lock extender, a quick and easy way to transfer supplies without docking shuttles, and there'd be crew working in it. Luke was right on his tail.

Smashing through it would damage the StealthX badly, but it would rip the tunnel apart, and there'd be deaths.

Let's see who blinks first.

Caedus realized nobody could see any of the StealthX's. Whatever fluid he was losing had vented completely. The auxiliaries couldn't even pick them up on collision alarms.

Do it.

The Anakin Solo loomed behind it.

"Don't..." Luke could see what he was doing, all right.

"I'm past caring," said Caedus, lying.

You'll peel off rather than risk dipping that.... killing workers.... Caedus thought.

I'll live with it.

The orange tunnel rushed up to meet him faster than he expected and he jerked the yoke back. Nothing snagged him; he didn't feel it, anyway. He couldn't look back. But he felt Luke's moment of horror at a near hit, buying him seconds that he needed to shoot underneath the Star Destroyer and come back along its length toward one of the hangar decks.

"Anakin Solo, emergency landing, damaged StealthX One-One-open Five-Alpha Hangar..."

He could have sworn he snapped off the tip of a comm mast. He was holding the fighter steady as much by the Force as by its controls, and trying to slow it with the Force as well, because the braking

burn wasn't enough. He had to drop into that slot just right or he'd take the section out with him.

I could have activated the transponder, let them track me for the last few seconds, but I can't pinpoint the Jedi...

Too late.

Caedus stopped thinking and felt. He was braking with everything he had. Coming out of the blackness of space, the hangar lights were sudden and blinding, and then he realized they were sparks. He was skidding across the hangar deck. The bulkhead filled his view; the arrester baffle caught him. He was flung against what felt like a permacrete wall. As the lights around dimmed and he couldn't see through the canopy any longer, he had a foolish moment of thinking he was dying.

No, you've done that. Doesn't feel like this.

It was the automatic flame-retardant foam coating the fighter. The airframe was completely still; he wasn't lodged in a bulkhead. He inhaled sharply, cursed a broken rib, and set about trying to heal it, eyes closed, while he waited for the fire party to decide he wasn't going to explode, and crack the canopy from the outside.

After a few moments, the light level increased. The foam was dispersing, and the canopy opened.

"Sir, I hope your insurance covers this..." Say the right thing. The Jacen Solo thing. Show them you're not a madman.

"I swerved to avoid a Jedi," Caedus said. "I didn't get his number. Give me a hand, will you?"

They were expecting him to rage at them for some imagined shortcoming, he could tell. He felt their relief as he climbed out of the cockpit and slipped on the remains of the foam. When he looked back, the StealthX was a mess. He was quite upset by that.

"Quick coat of paint, sir, and you'll never know she had a prang," the crash crew chief said. "Med droid's on the way."

"At least I know who generated the phantom fleet," Caedus said. This counter-rumor could zip around the fleet, too. Sane, humble, even humorous in adversity. "Next time I try to chase Luke Skywalker's pranks, confiscate my pass— card, will you?"

They laughed; good old Colonel Solo, one of the team, not the one who killed junior officers at all. He controlled himself sufficiently to limp back to his day cabin via the bridge, where he found that the Jedi illusion story had preceded him, and closed the hatch before letting the pent-up rage escape like steam. He looked in the mirror; a few cuts, and the eyes of a stranger, yellow, but eyes he was getting used to.

He could channel anger now. He would save its focus and momentum to take out Fondor.

GA WARSHIP OCEAN, FLEET ASSEMBLY AREA, OFF FONDOR

Niathal listened to the chatter on the bridge, caf in hand.

“He said the Jedi created a Force illusion of a huge fleet, targeted solely at him, “one of the signals officers said.

“Oh, Jedi, of course...” The junior officer of the watch was glued to the sensor screen but still managed to roll his eyes in mock realization. “Don’t you just hate it when that happens?”

Niathal believed it, but she was still waiting to hear it from Jacen’s own lips. The absence of the Fondorian fleet was troubling her; the first wave of the Imperial Remnant had dropped out of hyperspace, and she was waiting for a comm from Pellaeon. She had made up her mind. She would seek a surrender, and if Fondor declined talks, she would disable the defenses on the orbitals to allow the ground troops to land and secure them, one at a time, and then move on to begin precision attacks on the planet’s fleet bases. There was no point creating a wasteland.

And if-when-the Fondorian fleet reappeared, they’d have to get past Pellaeon, too.

And then there was Jacen Solo. Luke would have to learn to shoot to kill, he really would. She wondered if she would have fired if she’d had a lock on Jacen; she imagined her fingers curled around the yoke of an X-wing, and her thumb depressing the button, and wasn’t sure that she would.

But what do you do with a Sith? What do you do to restrain a man who has powers like Luke Skywalker, but no rules, no moral limits? It was hard to see him as simply someone who believed in benign dictatorship but whose law-and-order policy sometimes got out of hand. His otherness disturbed her. She could barely remember Palpatine’s reign, just his image everywhere, and Vader at parades on the holonews-occasionally. But she hadn’t known they were Sith. She didn’t even know then that Jedi existed. When she studied history at school, she learned about the Sith-Jedi wars by rote, but now that she could actually put it in a personal context of individuals she worked with, it had taken on a whole new meaning. She was a little alarmed by both sides. The mind influence was the most corrosive realization she’d had; how much of what she’d done was purely of her own volition? Luke could even deceive Jacen into fighting a fleet that wasn’t there.

No excuses. You knew what that leak to Luke would do. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t examine every urge you get to see if it’s really your own.

“Ma’am, Admiral Pellaeon for you.” The signals officer patched through the comm. “Visual, too.” “Gil, you missed the warm-up act,” she said. Pellaeon filled the holoscreen, all immaculately trimmed white mustache and charcoal-gray tunic. She saw the positive reaction of the crew; he exuded reliability. “So I hear, Cha. It’s all rather quiet down there, isn’t it?” “I won’t say it...”

“If they have a surprise for us, we might have to find one for them.”

“Have you had a chance to peruse my new battle plan?” “I have,” Pellaeon said. “Will it survive contact with Colonel Solo?”

Pellaeon could always lighten the mood if he put his mind to it. “Shall we see if he’s recovered



sufficiently to meet us?” Niathal asked.

“Your flagship, or mine? Or even his?” “I’ll tell him Bloodfin. He wants to keep you happy.” “Half an hour. I’m very conscious of the lack of even a Fondorian patrol.”

A great deal was said in front of the more junior ranks, and in most cases it wasn’t politic to hint at disagreement with other commanders, but Niathal was putting distance between herself and Jacen, and she needed them to know it. If Luke had warned her that he was going to attempt a snatch, she might even have been able to help him, but he seemed reluctant to involve her. She wondered when he might next reappear. If he didn’t, she would have to go ahead with a hasty plan that had crystallized on the in-bound jump. She would relieve Jacen of command, and order the Anakin back to base; the exact timing would de-pend on the progress of the operation, but it would be be-fore the withdrawal to Coruscant. With Pellaeon, she had enough firepower to enforce it if she had to. A third of the ship’s commanders in her task force were likely to support her, and few of the others would actively oppose her.

It was still a major risk in the middle of a war, but waiting until the war was over wasn’t an option.

Tahiri Veila now appeared to be the gatekeeper for comms to Jacen, at least when he was off the bridge. “Lieutenant, is Colonel Solo well enough to transfer to Bloodfin for a senior staff session at twenty-two hundred?”

“He’s well, Admiral.” Tahiri paused and the link went quiet as if she was consulting him. “We’ll be there.”

We. She’d fallen into a flag lieutenant role, then. The more scurrilous members of the crew assumed she was a new romantic interest, but Niathal had watched the dynamics of how Jacen behaved with Ben Skywalker, and it was much more a relationship of gang boss and junior henchman. Tahiri would be his fixer, messenger, and possibly even spy. Possibly? Definitely. Jacen knew how to lead troops instinctively, but his true calling was political gamesmaster.

“What’s the estimate on the StealthX?” Niathal asked. “We’re a little short of them until Incom deliver. You might have to slum it with X-wings.”

“Operational in forty-eight hours. The workshop’s re-mounting cannons now.”

“Cannibalizing, no doubt. Are you going to be flying combat?”

“No, I have orders to liaise with the Imperial Remnant.”

Ah, spy. I was right. “Later, then, Lieutenant.”

Niathal would have consulted Jacen on contact with the Fondorian President-Shas Vadde-but time was short, and that was the excuse she would give him. She kept an eye on the chrono while contact was made with Vadde’s office, realizing for the first time that being Supreme Commander as well as joint Chief of State was an awkward mix when making diplomatic contact. Being asked to rejoin the

GA could never be called exploratory talks when the request came from the senior commander of a task force on war footing.

“Chief of State,” said Vadde. “This strikes me as a decision already taken in search of a retroactive justification.”

He was right; they were going through the motions. “President Vadde, I can only ask again that you agree to re-join the Galactic Alliance and contribute to the common defense of the member worlds.”

“Having just reached some kind of economic recovery after the Yuuzhan Vong, and as our economy is substantially dependent on shipbuilding and the defense industry, we’re under no illusion that we’re seen as anything other than another handy fleet resource for the defense of Coruscant.”

He was awfully pious for a leader of a world that strip-mined every moon, asteroid, and stray pebble in the Tapani sector. “I’ll give you until twenty-three fifty-nine to put the request to your cabinet, and respond formally to me.”

“I can give you our answer now.”

“Nevertheless, I feel obliged to allow you that time.”

It was a warning, and sometimes the cold wind blowing from the brink did sober people up. The fleet would begin the attack any time after midnight. There was no advantage of surprise left for either side at this late stage.

“Noted, Chief of State. Remember that we’re no use to you broken.”

Maybe there was some room for maneuver; she’d keep an eye on that. Jacen Solo, though, was going to be disappointed if he didn’t get his chance to show what firm government meant.

“Ma’am,” said the comms officer, “there’s some HNE mobile broadcast units straying into the area.”

“We haven’t declared an exclusion zone.”

“Shall I issue a warning?”

“Tell them they might well be in crossfire at any time. They take their chances.”

“One has already requested an interview with Colonel Solo. Apparently he’s given them clearance to accompany the troop landings on the first orbital.”

“He’d better win, then,” said Niathal. “Or he’ll be taking prime airtime to advertise how to repeat our failures at Corellia.”

And if he did—he’d be doing it on his own.

CREW COMPARTMENT OF TRA'KAD, ORI'RAMIKADE RV POINT, SOMEWHERE NEAR THE TAPANI SECTOR, 2200 HOURS: AWAITING ORDERS FROM ADMIRAL DAALA

“Will your brother know when you’re around?” Mirta Gev asked.

Jaina almost stopped chewing. It was the first time that Mirta had mentioned Jacen, and as she could only want lethal revenge on him for her mother’s death, it showed either tact or tactics. Mando women didn’t do tact. Jaina took in another slab of uj’alayi and used the silence enforced by chewing to gather her thoughts. The cake was like a solid mortar mix made from nuts, syrup, dried fruit, and spices, cloyingly sweet. It was as much exercise as nourishment. She worried that her teeth would collapse long before the rest of her.

“Yes, he probably will,” she said. And he’d be baffled by the impressions he got back, to say the least. “We’re twins. They say that even non-Force-sensitive twins are linked across distance somehow. With Jedi-it’s real. Except he disguises his Force presence, so I’d never know he was around.”

Mirta had the same eyes as her grandfather: she looked as if she were permanently assessing the risk of something bad happening, and whether she could shoot it or sell it. “You could always follow the trail of bodies, I suppose...”

It was going to happen sooner or later. What did you say to someone whose mother had died under your brother’s interrogation? Sorry didn’t quite cut it. Somehow the fact that Ailyn Vel had been a bounty hunter and assassin, ostensibly hired to kill the Solo family, didn’t give Jaina quite the fuel of righteous indignation that she imagined when she was face-to-face with the human wreckage scattered by those casual decisions.

It’s okay. Ailyn was just going through the motions, using Dad to lure her own father to his death. She wasn’t after us, really. And she was hired by Dad’s cousin to assassinate us anyway-it’s not as if he hadn’t tried before, families. Aren’t they great?

“If there was anything I could do to atone for him, I’d do it,” said Jaina. “I’ll do what I can to stop him doing it again. I’m sorry, by the way. But you know that.”

“So it’s true he killed your aunt Mara.”

It was freshly shocking each time. Jaina still couldn’t see him going that far, but then he’d tortured Ben, thinking he was doing him good. If he did anything, he might not have planned for it to go that badly wrong.

Was there a real difference between sick and evil? “I don’t know, Mirta.”

“Think he’s capable of it?”

“I don’t know him anymore. I don’t even know where to start.”

Mirta leaned her head back against the bulkhead, arms folded. There were a dozen troops in the

Tra'kad assault vessel: Jaina and eleven Mandalorians in full armor, all waiting for the order from Admiral Daala that might not actually come. The other ten were members of Fett's elite special forces, the Ori'ramikade-supercommandos, the troops who'd saved Caluula Station and her parents from the Yuuzhan Vong. It was a very tangled social web; it was also sobering to tally the net score of incidents and realize that the Solos had done more lasting harm to Fett than Fett had to them.

“Aliit ori'shya tal'din, “Mirta muttered.

“What's that mean?”

“Family is more than bloodline. Meaning that families are about who raises and cares for you, not who your birth parents are. Or, put another way-your real relatives can treat you worse than chakaaryc strangers.”

Jaina could work out the meaning. She wasn't picking up much of the language, though; every Mandalorian seemed to be at least trilingual-Basic, Mando'a, and Huttese-and they spent a lot of time with their helmets on, talking among themselves. Whatever language the ten commandos were using on their helmet comlinks, Jaina was only aware of the body language, hand gestures, and head movements; it was an animated discussion conducted in apparent silence. The effect was unnerving, as if they had senses that she didn't, and she was missing the bigger picture. She wondered if they were gossiping about her. They radiated amusement.

Aha.

It was always edifying to see your own characteristics reflected in others. The next time that some ordinary being treated her with suspicion, she'd think how her Force abilities looked from the outside.

Mirta turned her head and said something to the commandos. A stream of unintelligible words emerged from the helmets, followed by laughter.

“It's all they can think about, “Mirta muttered. “I'm glad it's only once every five years.”

“What is?”

“Galactic bolo-ball tournament. It's taken over the HoloNet.”

Wrong again, then. Jaina's misfortunes weren't as riveting as a sporting event. Life didn't center on her small circle, another reminder that there was a wider world she seldom saw. “Where's Fett?” “Slave I. Where else?”

The small Mandalorian flotilla included Fett's ship, the tank-like Tra'kad, and a squadron of Gladiators and Aggressors. The holochart set in the bulkhead showed other vessels idling at the RV point: a carrier, judging by the hatches, and a Sentinel landing craft that looked heavily modified. The carrier was tiny: no more than a hundred meters long.

“Beviin?” Jaina felt almost protective toward him. He seemed to pick up Fett's pieces far too

often. “Didn’t see him embark.”

“Ba’buir told him to stay behind. Either to placate Medrit, or to keep an eye on Ba’buir.” Mirta did a quick little shake of her head. “I mean Grandmama. It’s the same word in Mando’a. I mean Sintas.”

At least Beviin wasn’t going to get himself killed following Fett’s whim. Jaina always had a stake in her missions, so it was hard to imagine how soldiers would take risks like this for credits or out of some loyalty to a man who simply hired them out. She stopped short of judging them, though. She’d seen the state of Mandalore, and she’d never had to worry about where the next meal was coming from. “How did you manage to hate a man you’d never met, Mirta?” Jaina could sense the emotions between Mirta and her grandfather pretty clearly; Mirta longed to love him, but seemed battered by constant disappointments, and Fett was trying hard to get it right, bemused by failure. “Did your mother even remember him? You didn’t even know Sintas.”

“I grew up hearing how Fett had abandoned Grandmama, and Mama, and that she wouldn’t have been struggling to pay the bills or having to take dangerous bounties if he’d taken some responsibility.”

“Yes, but to hunt him down to kill him? For years? Most folks get a lawyer.”

“Mama had a bad time as a kid. Moving from place to place. Always getting in fights because she was different.” Mirta shrugged but didn’t elaborate. “She even married a Mandalorian to improve her chances of finding Ba’buir. My father.”

“Wow,” said Jaina. That was dedicated hatred. She didn’t ask why Mirta had followed her father’s culture, or why she hadn’t worked out earlier that Ailyn was a little obsessive. “I’m sorry.”

“And Ba’buir wasn’t what I grew up expecting, some womanizing thug blowing his fortune in cantinas. He was just this.... wasted, austere, lonely man.... hard to even like, and yet I found I was proud of him.”

Mirta let out a long breath and reached for her helmet. It was a cue that she’d had enough of baring her soul. Jaina counted it as a plus that she’d even bothered to talk, let alone in those frank terms.

“I still love my brother, but there’s nothing left to like about him,” Jaina said. “Love’s a very separate thing. It has an independent life of its own.”

“Well, if you have to earn love on points, it’s not love, is it? It’s approval.”

Jaina peeled a chunk of uj’alayi stuck to her finger, and decided the syrup would make great gasket sealant. One of the commandos, the tattooed man called Carid, took off his helmet and cocked his head on one side in an aw-come-on gesture. “Hey, plan the celebration you’ll have after your marriage. What’s the point of surviving a mission if you’re going to be this depressed?”

That was Mando sympathy. “It’s a Fett thing,” Mirta said.

“Ah, I bet Orade will teach you how to laugh. You’ll get the hang of it.”

Mirta seemed to manage a twitch of a smile at the mention of her betrothed. The minutes ticked away. Jaina had the sense of being in the engine room of an ancient seagoing ship, surrounded by pipes and hydraulic systems, rather than drifting imperceptibly in space. A scraping sound made her look up at the deckhead.

“Buy’cese, “said Carid. Mirta sealed her helmet, and he looked past her at Jaina. “Put your breather on, Jedi. That’s someone docking up top. Just in case the seals don’t hold.”

“Fix them with this, “Jaina said, holding up her last wrapped chunk of uj’alayi. Everyone laughed, and she heard them this time. “I’m always happy to be test aircrew in a totally unproven vessel...”

“It’ll hold, “said Ram Zerimar. “Time was when Mando’ade rode war droids into deep space, no fancy hulls, raw vacuum that far from your shebs.” He indicated a tiny gap between gloved thumb and forefinger. “That’s how we won an empire. You going soft or something, Car’ika?”

“Oh, I know, we were tough then. We’d go two weeks without breathing, and half a dead pygmy borrat was enough to feed a whole clan for a week.” Carid folded his arms across his barrel of a chest and stretched out his legs. “If any of our babies couldn’t lift a beskad by the time they were weaned, we’d harden’em up by catching them a full-grown Trandosha and making ‘em kill it with their paci-fier and eat it raw. Ah, those were the days.” He belched. “Pardon me. We’re just too cultured and sensitive now, you know.”

Jaina bit her lip to stifle a laugh. One of the overhead hatches opened, and Fett slid down the ladder to land among them.

“Docks with Slave I just fine, “he said, hooking his thumb in his belt. They really were testing the Tra’kad on the job. It didn’t seem to faze any of them. “We got mission details now.”

“It’s a go, then?” Jaina asked.

“No, but we know what we have to do when we get the signal.” Fett passed around datachips. “Latest floor plans and layouts here. We’ll either be taking out power grids to disable cannon batteries on the orbital yards, as needed, or falling back to Pellaeon’s flagship Bloodfin to defend it if he gets in trouble.”

“Pellaeon? Even in a little toy Turbulent?” It was a woman under the helmet, then: that must have been Isko Talgal. Beviin spoke of her in hushed tones. “What’s going to put a dent in that?”

“Daala’s keen that someone should look out for him personally. “

“Does she know something we don’t?”

“Daala has a contingency plan for everything. Somewhere, she’s briefing someone to take out the Mandos if we don’t behave. That’s why she’s so hard to kill.” Fett smelled faintly of jetpack fuel and antiseptic. Smells were more noticeable in the cramped compartment. “My personal orders-if you run

into Jacen Solo, you leave him. Unless you really need to kill him. No hunting, no trophies, no avenging the Mand'alor. He's Jaina's, when she's good and ready. Or else me and Beviin have wasted valuable time on her."

"Got it, Mand'alor," Carid said.

Jaina wasn't sure if it was a Mandalorian courtesy, or just that Fett wanted her to share some misery by way of general payback. She let it pass. "What do you want me to do? You all seem to know what your roles are."

"You're the ace pilot, Jedi." Fett jerked his head in the direction of the aft bulkhead, as if there was something behind them. "Spare Bes'uliik in the carrier. Up for it?"

Jaina felt a pang of excitement and then instantly guilty. It seemed wrong to find any small pleasure in life so soon after Mara's death. She'd been the same after her brother Anakin was killed, as if feeling anything other than permanent grief was somehow betraying him. I'd hate to think anyone I left behind couldn't live fully again. I have to get past this. She thought of Mara having a good laugh about Jaina edging past five-year-olds with blasters, and seized the chance.

"Can I at least get a look at the controls first?" she asked. "It's hard learning on the job in combat."

"We can test cross-decking to the carrier at the same time."

Fett wasn't joking. The Tra'kad pilot brought the vessel down on the deck of the carrier and settled it flush against a hatch. The Tra'kad's belly hatch opened; Jaina, feeling like a bug tipped out of a box, jumped down to the deck five meters below, easing her landing with the Force. Four dark gray wedge-shaped fighters sat on the hangar deck, a tight fit, and the familiar scent of hot drive, lube oil, and coolant was reassuring. She stood admiring their lines; it was a pilot's machine, all right. Fett climbed down rungs set in the bulkhead, boots clanging as the spikes in the toe caps caught the metal.

"Mirta?" Fett never raised his voice, not even when he called out to someone. "You, too."

"Leave her to me, Ba'buir." Mirta walked up to a Bes'uliik and pressed something on her forearm plate to open the canopy. "Have we got time to get aloft for a few minutes?"

"Knock yourself out," Fett said, and climbed back up the rungs to vanish into the belly of the Tra'kad.

"Two-seater," Mirta said. "Up you get. You're driving."

"You're qualified on these?"

"If you mean can I fly one, yes." Mirta was remarkably agile even in armor, and was up on the airframe and lower-ing herself into the copilot's seat before Jaina had a chance to worry. "Only qualification is not killing yourself. We're not great form-fillers in Keldabe."

The canopy clicked into closed position and the cockpit was suddenly muffled against the sounds

outside. Mirta, wedged right behind Jaina's seat, pointed out the drive ignition button.

"Push it."

Jaina pressed the button carefully with a cautious fingertip. The Bes'uliik made a little ack like a living animal's cough, and then the airframe shivered as the initial throaty rumble of the drive rose in pitch to a steady, singing, pure note.

"If you're nervous, Jaina, "Mirta said, "remember I'm the one putting all my faith in you."

Yeah. No pressure.

Jaina followed the hand signals of a Mandalorian in bronze armor to roll back, and moved the yoke intuitively, surprised when the fighter responded as she expected. The hangar deck turbolift lifted; she watched the cross sections of decks pass the cockpit as they rose, and heard airtight hatches hiss and snap closed beneath them. Eventually she was looking up at star-dappled space; she was ready to take off.

"Nothing to crash into, "Mirta said. Her arm snaked past Jaina's cheek and pointed at the various instruments. "Almost X-wing panel layout, except the weapons systems are this side. Take her out, Jaina."

I'm a Jedi. I can fly anything.

"Full domestic spec?" Jaina asked.

"Export, and that still beats what you fly at home..."

Jaina let vague familiarity take over her hands, and her Force ability to sense position and every little nuance of the Bes'uliik's handling did the rest. She was clear of the small flotilla before she realized it and getting a sense of how tight the turns could be. It felt wonderful. It was like any well-designed, lovingly crafted tool: it felt like an extension of her body, not a platform designed around the weapons with grudging space left for the being who had to deliver them.

"Easy to be seduced by it, isn't it?" Mirta said.

She meant the Bes'uliik, that was clear, but Jaina thought of the ease with which she slid toward darkness, and how easy it was starting to feel among these people, how natural to be learning to treat her brother like a bounty; she wondered where the line lay between being open to new ideas and too easily betraying the old.

"It's perfect, "Jaina said.

Mirta wasn't as hard to read in the Force as her grandfather. The sense of agitation hung in the cockpit. "You think a Jedi healer would really be able help my grandmother?"

Jaina thought of Gotab, and why he'd found Mandalore as irresistible as this fighter was to her.



She knew he wouldn't welcome her poking around in his business. "Can't do any harm. I'll find one."

"Thanks, Jaina."

She realized she'd ceased to be just Jedi and even Solo, and was now Jaina. For some reason, that heartened her even more than not being shot on sight as a spy.

# Chapter 13

Taun We-No, I'm not dead, and yes, I've still got your research material. I don't plan to sell it off. Don't make me change those plans.

Koa Ne-No, I didn't forget. And you know I found what you were looking for. I just don't need three million credits that badly. Which is still my price, by the way.

-Extract from queued text-comm messages awaiting transmission from Boba Fett, Mandalore, via Arkania and Kamino comm nodes

IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER BLOODFIN, TASK FORCE ASSEMBLY AREA, OFF FONDOR

Caedus refused to let his recent brush with Luke rattle his composure as he stepped through the hatch of Bloodfin's hangar, Tahiri at his heels.

He'd been duped with a brilliant Fallanassi illusion and had his StealthX almost ripped from under him. That had left him reeling, but not for long.

He realized that it wasn't an indication of his own vulnerability. It was a benchmark revealed to him as part of his destiny.

Luke had come after him: that showed how desperately urgent it now was for the Jedi to stop him. Luke was pulling out all the stops.

The illusion, however masterful, was the best that Luke and his entourage could do. Or else they'd have used it to defeat him there and then.

The attack on his StealthX-that was the best Luke and his wingmate could do, too. They couldn't stop him or grab him, even with chunks of his fighter missing. And they didn't have what it took to kill him, militarily or emotionally.

Luke was the greatest Jedi Master, and he'd just exposed the absolute limits of his powers, a suicidal gamble in any war. No-no, the Force had laid out the evidence for Caedus, and all he had to do was look at it from the right perspective. Caedus truly knew his enemy now. And he knew that Luke's best shot wasn't good enough.

And neither is yours, Admiral.

Here she comes...

"You seem in a positive mood, Colonel," said Niathal's voice from some way behind him. "Good to see a spring in your step so soon after being scraped off your own deck."

Caedus followed an Imperial aide through the maze of passageways into the citadel of the

Destroyer, the most heavily protected sections that were the heart of the warship. It was a much smaller Destroyer than the Anakin Solo, an unfamiliar layout, with lower deckheads and narrower spaces. When he stopped outside the compartment designated for the meeting, he studied the ship's badge on the bulkhead.

"Thank you for your concern, Admiral Niathal," he said. The shield depicted a four-legged, fanged creature with cloven hooves like daggers, a blood-red frill raised like a mane along the length of its arched neck.

Niathal paused to look as well. "Think of all the extra work that would land on my desk if anything happened to you."

"I heal fast." The animal was caparisoned in ancient battle harness, trampling a figure-its own rider, judging by the matching leathers. "How ungrateful. A beast trying to destroy the master who guides it safely through the battlefield."

"Or unseating him for using the spurs too much..." Niathal inhaled as if she were savoring the chemical smells of recent work onboard. "Lovely thing, a new ship."

Pellaeon emerged from the compartment, creaseless and composed, and fixed a steady dark gaze on Caedus. It was their first encounter since Caedus had entered military ranks.

"Our eponymous animal, the bloodfin," Pellaeon said. "Most apt."

"I thought it was just a simple marine predator that was only a threat in its home waters..."

"A borrowed name, Colonel, because they both share this splendid red appendage." Pellaeon ran his fingertip over the glowing red pigment. Caedus felt the old admiral's curious blend of disciplined anger and enjoyment. "We once used these bloodfins as cavalry mounts, because they were ferocious fighters in their own right, with a much greater range than you might imagine. They remain a reminder to us that we should all be careful of the dangerous creatures we ride, because we have to dismount sooner or later. If we're cruel or careless, the beast may even throw us. And once the rider falls under its hooves, it will devour him."

The silence hung like a weight for three beats.

"I'm glad we have speeder bikes these days," Tahiri said.

Caedus went into the meeting unsure whether Tahiri just couldn't follow the subtext, or if she was much more arch and sly than he realized. He decided on the latter. Once the business of agreeing on plans for the engagement began, personal barbs were temporarily sheathed and everyone concentrated on the task at hand, which was the isolation of Fondor and the containment of any fleet assets it might still have on its surface. Caedus examined the holoscreens carefully. It was hard to tell from reconnaissance imaging whether the vast numbers of vessels and assorted craft on Fondor-one giant manufacturing site, in effect-were operational or customers' orders.

"In the absence of the mine net containing surface-based threats, this is a time-consuming task,

“Caedus said. “I suggest placing Third and Fourth fleet fighter wings inside the ring, for recce and rapid response to counterattacks from the surface, and a Destroyer and frigate flotilla to hit whatever dares raise its head. Meanwhile, we devote the rest of the two fleets to taking out the orbital yards’ own defenses, and then land an assault force to secure them. The Imperials will be on the outer ring to counter the inevitable reappearance of the Fondorian fleet.”

Pellaeon stroked the first knuckle of his forefinger down his mustache, nose to lip, as if lost in thought while he studied the holochart.

“The aim is still to take the yards in one piece...”

“Yes,” said Niathal firmly, looking to Caedus even though Pellaeon was asking.

“Which, as I’m sure you’ve made allowance for, means holding the yards long-term, which means... we also need to hold Fondor itself long-term, quite apart from neutralizing its fleet, or else we’ll be under siege ourselves on those orbitals.” Pellaeon held up three fingers. He glanced at Tahiri. “Three distinct battles in one, two of them possibly a semi-permanent commitment, unless we can perform a mass lobotomy on the Fondorian government and people overnight, and get them to love us.”

Caedus felt the trap creak, but saw no pit beneath. Ordinary beings often made those mistakes. He wasn’t prey to uncertainty. If he changed his mind, it was due to dynamic risk assessment.

“If you’re saying we can’t do this, or that the commitment is too much for the Imperial Remnant, then say so. Most expeditionary wars involve entering places where we’re far from welcome. That’s what wars are.”

Pellaeon was still stroking his mustache. “I’m just saying that subduing a civilian population is much harder than smashing a fleet.”

“Not if you project sufficient power,” said Caedus. Pellaeon didn’t blink. “Which force are we talking about, the unseen one available to you, or the one that goes bang?”

“Conventional force.”

“Bombing civilian populations can be a desperately slow way of breaking their will, actually. In my very long experience, most don’t give in until they’re standing in rubble and there’s not even a stick left to fight with. In the shorter term, they just dig in. It’s their home. They’ve nowhere to retreat.”

Caedus ignored the lure of an argument. They had different priorities: Caedus wanted Fondor broken as an example to everyone of how serious he was about forging a united galaxy capable of responding to those yet-unknown but very real threats like the Yuuzhan Vong. But Pellaeon was looking at a working asset that the GA-or the Imperials-could claim. Niathal probably favored that, too. It was small-scale and-in galactic planning terms-short-term.

How very typical.

Niathal was very quiet. And she hadn't said a word about Jedi StealthXs wandering around at will in the fleet assembly area. Any commander would have been in a flap about that, unless they thought it was a problem that didn't have their name on it.

I'm not stupid, Admiral.

"Thoughts?" said Caedus, looking her way.

"I've often fought the urge to reduce a planet to molten slag myself," Niathal said, unmoved. "Probably for totally different reasons to you, Colonel. But I agree with Gil-holding what we seize is going to be a drain on resources, unless Fondor shows some pragmatism and rolls over. Let's give them an extra reason for doing that, beyond annihilation."

"Such as?" said Pellaeon.

"Make it worth their while. They rejoin the GA and play by our rules, and allow a token force to remain for a while to make sure they mean it, and we give them special status-guaranteed GA work for their yards and factories in perpetuity."

"That's not unlike their status under the old Empire, as I recall...", said Pellaeon. "Handy hyperspace lane just for that, too."

"Well, then," Niathal said, "we already have a tested plan for making that work, don't we, Gil? An economic occupation is always better than a military one."

Caedus kept a careful eye on the unseen, unspoken negotiation going on right now between Niathal and Pellaeon. He could see the deal shaping, and that it wouldn't include him. Unlike mundane beings, Sith were never shocked by that. They expected and welcomed it.

"Let's fine-tune our strategy, then," Caedus said. "We isolate Fondor as planned, begin securing the orbitals, and then see if they're more open to suggestions after we've softened them up for a few hours."

"Agreed," said Niathal. "Remember that there's a surrender deadline in place."

"I agree," said Pellaeon.

Caedus felt he needed to keep a closer eye on the two of them, but that was what prospective apprentices were for. He had a battle to win. "Would you object to Lieutenant Veila remaining in the Bloodfin as my liaison for the duration of the engagement, Admiral Pellaeon? Of course, you're welcome to send a liaison to the Anakin Solo, as well."

Pellaeon's mistrust was clear to Force senses, but he smiled convincingly enough for the mundanes.

“You could use a comlink, “he said, “but she’s much more charming.”

No, you don’t think that at all, do you, Pellaeon?

Caedus quite enjoyed the intellectual challenge of these confrontations, polite and banal to the casual listener, but composed of layer upon layer of double meaning and double intent. He felt Tahiri bristle a little. That was good. She worked better when she was annoyed. She escorted him down to the hangar, leaving him with a Force impression of a mask held firmly in place.

“How do I liaise?” she asked pointedly, lips barely moving.

“Observe.”

“And what added value can I bring that a remote holocam can’t?”

“If Pellaeon interferes with my plan in any way, then you stop him.” Caedus’s whisper was just a breath. “The Moffs are far more willing, but he whips them back into line. Do you understand what I’m asking you to do?”

Tahiri still wore that deceptive I’m-earnest-and-really-quite-dim expression, but the glittering black shards of her calculating mind were right there in the Force. She was a testament to the transformational power of incentive. “I think so.”

“Some deaths... some sacrifices are necessary, however callous they may appear.” Caedus just made sure she’d got the full meaning without his having to spell it out. “But only if they prove necessary, remember.”

“I understand. It’s ugly, but... I understand.”

Last piece of bait, place it carefully... “In the end, we’re fighting for a galaxy where the Anakins of this world don’t have to give their lives. That’s why we have to think the unthinkable.”

Tahiri’s edge wavered, but she recovered almost as soon as Caedus felt it. “I think living in the past is a dangerous habit, actually. I’m doing this because I think an orderly galaxy is our best defense against falling to an enemy like the Vong again.”

Caedus left her standing in the passageway, hands clasped behind her back, next to the badge of the bloodfin devouring those who forgot how dangerous an animal it was. He mulled over her parting shot all the way back to the Anakin Solo, and realized that she was warning him that she knew how he was manipulating her fixation with his brother. So did she really believe in Sith government being the best defense against traumatic war in the future, or was she even more ambitious than he had ever realized? It didn’t matter. She had that Sith sharpness now, and it was an instrument he was destined to use.

Two of the bridge chronos-one set to local time, one to Galactic Standard Time-crept forward to 2359 GST. One comm channel on each flagship’s bridge was kept open for Fondor’s President, but the deadline came and went, and all Caedus could hear was faint static. Ocean, Bloodfin, and the

Anakin Solo were linked on audio, still waiting. Nevil walked slowly around the bridge, glancing over shoulders at tracking screens and sensor displays.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting a response,” Niathal said, al-most as if she was talking to herself. “All ships... we are now at battle stations. I expect this will now be known as the Second Battle of Fondor. I shall be operating from this command information center until further orders.”

Caedus was occasionally aware of the most subliminal of sensations deep inside his skull that hinted at intense activity in hyperspace. Over the last day or so, it had been intermittent. He interpreted it as a fleet moving from place to place, dropping out of hyperspace to pause briefly before jumping again to avoid detection. The Fondorian fleet was taking a walk around the block, he thought, occasionally pausing to take a look to see who was still loitering in the neighborhood, and if they had their back turned.

The Anakin Solo moved on Fondor.

On either flank, vessels from both GA fleets moved into formation, and one battle group with its X-wing squadrons streaking ahead of it broke out of the larger formation to slip past the ring of orbitals.

Caedus felt around him for the Jedi, not picking up what he expected. He knew they were here, because Luke was; but he couldn’t sense how many, or where they might be. He assumed the worst-maybe as many as a hundred, maybe the majority in StealthXs.

But Jedi or not, numbers and big ships still counted against them. These days, no naval architect made construction mistakes like the kind that would let a single fighter take out a war machine the size of a planet. Luke Skywalker’s days of dumb luck were long over. Caedus cast his worries about the Jedi aside, and visualized his ships and their commanders like a grid, a mesh, a network, like the mines he should have had in place now.

These were competent commanders with well-trained crews, and they only needed a little nudge to embolden them into even more decisive action. He found he didn’t need to control them; all he needed was to be hyperaware of where they were at any point in time, their state of mind, and if they needed a push to overcome hesitation caused by having a slower, limited, sensor-dominated perception of the changing situation in theater.

Ocean was where he expected her to be, to port and a lit-tle astern of him. I can keep an eye on you however busy I am, Admiral. He could see the sensor screens ahead of him and around the bridge, but it was the mental image he was building that was more vivid, and in moments it was al-most an overlay on his physical field of vision that he found hard to distinguish from what he could actually see.

Nevil turned to him. “Long-range, sir, Fondor’s ground defenses are scrambling.”

Sensors picked up a hailstorm of fighters scattering out into the planet’s orbit, and Caedus concentrated his touch on the minds of the commanders about to encircle the planet. The first wave of

X-wings streaked between the orbitals, targeting the defensive cannon emplacements on the yards as they passed. The wave of frigates and destroyers split horizontally to send one group under the orbit of the yards in a loop toward Fondor's southern pole, and the other mirroring it to the north pole. With the X-wings keeping the yards' defenses busy, the warships regrouped inside the orbital ring. Fondorian fighters swung around to engage them like a flock of garbs turning as one bird.

"Steady," said Caedus. "Push through. Push through."

Damage reports were now trickling in, most of them minor ones from overloaded shields, and they were diverted to the automated system to collate and estimate the impact on the fleet's effectiveness at any given point. But Caedus didn't need detail. He felt X-wings wink out of existence, each one a pang in him, and he felt the ships in the right place, the right moment...

Fondor's planetary defenses hadn't opened up yet, although the ships were in range. The yards weren't there to defend the planet; their armament was for their own protection. There was an odd, aching lull in the battle going on in Caedus's mental chart, and for a full minute he cast around waiting for StealthXs to fountain out of nowhere and harry his vessels inside the orbital ring. He'd feel them. Whatever tricks the Jedi had, however undetectable their fighters, he would feel their racing pulses and adrenaline as they began their attack. Luke might be able to hide, but not all of them.

The flotillas were through, scanning the surface of Fon-dor for cannon and turbolaser aimed at them, waiting for enemy targeting to try to get a lock on them and blip their sensors. There should have been the start of a bombardment by now.

Nothing.

Niathal cut into the bridge comlink. "Stand..."

Caedus felt something then, all right. He knew what it was a moment after it pressed like a weight behind his eyes. It was the sudden surge of drives, tension peaking, thousands upon thousands of beings exploding into action.

It was the Fondorian fleet.

In the slow-motion way of thoughts in battle, he had time somehow to wonder why sensors weren't showing him ships popping out of hyperspace and targeting weapons all around him.

Then he saw why, with his own eyes, on the monitors.

The orbital yards had come alive in an instant, Destroyers lifting clear of docks, smaller vessels forming up around them. Caedus felt the precision of the maneuver without even needing to see the rapidly changing transponder icons on the holochart; half of the ships focused on the GA elements now stuck between Fondor and the ring, and the other half turned their attention to the rest of the task force beyond.

The Fondorian fleet-or a very large part of it-boiled out of the yards like kag bugs pouring from a broken drain.



The sensor scans went wild.

Why didn't I feel them before, at such close quarters?

Jedi. That's where they were, putting all their effort into blocking his senses, no doubt persuading themselves that they were defending the civilian workforce or the orbitals. That fitted. Not rebel enough to come right out and fight side by side with Fondor but pious enough to aid their...

"Incoming! Brace brace brace..."

Nevil's voice was unnaturally calm, as it always was. But despite shields, the turbolaser volleys that struck the Anakin Solo were enough to shake the bridge and fill the viewscreen with brilliant, blinding, white-gold light.

Caedus took it in his stride. This was meant to be, to put him in the right frame of mind to win. The bridge around him distorted a little and the colors seemed to leach out, but he recognized his anger and grabbed the reins to make it serve him. Unlike the bloodfin's unlucky rider, he wouldn't fall and be devoured by it.

He reached out to his commanders and imbued them all with a little more aggression, a little less willingness to play by the rules of engagement.

Nevil, looking at Caedus's face, seemed frozen to the spot. Ah, my eyes have changed. They'd have to get used to that. The vague sensation of ships streaking in hyperspace had gone now.

"Captain, "Caedus said, "at least we know where they are. And why I didn't sense that they were waiting for us."

## SECOND BATTLE OF FONDOR: COMBAT INFORMATION CENTER (CIC), GALACTIC ALLIANCE WARSHIP OCEAN

Niathal stood with both hands braced on the holochart table in the CIC, dismayed. The removal of Jacen Solo would have to wait.

Fondor was putting up a credible fight and it was turning into a long slog, longer than she'd expected. The mine network would have made life so much simpler. But she'd taken her decision, and now she had to deal with it. Admiral Makin, stranded here with her because the battle was too fierce for him to transfer back to Sarpentia, drummed his fingers on the edge of the table as he moved around it, examining it from every angle.

And I said we'd offer them terms after we softened them up a bit....

"Admiral Niathal." Jacen's voice had an edge to it. "I in-tend to break this stalemate before we lose too many ships."

"I suggest we disengage and regroup."

“We will not run.”

“I said regroup.”

“And then what? What kind of assault will get us any farther than we are now?”

The comm went silent. They watched the Anakin Solo’s blue icon moving steadily through the three-dimensional plot, making for Fondor. Flagships did not rush into the thick of the battle and fight like frigates, but maybe Solo hadn’t got to that page in the manual yet.

“He’s not a team player, is he?” Admiral Makin said quietly.

“Colonel Solo.” Niathal rarely knew which way Jacen would jump in a fight, and he was getting more unpredictable every time. “Colonel, can you hear me?”

There was the faint chatter of static. “Yes, Admiral.”

“Please confirm your position and intentions...”

“I’m advancing.”

“Yes, I can see that. Why?”

“To bring this to a quicker conclusion.”

Niathal looked at Makin. The veteran Mon Cal commander made a gesture that indicated he wasn’t convinced of the firmness of Jacen’s grasp on the situation.

“Colonel, I really think you should fall back and concentrate on managing the battle,” said Niathal.

The Anakin Solo didn’t deviate or decelerate. “I can do that from here. Just keep the Fondorians as busy as you can. I’m going to target Oridin City.”

“The ground batteries, you mean. Can you identify targets a little more precisely, please?”

“I mean Oridin City. As in capital, commercial capital, strategic target capital.”

“Wait one.” Niathal switched the comm through to Bloodftn, cutting Jacen out of the circuit. “Gil, can you fol-low this?”

“Yes. He’ll have to get the planetary shield down first, and we’ve got our hands full with the Fondorian fleet, so he’s on his own.”

“If he didn’t have a ship’s company of decent beings with him, I’d be rooting for the Fondorians to do us a favor,” she said. “He treats that ship like it’s his Stealth. This fighter ace mentality infuriates me.”

“You can’t stop him, and we have our hands full.”

“I’ve just seen your sitrep.”

“Yes, Cha. Two destroyers and eight cruisers-even we notice those losses.”

GA blue icons were clustered within the inner cordon, as they’d rapidly taken to calling the space between Fondor and its orbitals. The other side, the outer cordon, showed amber and blue icons-GA and Imperials-scattered more loosely in clusters, Star Destroyers attempting to target each other while frigates and the rest of the battle group around each of them tried to shield them. Another blue icon-a frigate-vanished from the plot and appeared on the tote board as lost. Sometimes, that happened simply when they lost power to certain systems. Niathal hoped for the latter.

Makin’s frustration was getting to her. Unable to fight in his own ship, he was trying to be useful. He put on a head-set and listened to another comm channel, eyes closed.

“Cha, “he said, “I know you’re busy, but have you actually listened to this? The Fourth Fleet elements inside the cordon?”

There were too many ships for her to even begin to monitor voice traffic from individual captains. “No, should I?”

“Yes. It’s... odd.”

Makin didn’t usually talk like that. He was precise and specific. Niathal almost dismissed it, but relented and listened in on the same comm channels.

The mood and tone in the command center of a warship, even in a tight spot, was a lot quieter and more focused than holodramas depicted. Under fire, it was intense, and voices did get raised, but what she heard was not typical of her navy.

One captain was urging cannon teams to blow the Fondorians apart in extremely graphic and profane terms. She winced. “Who’s that?”

“Tarpilan.”

“Is he drunk?” Jun Tarpilan? Never. She didn’t even realize he knew words like that. He was old school, very formal. “That can’t be him.”

“Work through them all. They’re all doing it. It’s like they’ve all gone collectively mad-well, more like they’ve all had a few ales too many and they want to take on the galaxy. And I don’t mean incompetent, either.”

Niathal was starting to worry. The more she listened, the worse it got. Commanders she’d known for years-human, Mon Cal, Sullustan, all species-seemed to have taken on more reckless and aggressive personas. It was no time to dissect this with Makin, but she thought of the things Luke Skywalker had told her about Jacen dabbling in the darker side of the Force. Jedi could carry off

some extraordinary sensory manipulation; she would have bet her pension that Jacen could, too.

“I’d use the phrase fighting mad,” she said.

She was cut short by the shipwide comm. “Incoming, brace brace brace.”

Niathal bent her knees and grabbed a rail to buffer the shock. The whole CIC fell quiet apart from the faint hum of electronics, but there was no shiver from a missile or cannon round hitting the shield, so they breathed again. Destroyers like Ocean were well armored and shielded. But nobody was taking anything for granted with an enemy that had produced the galaxy’s most powerful warships and weapons before the Yuuzhan Vong “War.

In the CIC, there were no external viewscreens. The only images of the battle that weren’t translated into sterile graphs, numbers, and moving points of light came from external holocams on every ship or from cockpit cams. Niathal didn’t want to avoid the reality; she felt she was breaking faith with her crews if she couldn’t look at those balls of flame and twisted sections of hull plating spinning off red-hot into space. But to keep fighting these days, she had to find some distance. The small suffering dragged her away from the bigger picture. Then movement on a screen caught her eye and she couldn’t avoid it: a forward view from a cockpit as a fighter crashed into the Fondorian ship it had already ripped into with cannon fire, a sudden zoom-ing image of a Fondorian crest that was leaking flame.

I wasn’t like this when the war started.

“Just as well the Imperials signed up,” Makin said quietly, as they watched the Anakin Solo’s inexorable progress into the inner cordon. “We’d have been sliced and diced by now without them.”

“Good old Gil,” Niathal said, still shaken. “But after this, who’ll be left for Jacen to sign up to make up the numbers?”

## ANAKIN SOLO, FONDOR INNER CORDON

The Anakin Solo was in a hurry, and plowed between two orbitals on a direct course for Oridin.

A wave of fighters broke from an attack on the cruiser Armistice-pounding away with turbolasers at a yard that was venting gases into the atmosphere-and headed for the destroyer. Balls of white flame flared and died in the viewscreen, gone in an instant, and Caedus couldn’t tell-with his eyes, at least-if they were fighters exploding or strikes on vessels.

He didn’t need the tracking screen to feel the ships. He was fully battle-aware now, sharing his channeled anger to embolden the commanders in his fleet, and able to shut out anything that was irrelevant to the situation at hand. If Luke tried any more stunts with illusions, he wouldn’t get far.

The adrenaline and pure white rage looping back to him from the individual commanders made his throat tighten. It was almost like a back-pressure effect, that the passion for the battle that he was channeling into them gained power and momentum, and syphoned back into him as a changed and magnified thing that he felt he had to vent from his chest or scream.

He was out of breath. He hoped nobody noticed. It might have looked as if he were panicking.

“Sir...” Nevil seemed to be agitated by the battle link.

He looked as if he was trying to shake it off, like someone fighting to stay awake. If he'd only given in to it, he would have felt much better, like the others Caedus could hear-could feel-totally caught up in combat. “Sir, I'd appreciate it if you'd share your plans for breaching Fondor's shield, because with the power we've got available, we're going to be hammering away for hours to weaken it. Can I suggest we divert Dewback to help us out?”

“It won't be necessary,” Caedus said. He had to get this energy out of him. It was a weight crushing his chest. “Alternative power source, you might say. I'm going to get them to drop the shield. Stand by concussion missiles.”

“I see.” Nevil's tone said that he wanted to take this on faith, but he was struggling. “Is this like...”

“Captain, I know you're troubled by what you saw happen with Tebut, and... I regret my behavior, but I'm learning to use combat powers way beyond those of the Jedi, and I wasn't fully in control of them then. I am now. Keep monitoring the shield, and as soon as you see it drop, set ten concussion missiles to airburst over Oridin and two over the shield generator plant.” Caedus made an effort to sound detached and normal. It was hard to keep his voice steady. “Don't fear me.”

“Very well, sir.”

Nevil said it in as matter-of-fact a tone as if his commander had asked for a cup of caf at an inconvenient moment. Caedus sat down in one of the command seats and watched the disk of Fondor gradually filling the viewscreen until it had no sharply contrasted frame of black space left.

His lungs demanded air. The cumulative effect of his commanders' heart-pounding aggression needed out now. He could no longer pick out the individual crew and their stations around him in the Anakin Solo, just a complex tapestry of emotions, and that was the state of near blindness that he needed to push his way into the minds of strangers many kilometers away on the planet beneath.

The dam burst in him, but it found a river channel. Caedus saw what the Fondorians operating the shield facility might see; he had no idea what the actual location looked like, but he didn't need to waste his strength projecting his consciousness to actually observe. Any imagined scene would do to focus him as the torrent of anger and raw nerves of a hundred or more commanders poured back through him. He pictured the shield generator plant, the control room, imagining it much as any other power plant in the industrialized galaxy: a wall covered in readouts and status lights, and rows of consoles around him where other workers kept an eye on the integrity of the shield and ensured that a constant power level fed it. There would be a message system, possibly an illuminated board updating staff on the security alert level, too. The exact details didn't matter, he knew, as long as he could imagine enough about what was happening in their minds to be able to latch on to some breeze of a thought in the Force, and slip into their world.

It was like listening for a particular noise or vibration when tuning a speeder drive. He always knew which sounds were normal, and which-however faint, however close to the threshold of his hearing-shouldn't have been there and indicated a problem. Once he heard that sound, it was the only one he could hear, blanking out all others.

Caedus dropped into that white noise of the feelings and thoughts of billions on Fondor, and heard the one repeating note out of kilter with the rest. He focused. In seconds, it filled his head to the exclusion of all else.

He was aware of solid, real beings moving around him on the ship, but he was now more aware of the shield generator facility five kilometers east of Oridin and the minds of the control room team.

There were more of them than usual, he could feel that. There was a sense of having strangers around, as if they'd called in extra staff and were running emergency operations, which fitted a facility that probably ran on standby with droids and a caretaker crew most of the time.

The fleet needs to shelter.

Caedus concentrated on projecting an impression that the GA Fleet and its allies had been driven off, and now ships needed to return to base under the protection of the shield. There was urgency in it, because many of the vessels were damaged and needed to land before atmosphere vented or hulls gave way.

Open up. Let us in.

He flooded the operators' minds with an urge to get the ships to safety as soon as possible, all kinds of worries and concerns about family members who might be on board, a burning sense of saving people, of pulling out all the stops...

Now. Drop the shields, we're going to crash, let us through, for pity's sake help us...

"Shields down!" It wasn't Nevil's voice, but that of the weapons officer. Caedus was still drifting in that fog of minds, drowning in their panic and urgency, and not here with the ship that was going to unleash their worst nightmare. "Cone section, fire when ready..."

Caedus tried to snap back at the moment the airburst sent a blinding, searing shock wave across the packed city, but he was a fraction too late, and he caught a moment of pure animal terror that took his breath away. He jerked alert in his seat, wanting to complete a scream that wasn't his. He caught it in time. If he'd screamed-well, the crew thought he was crazy anyway.

On the monitor, he could see a fireball spreading and debris billowing up into the atmosphere on a plume of rolling smoke. Now he needed other GA vessels to turn toward the planet and press home their advantage. He wondered if he could even move. He was drained, and for a moment he couldn't even grip the arms of his seat. "Sir..."

Caedus looked up into Nevil's face, suddenly reminded that the Quarren once had a son, but Caedus had forgotten his name. And I had a daughter. She's lost to me now. It was a sentimental

thought totally at odds with being a liv-ing weapon. He suspected it was an echo from being in the minds of people who feared the worst for their own loved ones.

“Sir, Admiral Niathal is on the comm.”

“Tell her to wait. We need to hit Fondor hard now, be-fore their fleet closes in on us.”

The colors were coming back. The bridge looked familiar again.

Caedus’s head was clearing, and he could see the overlay in his mind again, the biggest cities on the planet and the infrastructure that he would need to cripple to bring Fon-dor to its knees. It was like being in a pleasant trance; not fully in the present, but aware, and unwilling to snap out of it because it felt so still and perfect-as if everything in the galaxy suddenly made sense and had an answer. He was vaguely aware that the captain had darted away. He was probably stalling Niathal from another comm position so he could gripe about Caedus unheard. No matter. He could gripe all he wished.

“Take us in, “Caedus said to the helm officer. “Close as you can.”

# Chapter 14

Officer of the deck's log, Galactic Alliance warship Anakin Solo:

1300: At action stations.

1330: At action stations.

1349: Escape pod launched from Bank 9-Alpha. Captain Kral Nevil missing, presumed unauthorized absence.

GALACTIC ALLIANCE WARSHIP OCEAN, OFF FONDOR

Jacen wouldn't take Niathal's comm, but she wasn't sure she'd believe what he told her anyway. She focused on the information she had, provable stuff flowing back from the battle.

The holochart changed before her eyes. One moment the inner cordon was a tangle of blue and red transponder icons, and the next the red icons were separating out fast and heading for the planet.

She could hear the voice of Captain Tarpilan in her head-set, as if he'd woken up sober and hadn't a clue what he'd been up to last night. He was apologizing for his language in a confused tone. GA ships were still locked in battle, but as Niathal switched from ship to ship, the contrast between the manic mood of a few moments earlier and the normal level of grim tension during combat almost felt like calm had descended.

"Tell me this isn't a feint," she said. "If they're playing dead, and he's fallen for it, we're borked." She didn't use the word often, but it was a blessed release right then. She got ready to pull her ships out, just in case, trying to check again who was where, who was still in one piece, who needed urgent assistance, who had no propulsion or had jettisoned escape pods. Jacen had effectively split off from the fleet.

"If Fondor's scamming us," Makin said quietly, "they're taking the special effects a little too seriously..." He touched Niathal's arm to get her attention. "Look."

Some X-wings had penetrated Fondorian space far enough to get detailed aerial reconnaissance of the ground. Visuals were confusing. Some showed steam roaring high into the air from the shattered tunnels that ran under the whole of Fondor's surface. Others were just thick dark smoke spreading, filling the frame like thick, folded fur, and it was hard to work out what was happening until she switched to a thermal image-and that was much clearer.

Oridin-was it really Oridin? - was burning. It was a ball of searing temperatures that cooled towards the edges, with irregular projections as if a firestorm was being fanned farther. That was exactly what she was seeing: the aftermath of a massive airburst. Fondor certainly wasn't putting that on for a show. When she looked to the other screens, Jacen's task force was taking advantage of the loss of shielding to pound other Fondorian cities. But Fondor still had a fleet flying, and the battle was intensifying even if the planet was in dire straits.



“Bloodfin, this is Ocean,” she said. There was no response on the personal encrypted link; she tried the bridge channel. “Gil, are you still there?”

“Clever trick,” Pellaeon said. His tone was wary: he had company this time. “I have Lieutenant Veila here, and she’s been explaining some of basics of the Force to me.”

“Jacen’s destroying Oridin. I’m comming Vadde and offering terms.”

“Are you asking me for my opinion, or telling me?”

“I’m joint Chief of State, and I don’t think my colleague is in a position to negotiate, seeing as he’s busy fighting his ship.” She could stop this now. She could stop this and end the day with some ships left, and Fondor wouldn’t look like the Yuuzhan Vong had just left again. She turned to the flag lieutenant she was usually assigned in Ocean, Vio. “Flag, get me the Fondorian President.”

Surrenders were normally forced from a stronger position than hers. This time, the GA had lost an arm but the enemy had lost both legs, so she was still ahead. She strode back to the bridge as fast as she could without breaking into a run, scattering crew members. They couldn’t have known what was going on; it was hard enough for officers in the CIC to piece together the picture, so anyone tied up in single tasks elsewhere knew next to nothing, other than from disjointed scraps that filtered through at remarkable if careless speed by word of mouth from deck to deck.

Shas Vadde took a little longer to respond than she’d expected. It was the first time it had crossed her mind that she was Jucky to raise him at all, because there was every chance he’d be based in Oridin. But he was alive; the holoscreen image showed him in a harshly lit room that could have been an emergency planning center with people milling around behind him, many in administrators’ uniforms.

“Admiral,” he said, “we’re on backup generators here, so make the most of this comlink. The power grid’s out in six cities in the Oridin region. Oridin itself—well, I’m sure you can see the results of your handiwork.”

“We can stop this now.” Niathal bristled at the thought of being tarred with Jacen’s brush, but it was all rather academic to someone in Vadde’s position. “Surrender now, we both recall our fleets, and I personally guarantee you that Fondor will get permanent special economic status, and we’ll aid you in disaster recovery as soon as you say the word.”

Vadde considered her in silence for what seemed like a long time. The bridge crew were occupied with the incoming data and intelligence coming in direct from the fleet and via the CIC, but a couple of officers paused to watch the impromptu negotiations. Wars turned on small personal events like this.

“What about Solo?” Vadde asked. “Is he going to go along with this?”

“I’m not asking his permission.” Forget the united front. “He’s too tied up with your fleet at the

moment to talk, so I'm acting unilaterally."

It took Vadde another minute to answer, during which he was interrupted by an aide who showed him a datapad. Whatever was contained in it, it wasn't good news.

"We surrender," Vadde said at last. "Call off your ships. I'll call off mine." He turned and said something to someone behind him, and looked years older when he turned back to face her again. "Give it a few minutes to reach all ships. Cease-fires can be ragged, as I'm sure you know."

Niathal waited, and as soon as reports started coming in of Fondorian vessels breaking off attacks, she opened the comm to every bridge in the fleet-and that included Jacen's elements around Fondor.

Tough. He wants to play front-line commander, then he doesn't get included in the diplomacy.

"All Galactic Alliance and Imperial Remnant vessels, cease fire immediately," she said. "Cease fire. Fondor has surrendered."

There was always a time lag while cautious commanders double-checked the signal, and gunners and pilots caught up in the life-or-death adrenal blur of combat were told again to stand down. It was hard to come to an immediate halt. The Imperial ships seemed to be waiting for confirmation from their own officers, but Pellaeon's voice came on the link ordering the cease-fire, and their fleet fell silent.

At this distance, without seeing the damage and casualty reports coming back from battered ships, Niathal could pretend that the sector had returned to a peaceful calm, and that everything could go back to normal.

The only ships still moving on the screens were the

Anakin Solo and its accompanying frigates. Niathal was anxious for Fondor not to get jumpy. She let Vadde hear the voice traffic. "Anakin Solo, this is Ocean. Respond please."

"What are you doing?" Jacen's voice wasn't his usual controlled facade of irritating reason, as if he were explaining something to the very dim. He sounded as if he'd been woken up from a deep sleep, and was annoyed about it. "You can't stop now."

"I've accepted Fondor's surrender. They've stood down their ships. Unless you can render aid to the planet right now, Jacen, withdraw, and return to the assembly area."

"We broke through." He paused. "I broke through." She could hear him snapping orders at someone, and it seemed to be a demand to find out why his ships had obeyed her order to cease fire. So he was on his own now. "I will not accept this. We have to seize our advantage. You're letting them regroup."

"They've surrendered, Jacen, and we've all got pretty much the same rules of engagement across the civilized galaxy - surrender means cease fire."

Niathal wasn't just obeying interplanetary conventions, of course. The Fondorian fleet hadn't gone home and dis-armed: it was there, nose-to-nose with her ships, and could start the battle again at a moment's notice. Fondor had everything to lose, but the GA had ships at stake, too. They'd already lost half the Fifth Fleet recently, and Fondor was not the only enemy.

"I refuse to stand down," Jacen said. "I intend to carry on fighting." There was a pause. "Nevil? Where's the captain? Find him. I'll have him..."

Niathal had no other option, but it was one she felt almost glad to take. There was an inevitable cleanliness about it.

"Colonel Solo," she said, "if you don't honor the cease-fire, I'm relieving you of duty. An admiral outranks a colonel, remember, and I will order your ship to be disabled."

There was another pause. She'd never expected him to say yes, ma'am, anyway.

"I don't recognize your authority."

"Stand down, Colonel."

"All GA vessels, this is your Chief of State ordering you to fight on. All Imperial vessels-under the terms of our agreement, I insist that you rejoin the battle."

Niathal was being carried along by events, but the next words that left her mouth were going to seal many fates. Could the Imperial ships even hear Jacen? "All GA vessels, Colonel Solo is relieved of duty." Poor Captain Nevil; he was in the worst position of all. He'd have to take over the Anakin. She had a sudden cold splash of realization that she should have had before she got on that comm. If Jacen could breach a planet's shield with his influence, there probably wasn't much that his crew could do to defy him. She was faced with the real possibility of having to shoot down the Anakin Solo.

Down.

There was no up or down in space, but she still had a feeling of falling.

And where was Nevil?

On the chart, a battle group of amber icons began to move toward Fondor. Some of the Imperial commanders had heard and heeded him, at least.

Pellaeon's voice boomed over the bridge comm. "The Imperial fleet will withdraw immediately, and respect the cease-fire. Wyvern battle group, resume your position at once." The amber icons slowed to a halt. "We now take our instructions solely from Admiral Niathal."

"Ma'am," said the comm officer, hovering at her elbow, "Shas Vadde's defense secretary is on the comlink, asking what you expect her to do if the Anakin Solo opens fire again."

The Anakin Solo was silent. She could only imagine what was happening on that bridge. And no Fondorian ship could be expected to sit and take Jacen's barrage to preserve a cease-fire.

"Tell her I won't regard self-defense as a breach," she said. "But if Jacen Solo opens fire first, then I'll have to take him out."

## IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER BLOODFIN, OFF FONDOR: COMMAND CENTER

"This beggars belief," Moff Rosset said. "The GA's falling apart in front of our eyes." He rapped his knuckles angrily on the transpariplast screen showing the positions of ships. "This is their highest level of command and political decision making, screeching at one another in the middle of a battlefield, about to slug it out. And we're committing Imperial citizens' lives to defend their interests? In the hope they'll keep their promises? Are we mad?"

Pellaeon considered what he'd do in Niathal's position, because he was walking a knife-edge himself. Grand Moffs and some leaders of the Council cliques had gathered in Bloodfin to pick over the warm remains at this bizarre half-time interval. Pellaeon knew that some of the Moffs would rather obey Jacen, but they'd seen sense at the last minute.

They had to come home to Bastion sooner or later. They knew what the consequences would be if they escalated from merely fantasizing about ousting him to actually attempting a coup. If they made a move now, they'd have to mean it.

"I admit they're not impressing me with their cohesion," Pellaeon said. He was conscious that he had Jacen's eyes and ears in the compartment with him. "But we withdraw, and we wait. Now's the time to concentrate on getting rescue parties deployed, and to see which hulls we can salvage."

Tahiri Veila watched silently. She reminded him increasingly of the villips that the Yuuzhan Vong had used as communications channels, living creatures like disembodied eyes that saw and heard everything, bonded to their users from birth like hatchling nuna. Out of all the repellent organic technology of the Yuuzhan Vong, that was one of those he found most disturbing, even compared with their living weapons. It was the sensation of being spied upon; it was really no different from a comlink, but because it was alive it somehow made his flesh crawl. The things mimicked their user's voice and could even shape themselves to look like the speaker's head, and he half expected Tahiri to spout Jacen's voice and her features to transform into his. The little Yuuzhan Vong ritual scars on her forehead did nothing to take away the feeling. He stared at her until she moved away to the far side of the compartment.

"Solo can't retain power after this," Grand Moff Siralt whispered. "He's totally discredited now. Is Niathal going to honor the Borleias-Bilbringi agreement, though?"

"We won't know for now," Pellaeon said. Moffs always flew straight for the fresh carcass, however much mayhem was going on around them; Pellaeon's priority for the next few hours was simply to preserve the fleet, and worry about spoils later. "Chances are that she will, because she's a pragmatist, and she needs our muscle. First things first, though."

Moff Quille-ah, Jacen's new lever inside the Moff Council-didn't take the hint. "They're in disarray, and Fondor is still restorable, even if it's crippled in places. I'd trade a couple of B-list planets for this."

Quille couldn't even stay loyal to someone who was encouraging him to be disloyal to his own head of state. Pellaeon savored the irony, and hoped that villip Tahiri overheard that little snippet.

"They're not in disarray," he said. "The headless body of the administration twitching out there is one thing, but they still have fully operational warships all around us, with rules of engagement, and if anyone here tries to pull a stunt like moving in on Fondor-without even a plan, you fool-then it won't end well."

Without a plan. Pellaeon was pretty sure that some conversations had gone on in back rooms about contingencies like that while the old man's back was turned. "I'm very clear what we do now, and you will do it. Fondor has surrendered. The fighting is over. We do not take aggressive action now. The GA has achieved its objective, and all it has to do now is to sort out who's actually running it, while we have a caf and lick our wounds. Do you understand me?"

He didn't underestimate Quille, or how many other cliques in the council the man could enlist. There was a small army of Moffs out there-in ships of the fleet, or back home, or right under his nose here-and only one Admiral Pellaeon. He held the Empire together with the complex net of personal loyalties, the Moffs' collective awareness that he was usually right, and a rarely administered but effective dose of retribution for those who didn't play the sensible game. Without that, all he had to enforce his word was his Imperial service blaster, not even a massively lethal one. Power was a nebulous thing when you examined it; just like Luke Skywalker's phantom fleet, in fact.

"I said, Moff Quille, do you understand me?"

Perhaps not just a blaster, though. Pellaeon did have his backup, but Admiral Daala wasn't needed yet, certainly not for the primary engagement. There was a lot to be said for keeping his powder dry. He had a concealed personal comlink permanently open to her anyway, so she could hear what he was doing minute by minute, and she was monitoring the battle. Ten standard minutes away; at least she'd gained useful intelligence from being an observer.

The command center staff went about their business, occasionally glancing Quille's way, because most of them had seen Pellaeon smack a wayward Moff into line before and there was no novelty in the spectacle. Pellaeon never raised his voice unless the ambient noise level required it. In this quiet part of the ship, slow emphasis alone made his point. Tahiri watched as if she was straining to hear.

"Yes, Admiral." Quille backed down. They always did. "I was just thinking outside the box."

"I'm all for creative solutions," Pellaeon said, "but thinking like that can put you inside a box all too easily. Now let's see what happens next."

This was an odd interlude for Pellaeon. On one side he could see the urgent business; on the other, the GA was frozen for the moment, which was as urgent a problem in its way, but there was less he

could do about that.

The vessel state board was a worrying tally of too many red lights in the tidy ranks of green that showed ships as operational or with minor damage. The red-lit list showed several of the Empire's largest Star Destroyers badly damaged, three with only emergency environment control and drifting, and some of the fighter squadrons had taken 30 percent losses. The med runners were working at maximum capacity. If fighting flared up again now, they'd be caught in the middle with the salvage tugs. Nobody in his navy was going to get killed after surviving an attack, he swore it.

Yes, let's take a breath and come to our senses. "Sir, the Anakin Solo is moving." The midshipman at the long-range scan plotted a projected course from the GA Destroyer's movements; the scale of the scan made it look as if the Anakin Solo were making full speed, but the huge ship was simply edging ahead. The young officer tapped his earpiece. "Getting quite tense in Ocean, sir. He's powering turbolasers again."

Tahiri was slinking around now, still silent, but checking out the status of the GA Fleet and-maybe Pellaeon was imagining it-getting worried. Here she was, stuck with the obstinate Imperials while her master tried to dig himself out of the pit.

"What's he waiting for?" Pellaeon asked her. "He never struck me as afraid of Niathal. Can't he snap her head off with a thought or something? Can't yow?"

"Colonel Solo has... exceptional powers," she said. She was blinking rapidly. Was she acting dismayed? "I don't."

"Is he recharging himself? Must take it out of you, bringing down a planetary shield singlehanded, without the aid of a decent Death Star..."

Her slight flinch made Pellaeon bet on that being closer to the truth than he'd imagined. He'd watched thousands of personnel under stress. He was sure he knew the real thing from an act.

"I would think his crew are finding it hard to respond to the order," she said. "They're personally loyal, but it's also true that on the battlefield, a full admiral outranks a colonel."

"Solo's got so many titles." It was probably hard to respond to an order from Niathal when your CO could throttle you without leaving his seat, too. "Must be confusing."

The midshipman turned sharply, one fingertip against his earpiece, at the exact moment one of the sensor scan operator snapped, "The Anakin's fired." Then reports flooded in.

"Fondorian cruiser Prosperity's taken a direct hit on the bridge, sir."

"Looks like several enemy vessels responding."

"Fondorian fighters..."

"Ocean for you, sir."

Pellaeon took the comm, audio only. He hoped Daala was paying attention. “Cha, what’s going on?”

“Sorry, Gil, but Solo’s not responding to reason, and I can’t rely on his commanders to follow me. I’m going in now to put some buffer between him and Fondor, and stop him the hard way. I need your help.” A pause. “Wretched shame that he’s taking so many good crew down with him in that ship.”

“Understood.” This was the inevitable cleansing Pellaeon thought might be a longer time coming. It was as good a time as any. He turned to the Moff’s and gestured to the comm officer with a finger to open the fleetwide channel. “All ships, identify GA vessels not responding to Admiral Niathal, and engage any that attack Fondorian targets immediately. We will honor this surrender as long as Fondor does.”

There was a ripple of uncomfortable breaths among some of the Moff’s.

“Are we clear in our purpose, gentlemen?” “Yes, Admiral,” said Quille.

Pellaeon turned for the hatch. A private conversation with Daala seemed a good idea. Then he’d call Reige to his cabin, and discuss what to do with Quille when the fleet arrived home. “I’ll be in my day cabin for a few minutes. It’s my age...”

He swept past Tahiri and strode down the passageway. The order for action stations was echoing through the ship, and everyone was closing up for duties, making him feel al-most a footnote to events. He slipped into his cabin and secured the lock, catching sight of himself in the mirror on the locker hatch and straightening his collar.

Daala can hear all this anyway. I just want to hear her take on this. She’s more at the Jacen end of the ruthless spectrum. Pellaeon wondered if he simply wanted to hear a friendly voice, and took his comlink from his tunic. At least it’ll be over sooner rather than later. Then the hatch opened. He’d locked it.

Tahiri Veila stepped in, head slightly lowered as if she was sorry to interrupt him.

“Sorry, sir, but I had to speak to you.”

Pellaeon felt his nape prickle. He’d have to factor in anti-force-user security in the future, just in case-if such a thing could be made. “There’s always knocking...”

“Sir, there are lives on the line. If you let the GA tear itself apart, everyone loses.”

“I’m not letting it do anything, Lieutenant,” he said. “I’m giving practical support to an ally.”

“If Colonel Solo is deposed, the GA will revert to its indecisive self and there’ll be chaos.”

“I’m afraid I can’t agree with you, my dear, but then I don’t have to. Loyalty is a fine thing, don’t think that I don’t respect that-but Jacen Solo’s the chaos, not the cure.” Pellaeon stood, expecting her to try some feminine charm. The comlink to Daala was still open: she’d be finding this amateur

routine very amusing. “Is there anything else?”

“The Moff’s will break off if you tell them to.” Tahiri took a step back. “I witnessed the influence you wield. Moff Quille was ready to defy you, but you just put him back in his place. I can feel things in beings that even you can’t see.”

“I’ve no reason to refuse Admiral Niathal’s request. Subject closed.”

Tahiri pressed her lips together and sighed, mild annoyance, possibly joking, but the GA-issue officer’s blaster she drew from her belt was quite serious.

“Please, Admiral, just do it.” She flicked the safety catch off and aimed it at his chest. Her voice had a harder edge and lower tone now. “Call off your fleet and give Jacen Solo a chance. He needs to win at Fondor.”

“Win...”

“Destroy its capacity to threaten the GA again. It’s a practical matter, but it also shows the rest of the galaxy how high the stakes are for them.”

Ironic. Jacen Solo would have found Alderaan’s demise within his ideology. Pellaeon wondered what Leia would have made of that.

“No.” Pellaeon calculated whether he could draw his weapon before she could fire-if she would fire-but she was a Jedi, and a third his age. A horrible certainty gripped his gut. For a few moments all he could feel was the sensation of intense cold flooding his thigh muscles. He’d felt it before, under fire, when he knew how close he was to annihilation. But he was also used to working through that reflex. “I won’t ignore a surrender, and I won’t enable the bombardment of civilian centers afterward, and I will not lend the Empire to a petty despot.”

“You know you’re going to die,” said Tahiri.

Pellaeon was past the adrenaline ice stage and into the phase of letting his body and training take over to resolve the threat. It was a shame he was just a little too old now to do it with a display of physical force. He’d make his last punch count, though.

“I’m ninety-two years old. Of course I’m going to die, and quite soon, but it’s how I die that matters to me. Please-get out of my cabin.”

“Last chance.” Tahiri leveled the blaster. “All you have to do is call a halt. The Moff’s obey you.”

“My son died to defeat the Yuuzhan Vong, and Jacen’s as set on destroying everything I hold dear as they were.”

Pellaeon knew death, all too closely glimpsed for too many years, and the end that he’d most feared was slow decline. He could feel death most days lately, tapping to get his attention like an anxious bird at the window. Now the bird was gone, and the dread with it. It was the cleaner death



standing alongside him again now, the one he knew from combat, the one that he preferred, and few ever got to choose the way they left the world quite like this. He grabbed the privilege and opened his comlink.

“Pellaeon to Fleet, “he said. Tahiri paused, probably expecting him to cave in to her threat, like she would. Life mattered more to her than how it was lived. “Fleet, this is Admiral Pellaeon. I order you to place your vessels at the complete disposal of Admiral Niathal, and take down Jacen Solo, for the honor of the Empire - “

The blaster bolt hit him square in the chest and flung him back against the bulkhead. The pain was so fleeting that he was sure he was already dead; he’d always expected black oblivion, not this numbness like getting a crushing kick from a faulty power circuit. Tahiri leaned over him, eyes wide, the smell of blaster and burned fabric clinging to her. He wasn’t dead yet.

Reige, I never had that talk with you-no, don’t come running, wait and fight another day, you can’t keep saving me forever...

“So that’s Jacen’s new Sith Order, “Pellaeon whispered, actually quite surprised that this was what real dying felt like. He was having trouble breathing; a tight band gripped his chest, and the pain was suddenly excruciating. “Wiping out civilians... from a safe distance, and getting... a child to... kill an old man.... just make sure.... you can dismount from that... bloodfin of yours...”

Tahiri looked concerned. Behind her, Moff Quille leaned through the hatch, tilted his head to stare at Pellaeon, and walked slowly away.

“I can save you, Admiral, “she said. “It’s not too late. The heart’s a resilient muscle.”

“Go... rot somewhere else... villip, “he whispered.

There were boots in the passageway outside; not running, more shuffling around, waiting impatiently. Tahiri’s lighter step faded as she walked away.

“Is he gone?” said a voice that he didn’t recognize.

“Not yet, “said Quille. “I’m not going to touch him, so we’re totally clean...”

The cabal of Quille’s Moffs. Pellaeon whispered, “Quille, “hoping Daala could still hear him, and add another Moff to her list.

Admiral Daala’s fleet would be a lovely surprise. Pellaeon wouldn’t spoil it for the Moffs by letting them hear a distress call to her.

He managed to fumble for the comlink and place it on the floor, but it was a struggle. He reached for the nearest hard surface and drummed his fingers.

Rap... rap... rap.

Rap, rap.... brr-rrr-rapp.

Pellaeon's pain came crashing back at that moment like a tidal wave that had hung motionless for a split second. And yes, he'd been right all along. It was black, black oblivion after all.

# Chapter 15

Star Destroyer Chimaera to Slave I

Fett, change of plan.

I need you to seize a Star Destroyer for me.

Before you ask-yes, I know that'll cost extra.

-Message from Admiral Daala to Boba Fett, awaiting orders ten standard minutes' hyperspace jump from Fondor

ANAKIN SOLO, INSIDE FONDORIAN SPACE

Caedus felt stronger now, but the raw energy of the battle link with his commanders, built up and discharged into the minds of the Fondorian shield technicians, hadn't yet returned.

Exhausted, he had to rely on the natural skill of the commanders who'd rallied to him. Two Fondorian frigates circled the Anakin Solo, pounding the shield generator dome.

He was also sick of hearing Niathal's repeated signal to all GA vessels.

"... all ships, Colonel Solo no longer holds command, You are to pursue and disable the Anakin Solo, or, if necessary..."

"Traitor," he whispered. "Traitor... traitor!" His voice rose to a snarl. "Traitor! Shut that comm down, Inondrar. Look at her! She thinks she's a martyr, a hero!" Caedus jumped up and stalked to a holochart showing the close view of Fondor. GA ships loyal to Niathal were formed up with the Fondorian navy, blocking Caedus's fleet by forming a defensive barrier between Fondor and its attackers. "She's spending our lives to shield the traitors. She's throwing away Alliance lives. What does she think, that Fondor's going to make her a national hero now? They'd better, because she's never setting foot on Coruscant again. Never."

Inondrar paused and waited for him to return to his seat. "Yes, sir." The Anakin Solo's executive officer now filled the breach left by Captain Nevil. He was doing his best, but it wasn't enough. And when Caedus found Nevil, he was another traitor who would die. "Sir, there's..."

"Nevil's betrayed me, too, hasn't he?"

"There's one escape pod missing, and Captain Nevil can't be found. But..."

Caedus considered just jumping to hyperspace and fighting his corner from Coruscant, but that was just fatigue talking. He had a fleet here, and the battle wasn't over.

"Save your time. I don't feel him on the ship."

“Sir, the Imperial Remnant-the fleet is turning toward us, and Lieutenant Veila is comming you.”

Caedus was too thinly stretched to read much from her in the Force. Was the Remnant rejoining the battle to finish him off? He groped around for a sense of danger, but the carnage and chaos of the engagement drowned out all detail. He was under fire on all sides.

“Lieutenant, go ahead.”

“Sir, Admiral Pellaeon is dead, and the Imperial Remnant is rejoining your forces.”

She said it calmly, as if it were a routine thing to have achieved. A subdued ripple of approval passed around the bridge crew. Caedus veered between prizing this loyalty and knowing that they had no choice but to fight, seeing as the Anakin was now the prime target and they were stuck in it.

But they’re still here, and Nevil isn’t.

Caedus gestured to Inondrar to take over, and moved to a comm station where he wouldn’t be overheard.

“Did you finish the job yourself, Tahiri?”

“I... I shot him, sir.”

“You’ve probably saved the Galactic Alliance.”

“I didn’t feel much of a savior. He was just an old man.”

But Caedus noted that she had done it anyway, no sentimentality, no weakness. “How do we get you back on board in the middle of this, Tahiri?”

“It’s going to be difficult.”

“We’ll do it. You’re still in Bloodfin, yes? You’ll be safe there for the time being.”

“I’m stuck in Bloodfin. The crew mutinied and the commanders are trying to regain control. We’re on emergency power-environment control only.” Tahiri seemed to lose her detachment for a moment. “We were taking fire from other Imperial ships until the Moffs called it off-they’ve transferred the flag. But the senior Moff commanders are all stranded here.”

“I’ll come for you, Tahiri.”

“The crew can’t hold those sections forever. When the fighting’s over, they’ll be able to send any number of ships back to storm Bloodfin.”

And perhaps not be too careful who they blast when they try to get the Pellaeon loyalists out.

“I’ll still come for you-when I can extract myself from this.” He could feel her now that he

focused. She was unhappy, not afraid; full of doubt, but not about getting out of Bloodfin in one piece. “Are you ashamed, Tahiri? Are you ashamed because you killed an old man?”

Tahiri didn’t answer for a moment. “It’s not quite the heroic role I had in mind.”

“But you did it.”

“Yes.”

“Tahiri, in the long term, it’s easier to kill a powerful enemy than it is an apparently weak one. If you bring down a giant, you’re a hero. If you kill something weak-even if it has to die-then you endure contempt. Being willing to be despised to serve the common good... that’s the mark of a true Sith. You’re going to make a fine apprentice forme, Tahiri.”

“Oh. I’m... official, then.”

Tahiri had a way with bathos that he’d thought was sim-pie banality, but she seemed to use it as to defuse situations she found too awkward. Then again, she might have been subtly mocking him. “You may call me Darth Caedus. I shall be known only by my true name from now on.”

“Yes.... my lord.”

“And I’ll come for you, Tahiri. I won’t abandon you.”

The tide had turned. Caedus sensed another cog turn, shifting every part of the whole machine of existence. The galaxy was an altered place. The majestic power of an Imperial fleet joining his loyal ships felt like the rush of energy in his veins from eating a sustaining meal after a long fast. There was something else, some other harbinger of great mechanical power and energy, but it was hard to pick it apart from the growing excitement of a fleet about to throw everything it had at the enemy.

“Sir, the senior Imperial commanders want your orders, “Inondrar said, as if he’d repeated it several times be-fore and got no response.

“Let’s give Niathal the fight she wants, then.”

Three Imperial cruisers moved in to open up a furious barrage on the frigates harassing the Anakin, catching one in a cross-stream of turbolaser fire that ripped through its top solar fin. Caedus thought he saw Ocean train her cannons on him, but it was a ship of the same class, and other Imperial warships attacked it with the same pack tactic, subjecting its shields to a punishing combined stream of firepower that overloaded the defenses. Caedus saw the moment that the shield failed; the hull was peppered simultaneously in twenty places at once as small cannon fire from Imperial assault fighters suddenly passed through and made devastating contact.

He had the GA on the back foot. It was numbers, always numbers. And now he had more.

‘Where are you now, Jedi? Don’t want to get the StealthXs scratched, do you?’

“Ah....,” said Loccin, still at his post after all these hours. “Sir, more ships dropping out of hyperspace.”

Caedus turned, eager to see what else the Imperials had thrown into the battle.

“What’s that?” He didn’t recognize the vessel, and it didn’t carry the Imperial livery. “An auxiliary? A fleet tender?”

Ships began popping out of hyperspace in flares of white light, and as the transponders began kicking in and the sensors pinged others, Caedus knew the Jedi were back with one of their mind-games. He was on the receiving end of another elaborate Jedi mind-assault. Or at least his crew were, and now he hoped everyone understood how very real the Fallanassi illusions were in the hands of a master, how they registered with all the senses, and even sensors if the illusionist was powerful enough.

“It’s Skywalker,” Caedus said. “Try to filter these apparitions out from the real threats. It’s hard, but that’s how he wants to decoy you, to get you firing carelessly.”

“Oh, you’re kidding me...” Clearly, Loccin and another junior officer, Duv-Horlo were seeing what he was, so this was a large-scale illusion registering on many minds, not just projected at one like his had been. “Did someone raid an aerospace museum? What the stang is that?”

“Steady,” said Caedus. “It looks real, but beware.”

None of the ships’ transponders registered pennant codes on the system—there was only so far that Luke could go in embroidering this fantasy, then—and the two young officers tried to identify the vessels by class alone, as if it was some cadet instruction at the naval academy. There were now two Crusader cruisers, a Victory-class Star Destroyer, and a squadron of TIE fighters. A Venator and two Republic-class ships dropped out at exactly the same moment like a choreographed party surprise of the very worst kind.

“Sir...”

It was very convincing. It was exactly like the previous attempt, except more imaginative, and the feeling of real mass and power was detectable now. I think.... I think this might be real.

“Get me the senior Moff and ask if those are his... mili-tia forces.”

The motley fleet kept growing, falling out of history into Caedus’s here and now, and their weapons were real. The sensor ops team was flat-out trying to assess the battle elements ranging against them.

“Fierfek, those are Assassin corvettes...”

“How many more?”

“I thought the Scimitars had gone for scrap by now.”

“This is crazy. Where did all these crates come from?”

An Assassin broke out of formation, blinding white power streaming from its cannon. A GA carrier moving X-wings into position exploded, the whole aft section swallowed in a ball of expanding light.

It was no illusion.

Loccin seemed to have had enough of humoring his commander. “That’s really dead, sir. Sorry to argue, but that’s real, it’s absolutely real.”

I’m losing concentration. I’ve got to stay sharp. Where in the name of the force did these come from? “Yes, it is, so come about and ready torpedoes.”

Flaring into existence like the avenging swoophawk that the Jacipri sages said would herald the end of the universe, an Imperial Star Destroyer was now on a ramming course for the Anakin Solo.

It had an identifiable pennant code.

“Sir, it’s I-Two... oh, that can’t be right, “said Duv-Horlo. “Someone’s doing a psy ops job on us, real metal or not.”

Caedus took a slow breath. He recognized it, too, but this time he believed. “She was never confirmed destroyed.”

It was a vessel that had been flagship to the legendary admirals of modern history and fought at some pivotal battles. The veteran ship was looking a lot tidier than it had at the Battle of Bastion.

It-no, she was fully restored.

“Chimaera, “said Caedus.

“Sir, someone’s emptied the whole galactic junkyard, and then some.”

Caedus felt such focus and long-suppressed venom in the Force that he almost thought he’d detected a Sith, but this was mundane darkness; simmering, long-nursed griev-ances, longing for justice-diffuse longing, any justice-a piercing shaft of sorrow right through it. The sensation would have fascinated him had he not been more preoccu-pied with how much trouble was in his path.

“You know what we girls are like, “said a slightly rasp-ing patrician voice over the open comm. “We just can’t throw anything away in case it comes back into fashion years later.”

“You have me at a disadvantage, madam...”

“My apologies, Colonel Solo. Where are my manners? This is Admiral Daala, flag officer of the Maw Irregular Fleet, and I ask that you stand down and leave Fondorian space now.”

I knew she was back on the list, but the Moff's need to improve their intelligence gathering...

"As Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance, I'm afraid I can't do that." Caedus summoned his overstretched battle meditation skills. "Flight, stand by five-seven and five-nine squadrons."

"As you please, sir," said Daala. "Maw Fleet, patch into Admiral Niathal's combat information center and give the lady a hand."

A Moff's voice came over the comm, unhelpfully late. "We knew Pellaeon had recalled her for something underhanded."

"Good afternoon, you insignificant little man." The satisfied polish to Daala's voice was tarnished by some pain and regret, though. Caedus heard it. "This one's for Gil Pellaeon. And.... Liegeus."

Chimaera opened fire. The battle with Daala's scrapyard fleet had begun.

MANDALORIAN BOARDING PARTY; ASSAULT SHIP ORAR APPROACHING IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER BLOODFIN, ACCOMPANIED BY TRA'KAD

"What would you like to be today?" Orade said, scrolling through the list of spoof transponder codes for the assault vessels. "Hopelessly lost Nallastian freighter, fuel bowser, Death Star?"

"HNE combat broadcast unit," Carid said. "Nobody swerves to avoid them, but they're not tactical targets. Plenty around. And they get in stupid positions."

Fett had to admire Daala's timing. Imperial ships that had been protecting Bloodfin from predatory strikes while the battle raged inside her now had urgent problems of their own with the arrival of the Maw Fleet.

"A lot of trouble to go to for a few Moff's," Fett said. He now had a link to Bloodfin's mutineers. He thought that term was a delicate legal point if their admiral had been assassinated. "Reige, what's your situation?"

"We've rigged the drives and weapons to blow if anyone tries to board her," Reige said. "Once the troops breach our bulkheads, we're finished-we're not equipped for close combat down here."

"As long as you don't try to repel MS, we'll be fine," Fett said. "Who have you got on board?"

"The senior Moff's on the flag officer's staff-and their boss is Quille now, I suppose. The rest of the Moff's with command status are still with their ships."

"So you left the B-team Moff's at home... Well, I'm not fussed if I remove them dead or alive. Can we breach the hull and let in some nice cool vacuum without killing you?"

"No, they'll be in the command center. The citadel's hardened anyway. We've activated the fire control bulkheads to seal off the compartments around the citadel. If you go in via the replenishment hatches, that'll put you much closer to the command center, and you won't have to fight for every



meter if you run into company.”

“And you’ve got a Jedi on board, “Jaina said quietly. “Tahiti Veila.”

“I think she’s forfeited her lightsaber now, Solo, “said Fett.

“I meant that she might be extra trouble.”

Bloodfin was effectively dead in the water, with all weapons and propulsion offline. It was just a matter of getting to her without attracting too much attention, then boarding, and then neutralizing the troops who were trying to regain control of the ship. The Moffs were stuck in a metal box; they either had to find some way off the ship or regain control before Niathal, Daala, or even the Fondorians blew her out of space.

Jaina was subdued. It was a bad deal with Pellaeon. She had a look in her eye that said she could easily have been a woman who’d embark on a bloody vendetta if the Jedi hadn’t educated that natural human reflex out of her.

“I shouldn’t have let you hear Daala’s recording, “Fett said. “But when you’re hunting scum, Solo, recognizing the voices is part of making sure you kill the right barve.”

“I’m not squeamish, “she said.

Mirta, helmet in her lap, gave Fett a look. It could have been leave her alone, or even try harder.

“It was still a man you’d known for a long time, “he said. “And a Jedi killed him.”

“It’s bad enough that Tahiri did it, but it’s hard to think of anyone waiting outside a room until someone’s dead.”

Fett saw her point. He tried to work out how many beings he’d killed-no, can’t even guess, have to check the archived accounts, give it up-and he couldn’t remember leaving someone to die the way Pellaeon had been left. The barves should have finished him off cleanly. He didn’t much care for the Moff class anyway, and Daala had made clear what he had to do.

Nobody was familiar with the Remnant’s new Turbulent-class “pocket” Star Destroyers, but Daala had transmitted a deck layout, and its two hangar decks opened at the stern. Fett located the replenishment access. “Reige, where are the troops?”

“As far as we can tell, apart from the ones pounding us, they’ve positioned them at the main exterior hatches. They were relying on the frigates to prevent boarding.” “I think Bloodfin just lost top cover...” “And look out for Jacen Solo-he’s probably planning to extract Lieutenant Veila. Good luck, Fett.”

Fett turned to Jaina. “Added complication. He’ll be facing the same challenges that we are.”

“I can’t locate Jacen in the Force, but I can find her, so she’ll be his transponder.”

“You think he’ll come for her?” “If it’s not too much trouble for him.” Carid leaned across Orar’s console to the chart and put a marker on the Anakin Solo. “Not that he’ll bring that alongside, but it’s comforting to keep an eye on him.”

“Reige, “Fett said. “Stand by. Orade, you join Zerumar in the Tra’kad.”

Orar was a little under forty meters long, and in the shoal of ships ten, twenty, thirty times larger, she was a small target to pick up visually; a transponder trace showing her to be an HNE broadcast unit getting way too close to the action in this chaotic battle meant that by the time anyone checked what she was doing coming so close to Bloodfin’s stern, it would be too late. Tra’kad, even smaller, trailed behind her. Orar crept along the port side to settle over the replenishment hatches and clamped herself to the hull. The belly hatch of the assault ship opened and they were looking at an aperture not quite two meters wide.

It was a poor access point and a good place to get trapped. As soon as Fett slid into the hatch and put his glove on the metal, he could feel distant vibrations from something pounding away inside Bloodfin: someone was trying to smash through a hatch. Fett hoped the engineers and weapons techs could hold back the shock troopers a little longer.

The replenishment hatch opened onto a storage compartment with access to the main deck of the destroyer. Jaina emerged from the hatch in the middle of a stream of armored troops, a small figure in gray with a lightsaber hilt in one hand and blaster in the other.

“I’ll locate Tahiri, “she said.

The ship was in semi-darkness lit only by dim green emergency lighting in most passageways. With visor enhancements, Fett and his troops could see a lot more. Jaina shot off down the passage with all the confidence of someone in broad daylight; Fett found that if he thought of Jedi as having built-in armor and HUDs, then he didn’t find them quite so unsettlingly different.

It’s not about their powers. It’s about their attitude. The powers - I can cope with those.

Kubariet, the Jedi agent he’d worked with in the vongese wars, had been reassuringly matter-of-fact about his abilities and hadn’t had any qualms about using a blaster when the situation demanded. It might not have made any difference to the outcome of a fight, but Fett was better able to see what he was doing. He had trusted him more.

Fett and Carid reached the hatch that opened directly onto the command center section. Jaina was already there, flat against the bulkhead.

“I’m sensing about thirty beings in there, and definitely a

Jedi, “she said. “They’ve barricaded themselves in. The only way they’re getting out is via the same hatches we enter.”

“Let’s do it, then.”

“And she’ll probably have sensed me already.” Fett didn’t specify it. Once those hatches were open, he and his troops would kill everything that moved inside. If Jacen Solo wanted to extract his apprentice, he would have to do it fast.

“In three,” said Carid. “One.... two.... go!” A stream of concentrated blasterfire took the hatch off its clips and it fell into the passage beyond, wedged on the coaming like a safety ramp. Fett laid down covering fire as six of his Ori’ramikade rushed in and dived on the deck, firing from prone positions and meeting a returning hail of blaster bolts.

The Moff’s weren’t going down without a fight. Fett plunged into the smoke and stabbing bolts of energy, suddenly realizing how much more punishment his beskar armor plates absorbed than the old durasteel ones.

In the noise and chaos, with even his HUD display sometimes overwhelmed by the volume of flashing blasterfire, he was unnerved to see Jaina Solo, a small woman by any standards, deflecting bolts with a lightsaber and with nothing but a gray fabric flight suit for protection.

He’d have to remember to tell her one day how impressive it looked. For the time being, all he could register was the direction of incoming fire, and Jaina-cursing loud enough for him to hear over the crack and slap of blaster discharge-saying that Tahiri had vanished.

## GALACTIC WARSHIP OCEAN, OFF FONDOR

Chimaera cut a swath through the battlefield and headed straight for the Anakin Solo, firing turbolasers.

“They always say that Daala tore up the strategy books.” Niathal was still assessing the strength and firepower of the eclectic fleet that had just fallen into her lap. Her immediate guess was that she now had 30 percent more hulls than the Moff-Jacen fleet, as she now thought of it. “She looks as if she’s going to ram him.”

“I’d get out of her way,” Makin said.

Several other commanders in Jacen’s fleet must have had the same idea. They broke off attacks and headed for the Anakin Solo. There were now a six warships converging on the Chimaera, and Niathal tried to guess Daala’s strategy. One advantage of having a completely unexpected and diverse fleet suddenly emerge in theater was that it plunged everything into chaos, and each commander had to pause and take stock-but that included Daala’s allies. It was crowded space. Niathal had an impression of an ancient maritime battle on Naboo, when ships had been packed too close together to move or fire safely.

“Yes, she’s going to turn as late as she can,” said Niathal.

“Even so, I wouldn’t be the frigate on that bearing there.”

“Did she say Maw Irregular Fleet?”

“She did.”

One destroyer bearing down on Chimaera’s port beam appeared to be targeting her bridge, and a cruiser was on an intercept course from starboard. Chimaera opened fire on both simultaneously, with apparently little effect, and held her course.

“What was that, Vio?” Niathal asked. “Turbolaser?”

“Unknown, ma’am.”

“This isn’t the time to admire what she’s had done in refit, but I haven’t seen anything like that. Sensors? Tell me what Chimaera’s got by way of armaments. I just hope this isn’t some massive bluff and she’s just scrambled everything from the breakers’ yard, because Jacen will sense that very fast.”

Niathal, still monitoring the developing collision, moved to watch one of the holocam feeds from the remotes nearest the Anakin Solo. Chimaera was letting smaller vessels take pot shots at her, which her shields shrugged off, and then she simply targeted the same two vessels that she’d returned fire upon moments earlier.

Niathal waited for signs of impact. What she saw instead was the hull of one ship deforming and then simply bursting apart like a bag of grainmeal, with no accompanying explosion. The aft section was intact, but there was a large enough hole in the hull to span five decks, maybe more, and expose compartments to vacuum.

It was an oddly silent, unfit end for the cruiser. It rang a bell with Niathal.

“Oh, I think Daala’s brought some of her toys with her, “Makin said. He’d been watching in silence.

“Yes, I do believe she has some novel weapons.” Niathal commed the Maw flagship. “Ocean to Chimaera-thank you for your assistance. Are you armed with unconventional weapons?”

“Ocean, confirm that, we have metal-crystal phase shifters.... among other things.”

MCPS weapons altered crystalline structures. An area of the unfortunate destroyer’s hull had simply fractured under the stresses and started to break up. It was as good as a laser strike but penetrated shields.

“Thank you, Chimaera.”

“Daala’s dusted off some of the research projects from the Maw Installation, “Makin said. “No telling what she’s got now.”

“Well, I think we should be telling someone.... because that would dent my morale somewhat if I were the enemy.”

But Daala was sending her own unspoken messages around Jacen’s fleet. Other destroyers were

leaving ruptured, dead GA ships in their wake, with a weapon that conventional shields couldn't counter.

Jacen surely had to be able to detect what Niathal could-and more, with his Force senses-and he would know that he was dealing with tactics and weapons he'd never faced before.

And the Anakin Solo was now exposed. The battle group ranged around it was being picked off, in an eerily peaceful but equally lethal way; no spectacular explosions breaching hulls, but large voids from crumbling, altered metals that had lost their strength.

There was no way of telling how many ships had MCPS, but that was all part of the tactic: the uncertainty. GA and Imperial vessels were literally bursting open all across the Fondor theater, and any sane commander with one of Daala's vessels approaching would wonder if he was next.

Niathal chose her moment to comm all ships, hoping that those who'd rushed to Jacen's side had kept open their links to the flagship.

"Commanders of the GA Third and Fourth fleets who have chosen not to accept my command," she said. "This is your opportunity to rejoin the legitimate forces of the Galactic Alliance. Power down your weapons and withdraw now to the designated fleet assembly area. I will not, repeat not, take disciplinary action against any commander who withdraws now."

Niathal sat back and waited to see who would rally to her.

And she kept her gaze on the Anakin Solo, to see what Jacen would do.

# Chapter 16

Call me paranoid, but after we've dealt with the most immediate problems, I suggest we devote some resources to finding out where Daala is based these days, and where she's laid up all the technology from the Maw Installation. She might be a welcome sight now, but who's to say how she'll feel about us in the future?

-Admiral Makin to Admiral Niathal

GA WARSHIP ANAKIN SOLO, OFF FONDOR

So she thought she could play that game, did she?

"Sir, we've got no countermeasures for whatever that is." Commander Inondrar darted from sensor screen to sensor screen, checking the data scanned from stricken ships. "My guess is that it's a phase shifter."

Caedus stood at the main bridge holochart, meshing what he could physically see with what he could sense. Daala's fleet seemed to be everywhere like a cloud of insects, but if they all had phase shifters then they weren't using them. He could sense something else, too: Jedi, but not close, not in the battle, not coming after him.

But I didn't sense Luke before, did I?

"Identify which of Daala's ships has it and concentrate fire on them," Caedus said. "Break off the attack on Fon-dor. Throw everything we've got at Daala. And I mean everything. Even ships responding to distress calls."

"Sir, we've got a lot of damaged ships and even X-wings out there that we need to respond to..."

One of the sensor team looked up from her screen. "Sir, the Loyal Defender has issued an order to abandon ship-they can't maintain hull integrity. Compass Star is going to her aid."

And that was his other dilemma: badly damaged ships tied up other assets in rescue operations.

I could leave them...

No, he couldn't. Nobody would fight on if they thought there'd be no attempt to rescue them. Morale was critical, and not even Caedus could shape the minds of an entire fleet to feel positive about abandoning their comrades.

"This might be a prudent point for a tactical withdrawal to regroup," said Inondrar. "Reassess the situation."

Caedus usually heard retreat when someone said withdrawal, but he was now outnumbered, and the addition of Daala's unorthodox weapons probably amounted to being outgunned, too. Pulling back

and gaining some breathing space was suddenly an attractive idea; but he wondered if he was reacting to exhaustion, and maybe an aggressive push now would turn the battle in his favor.

“What shape are we in?”

“Half the fleet has taken some damage, and we’ve lost more than thirty vessels, sir.”

Caedus was losing. If he delayed, he could lose most of the fleet. It was humiliating to run, but it was one battle of many, not the whole war.

It still stuck in his throat. “Commander, identify an assembly area, and order ships that can jump and that aren’t responding to emergency signals to do so. Loyal commanders only, for the time being.” He was now fighting a battle on three fronts-not only the ad hoc coalition ranged against him, but a weapon he wasn’t yet equipped to resist, and a traitor urging his ships to mutiny. “And we’ll see who’s the legitimate voice of the Galactic Alliance...” Two could play that game. If Niathal had any sense, she’d be as reluctant as he was to slug it out over Coruscant. “All ships-this is Colonel Solo. Admiral Niathal is acting illegally, and I call on you to remain loyal to the Galactic Alliance. Signal your intentions and stand by for orders.”

“What are you going to do, sir?” Inondrar asked.

“If they’re loyal, give them a second RV point to jump to,” Caedus said. “Then we’ll see what Niathal’s got left. If we retain fewer than we hoped-it’ll be a good time to withdraw. If we get more-we pull back to Coruscant, and Niathal’s left high and dry. We lose Fondor, but we can still fight that another day.”

“Ships can’t jump until they’ve cleared the orbit of Thanut.”

“Then tell them to move.” “Yes, sir.”

“And stand by a rescue runner for me.” “All the Anakin’s are deployed.” Caedus was about to demand that one be turned back, but he had an alternative that might make extracting Tahiri a little easier. “Get me a med sprinter, then.”

“We’ve got more calls on med evacs than we can...” “Lieutenant Veila is trapped in Bloodfin, and I won’t leave her. Nobody will fire on a med sprinter. Get me a med sprinter and a corpsman’s uniform.”

Inondrar looked as if he was about to ask how Caedus planned to get on board Bloodfin, but he just mumbled, “Very good, sir, “and commed the hangar deck.

Caedus would work out the details when he reached Bloodfin. There would be an opportunity to remove the wounded, or he would create one.

“Comms how are we doing on responses?” he asked. “How many loyal commanders do we have?” “About two-thirds now of all GA ships.” “Good. Send them the RV coordinates.” Caedus could sense Tahiri now: she was in trouble. “Bloodfin. What’s happening there?”

“We’ve lost the comm from the command center, sir, but they were on emergency power anyway.”  
“No, something’s happening.”

“No sign of enemy action against her. The Imperial forces seem to have abandoned her since they transferred the flag.”

Maybe the mutineers had taken the ship. There had to be casualties. There was no sign of an opposed boarding. Either way, he had to make his move.

“Commander, you have the ship,” he said to Inondrar. “I’ll notify you of my location when I’ve extracted Lieutenant Veila. Withdraw the fleet to Coruscant, and if Niathal attempts to return with her traitors-repel them.”

GA WARSHIP OCEAN, FONDORIAN SPACE

“Stang.”

Several heads turned, even in the middle of a battle. Niathal never cursed aloud-hardly ever, anyway-and for the crew it was an indicator of very bad news.

“My apologies,” she said, fuming inside. “Some of our comrades have decided to leave the party early.”

On the holochart, ships’ icons winked out of existence, and every sensor, tracking screen, and holocam view showed the fleets thinning out. Some vessels that had been under Jacen’s command were still there, along with rescue and med evac tenders. Daala’s fleet cruised among the dwindling number of ships like firaxa sharks let loose in a shoal of matshi, and the garbled comms that she was picking up showed that even the so-called Maw Irregulars were having trouble working out who was on Jacen’s side. The Imperial ships were easier to identify and were taking much of the fire, some conventional ion cannon and turbolaser, some phase shifter.

If the phrase fog of war applied to any moment, then this was it.

“I think this might well be called a mixed blessing,” Niathal said. “But for the time being, I’ll concentrate on the fact that Daala’s saved our necks.”

Niathal was now in the bizarre position of having beaten back Jacen’s combined fleet, but losing her hold on power. She stared in dismay at the modest tally of ships loyal to her on the screen, with Makin leaning over her shoulder.

“I really thought that he’d bitten off more than he could chew this time,” she said. “How has he managed to hold so many ships?”

“Charisma, terror, and the natural tendency of beings in uniform to follow procedure.” Makin shook his head. “Asking crews to choose between two joint leaders is going to end in a split one way or another. Anyway, what are we going to do? Chase him? Fight him for control of Coruscant? Because we’d need Daala and some additional hulls to make that happen, and invading the capital



with another planet's forces would be a step too far politically, I think-even if we could pull it off militarily."

Niathal berated herself for not thinking that through, but would it have made any difference? The moment Jacen refused to honor the surrender, Niathal's course of action was decided for her. She couldn't stand back and let that happen: if she'd followed him meekly, she'd have lost a lot more than a job.

"No, I'll give him a headache instead," she said at last. "We'll withdraw to another base, and set up a GA government in exile. Provide a rallying point for his enemies, and we know he's got a growing collection. That'll split the GA, unfortunately, and perhaps we'll end up with some unappetizing bedfellows, but it beats playing Jacen's game."

There was still the Jedi Council, of course, but Niathal had to keep her distance. It was a case of mutual interests, but she couldn't commit her forces to Luke Skywalker's control, and she doubted if he'd give his Jedi pilots to her command.

And where were they? The StealthXs were around-Jacen's undignified and narrow escape was proof of that-but working out what they were up to was another matter.

Jacen was pulling back. She'd risk opening comlinks and see if any Jedi answered.

"Ocean to any StealthX, please respond..."

She waited. Come on, Luke, I know you're out there...

"StealthX Five-Five to Ocean."

"Master Skywalker... you're not in our way, so I won't get in yours, but a heads-up would be appreciated."

"Understood, Ocean. We were keeping Jacen's ships off the backs of Fondorian emergency responders, but they seem to have somewhere more interesting to go now."

"Mind if I ask if you had anything to do with the concealment of the Fondorian fleet?"

"We did our best to protect unarmed civilians working in the orbital yards."

"That's.... borderline when it comes to Jedi ethics, is it not?"

"Our objective is to stop Jacen with minimal loss of life." Luke swallowed audibly, as if framing something he found difficult to say. "I very much regret what happened to the minelayer crews. I thought Fondor might tackle the threat differently."

And this man flies a fighter. He's fought real battles. He destroyed the Death Star. I'll never understand the Jedi... and this is all my fault anyway, for spying for him.

“We all have our regrets in war,” she said. “And what looks like today’s merciful solution turns into tomorrow’s suffering, Master Skywalker. We’re all part of that web of events.”

“Indeed...”

“My intention now is to set up a GA government in exile, because we can’t beat Jacen on Coruscant, not without outside aid, and I’m not sure that’s prudent right now.”

“Ocean, where will you go? Where can you go?”

It was an excellent question. The nearest GA Fleet base-or at least a base that wasn’t hostile to the GA-was Nallastia.

“Nallastia.”

“Not ideal.”

“Fondor would have been handy, but we appear to have worn out our welcome...”

“Commit some rescue teams to the planet, and I’ll see what I can arrange with President Vadde. Stopping Jacen ignoring the surrender might have bought you some points with him. And you’re no longer the official GA.”

War could suspend all logic and common sense. It wouldn’t have been the first time in history that enemies had found common cause midstream and become allies. Niathal grasped at the straw that would give her crews the best chance of survival.

“I’m very grateful for your assistance, Master Skywalker,” she said.

“I’m sure you’d do the same for me, Admiral....” And look where it got me.

One day, Niathal knew, she would be unable to keep it to herself any longer, and she’d have to unburden herself to someone about leaking the minelayers’ movements.

And you, Luke Skywalker. How will you square it with your conscience?

Now wasn’t the time to ask him.

She’d left port as the joint Chief of State and now she couldn’t go home-not until or unless Jacen Solo was deposed. For some reason, the hundred minelayer crew weighed more heavily on her than the thousands lost in this battle.

“Resilient reports that they’ve recovered Captain Nevil, by the way, ma’am,” said the comm officer. “He asks if he can join Ocean.”

Nevil, one saved out of so many lost. “Tell him, permission granted.”

Nevil's wife didn't have to lose both a son and a husband within weeks of each other. Niathal grasped it as one bright moment in a day of dark.

## MED EVAC SPEEDER, APPROACHING BLOODFIN

The battlefield was a scrap yard of debris from a hundred ships and more. Caedus picked his way between slowly rumbling chunks of ship ranging from hatches and torn sheets of plastoid panels to whole sections bigger than his own vessel. The battle was over, leaving desolation in its wake.

But Tahiri was alive; he could feel her.

And he could feel Jaina.

Of all the people he'd lost-in the sense that they were monochrome images from another life, that they would be vividly relevant and full-color again if he could only change back into the person he'd been-Jaina was the one that troubled him most. He had been certain that it would have been Allana; he made a conscious effort not to think of his daughter, and it worked-mostly. But it was his twin who haunted his thoughts, and that perhaps was inevitable.

So she'd come after him, too, to finish what Luke had started. Yun-Harla: the Trickster goddess of the Yuuzhan Vong, who would have derived satisfaction from seeing the two battling twins of their religion made flesh. He reached out in the Force to locate Jaina, the only way he could detect the location of her StealthX. She would never feel him now that he was hidden in the Force; and she would never open fire on a med evac vessel. But he stayed alert.

Bloodfin drifted, apparently intact, ringed by debris that wasn't her own. Two Imperial cruisers circled her at a distance, almost the last of the Remnant's fleet to leave the area. The med sprinter's comlink burst into life.

"Med Evac, this is Gold Fortress. We have a security situation in Bloodfin. Please keep clear."

Caedus eased slowly toward Bloodfin's stern. "This is Med Evac Ten-Fourteen from Colonel Solo's Galactic Alliance Fourth Fleet, offering assistance. We're aware of your problem."

"Where's your boss, Ten-Fourteen? Banged out in a hurry, didn't he?"

"Give me time to talk to Bloodfin and persuade them to let me take off any wounded." In a corpsman's uniform, Caedus was pretty anonymous. Even if folks knew a face, they tended to be poor at recognizing it out of context. A little mind influence, a little push here and there, and he could walk in. "I'm a med evac, for goodness' sake. They're not savages, mutiny or no mutiny. Have you still got comm contact?"

"Negative, Med Evac. We're waiting. They've rigged the ship to blow if anyone tries to board her." "Let me try."

The comlink fell silent for a few moments as if Gold Fortress was considering the proposal.

“Okay, Med Evac, we’ve sent a signal indicating that you’re standing by, but we don’t know if anyone’s receiving. Last we heard, troopers were holding the hangar area. So you take your chances. You’re obviously not a boarding party, but they might shoot first and worry about ID later.” “I do this all the time,” Caedus said soothingly. “I can calm people down.”

Or make them want to fight to the last trooper. But you don’t need to know that right now.

“Your best bet is to dock with the emergency access on the upper hull aft of the tower, and hope common sense prevails. Make sure you’re all lit up, Doc...”

A shattered X-wing rolled slowly across his bow as he moved closer to Bloodfin; and a slab-sided vessel of a type he’d never seen before drifted without power on the port side of the Destroyer. Caedus picked up a waft of life and anxiety in the Force. One of Daala’s museum collection, no doubt, but where had she hidden all this when the Maw Installation was cleared out? He’d have to locate that little sarlacc of nasty surprises sooner rather than later. Tahiri, I’m here. Help me out. Concentrate. She was alive, but under stress. He could almost feel her heart beating out of her chest. She was under attack.

Caedus aligned the med speeder with the rescue access hatch, yellow and red chevrons glowing in his landing lights.

# Chapter 16

This will be a difficult matter for me to square with others, but I would be prepared to offer Admiral Niathal's fleet safe haven. At a time like this, when Colonel Solo clearly represents the greatest threat to Fondor and the rest of the galaxy, uniting against him is the most important thing. He may well be back to finish the job he started, and if he doesn't, then I would like to commit the forces we have left to finishing him.

-Shas Vadde, President of Fondor, to Luke Skywalker

IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER BLOODFIN

"Mand'alor, we've got company."

Fett paused to adjust the audio in his helmet comlink with an eye-blink. Blasterfire spat around the compartment, cracking the air apart. "Can you deal with it, Grade?"

The Tra'kad was the right vessel at the right time; even without manual systems, it was ideal for playing dead. "Med sprinter docking, top rescue hatch."

"How caring." Fett was getting tired of waiting for the Moffs and the platoon of shock troopers defending the next compartment to give up and die. "Clear!" He lobbed in a small stun grenade-no dets, keep the place in one piece if we can-and instinctively flinched at the stupefying blaze of light and noise, even though his helmet buffered it. Then he hosed the space with blasterfire. "Courageous medic, or some scumbag abusing the noncombatant flag?"

"They'd better be medics, or they might end up in need of surgery themselves. Leave it to me and Ram."

Mirta backed along the bulkhead, blaster raised, and stepped past Fett to check the compartment. The ship's defended heart was like a nest of boxes. That was great-as long as you weren't trying to get out. Somewhere aft of them, they could feel sporadic thumps through the ship as troopers tried to smash their way into the center section.

"Did you fry the locks on the hatches to the hangar deck?" Fett asked.

"Yes." Mirta listened at the next barricaded hatch to the Moffs' last stand. "I hate being interrupted when I'm working. We can crack it later if they still want a fight."

Carid and Vevut unrolled a strip of detonite to make a frame charge. "You reckon they'll cave in when we de-Moff this crate?"

"Maybe." Fett calculated for a moment: twenty Mandos in Bloodfin, about thirty standing by to follow them and take the troopers trying to batter their way into the engineering area. The Imperials might have had a lot more troops, but that counted for little in a confined space where they couldn't actually use them. "They're logjammed."

Carid and Vevut waved him back, and he took cover with Mirta. The whump of the exploding charge left the hatch hanging open; Vevut ripped it to one side with a crushgaunted hand, and fire spat out the hatchway. If Daala hadn't wanted the ship largely intact, this could have been over by now. A volley of bolts struck Carid in his beskar chest plate and smacked him against the bulkhead. He made an animal grunt of annoyance.

"Ah, I love it when you boys get saucy!" he wheezed. Fett heard the shunk of his gauntlet vibroblade. "Come here and say hello to your uncle Carid..."

Carid dived into the opening with Vevut and Fett behind. It was an adrenaline-fueled blur-as it always was-and Fett was aware of Vevut getting a faceful of white armor; the troopers must have shoved the remaining Moff's into the next compartment to shield them. The spaces were so cramped now that it was hand-to-hand fighting, with not even enough space to raise a rifle. Displays and sensor panels crashed across consoles like barriers. He tasted singed plastoid when he inhaled-he needed to smell his environment, helmet filters or not-and he would have been blinded by smoke if the HUD hadn't picked up other wavelengths. He jumped onto a collapsed panel to vault over it and it split beneath his boots, catapulting him forward onto a shock trooper. The man shoved his sidearm into Fett's belly and fired.

The impact of rapidly expanding superheated air was like a gut-punch, but beskar really was worth the extra weight. Fett smacked down hard with his vibroblade into the gap between chest plate and underarm, feeling it lodge and then penetrate. A blaster bolt that wasn't his cracked into the man's helmet in a blinding flash of light. The trooper stopped struggling.

"Ba'buir, "said Mirta, trying to haul him up. "Where's the Jedi?"

Jaina Solo was tough enough to look after herself. But if she'd managed to get herself killed, he'd be furious. That wasn't in the plan. He scrambled to his feet, then heard a thud and turned. Jaina dropped down out of what looked like a ventilation duct.

"Tahiri, "she said. "She's gone into the shafts. Schematic says that's an emergency exit route, last resort."

"You busy, Mand'alor?" Carid yelled. He seemed to forget that he didn't need to raise his voice in a helmet. He usually preferred fighting without one. "Or we'll just mop up this bunch on our own, shall we?"

"On my way, "Fett said. "Solo, can you get her?"

"I need her blocked off somewhere along the route."

"I'll do it." Mirta adjusted her helmet. "I'm small enough to pass through in armor."

"There's a med sprinter docked topside, "Fett said. "Just a hunch, but do those ducts join up?"

Mirta checked her datapad. "Yeah... there's a space a little under two meters high running the underside of that hatch. I reckon Tahiri commed a ride home. Maybe you should use the

flamethrower.”

“Let’s not,” said Jaina, looking up at the deckhead. She shut her eyes as if listening, and coughed. Fierfek, next time I’ll make her wear an environment suit. “I can feel her, but I can’t feel anyone outside on the hull.” “You can sense that?”

“When I really concentrate.” She took a deep breath and coughed again. “Might be a med droid, might be someone who can vanish in the Force and I can guess who that’ll be.”

“I didn’t need the Force to know your brother would come to collect his villip,” said Mirta, and dragged a seat across the deck to climb up to another ventilation grille. “And if I get to him first, your training’s going to be wasted.”

“I said, we leave the scumbag to her.” Fett lunged to grab Mirta’s ankle just as she hauled herself into the trunking. He couldn’t think of anything that would express his sudden fear for her. He tried. “Don’t get killed now that I’ve bought your wedding present.” She shook her leg free. “Get a refund.” Jaina gave him a sympathetic shrug and bent her knees, bouncing a little as if she was going to jump. She did. She vanished up the shaft and there was no sound of her crashing into anything. ‘Yeah, clever. The noise of close-quarters fighting had now given way to more distant sound transmitted through the ship’s decks, the faint vibration of some serious pounding taking place. The blastproof bulkheads and hatches in the engineering sections seemed trooper-proof, too.

Fett turned to see Carid’s head stuck out of the hatch. “Don’t get all envious. You can do that with a jetpack. Now, Mand’alor, we’re about to open your surprise, so if you wouldn’t mind hauling your shebs in here…” “I shouldn’t have brought her. Or Grade.” “Don’t go soft on me, Fett.” “I need someone to dance on my grave.” Carid was a good man, but Fett missed Beviin on ops like this. “How many have we got in there?”

Fett picked his way through the debris to another hatch, one with double doors. The schematic said this was the inner sanctum. His terahertz penetrating radar showed bodies moving around, just a dozen or so now. As far as he was concerned it was a stupid design for a warship, but then he didn’t fight the way Imperial navies did.

“I reckon they’d have a good twenty to thirty Moff’s and their lackeys in a flagship,” Vevut said. “I count fourteen dead so far.”

“Well, they don’t look like they’re leading their troops from the front. Let’s drill out the rest of the maggots.”

Vevut and Fett crouched in the cover of a console ripped from the deck, squatting ready to spring forward as soon as Carid blew the hatch bolts. Fett felt no pain: he knew he’d feel like a wreck tomorrow, but right then he was im-mune, buoyed up on urgency, adrenaline, and long practice. His body knew what needed doing even if his brain kept trying to tell it that he was too old for this nonsense, and that he needed to worry about his granddaughter.

You didn’t give a mott’s backside about her mother for decades, and now you worry about the kid.

There was no logic to the things that went through your head when you thought you might die. And every time he drew a blaster, a little voice said that this might be the last time he did, even if he never believed it.

“Cover!” yelled Carid.

“Volume...” Fett sighed, ears ringing.

Whump.

The hatch doors ripped apart. Fett’s stream of blasterfire preceded him as he jumped over Carid and burst through the hatch. They were fresh out of troopers inside, and he didn’t care if he was dealing with armed Moff’s or not, because his hand didn’t have time to factor that in before it carried on firing.

He waited for the noise to stop; blaster, exploding transpariplast light fittings, shouts, cries of pain. He’d heard folks say that Mandos were totally silent when they attacked, but then they never heard what went on inside the helmets. Carid had his vivid stream of invective running the whole time, and he never seemed to use the same profanity twice. Vevut muttered to himself. When they got hit, they yelped. Fett couldn’t recall making any sound apart from what was forced out of him by being winded by a blow or a fall.

“Well, endex for them,” said Carid. He aimed his blaster while he checked for any still alive. Five men: maybe there were other officers, but not here. They’d reached the core of the citadel. Fett looked up.

“No, I didn’t think they’d be that dumb.” There was a decent-sized hatch above his head, nothing so small as to need an undignified scramble to pass through. A panel of controls was inset into the deckhead next to it. Fett lifted his arm to poke the panel with the muzzle of his blaster, and it ratcheted open, releasing a ladder that extended to the deck and came to rest on two feet.

“They don’t go down with their ship, then.” He directed his penetrating radar by tilting his head, and his HUD showed that the shaft rose vertically, then branched off at forty-five degrees. If the schematic was right, the angled shaft would come out in a larger passage just under the emergency hatch. Sounds of twanging metal said that the shaft was either buckling with heat from a fire, or someone was hitting it-boots on rungs, probably.

“Why do people always run away from us?” Carid said. “Let’s go ask them,” said Fett.

IMPERIAL DESTROYER BLOODFIN: EMERGENCY ROUTE BETA-ONE

The Star Destroyer was riddled with shafts that reminded Jaina of sinuses in a skull.

She emerged at the top level, sweating. It had to be the top: she ran along the passage at a crouch, looking to either side, and couldn’t see any more openings. She didn’t have a sense of any concealed hatches, either.



But if Jacen was there-he'd know she was, too, even if he couldn't pinpoint her exact location.

Mirta.... where's Mirta?

Ben had once said to her that he used the GAG helmet comlinks, because the Force was all well and good, but he needed to send and receive complex information in apparent silence, and the Force was pretty poor at that. Jaina wished for a helmet-just for a moment-to communicate with Mirta. In the end, she didn't need to. She found her squatting with her blaster leveled ahead. Jaina dropped down too.

Mirta's hand signals were actually very clear: Three or four contacts ahead. Then she drew a T-sign in the air with her fingertip-Tahiri-and shrugged.

"She's in there," Jaina breathed. It was as quiet as she could make it. "I feel her."

The schematic didn't show everything, apparently. Mirta lifted her left forearm, blaster held one-handed in her right just like her grandfather, so Jaina could read the datapad housed in it. Jaina could see a hatch in the deck of the passage that wasn't shown. They bolted past it at a crouch, peeling the soles of their boots from the surface to avoid noise, and then they came to a corner.

There was a slow, rhythmic scraping sound, like someone unscrewing a metal container. What happened next felt completely natural: Mirta pointed to the front and side, then to Jaina, and then to herself and indicated forward. She'd give Jaina covering fire as she rounded the corner. Hey, I'm getting used to these people. Mirta signaled: One, two-go.

Jaina shot around the corner and even though she was in Mirta's arc of fire, she felt complete confidence. But ahead of them, Tahiri-struggling to release something in the deckhead, clinging to a ladder, wearing a bright yellow environment suit-clearly didn't. She let loose with a volley of blaster bolts that Jaina deflected with her lightsaber. The fire hit Mirta's plates.

Jaina had never been close enough to someone in those circumstances to worry about what happened to deflected bolts, but now she knew. Mirta swore loudly and returned fire. Tahiri fended off the shots with her own lightsaber, and then Mirta just went crazy as far as Jaina was concerned: she ran full-tilt at Tahiri, yelling some curse at her at the top of her voice, something like "Gar shab'ika!"

Mirta shouldn't have been able to beat a Jedi's reaction time. But she did.

She cannoned into Tahiri and the impact lifted the Jedi bodily. It had to be the pure shock of seeing this ball of armored, cursing fury coming at her, not caring if the enemy held blaster, lightsaber, or ion cannon, that rooted Tahiri just long enough to get hit hard. She lashed out with the lightsaber. Jaina could see Tahiri through the faceplate and knew she would never forget her look of horror as the blade of energy simply failed to slice through Mirta's body: My lightsaber doesn't work. For any Jedi, it was a shocking, naked moment.

Jaina was only a split second behind Mirta, but it felt like minutes. She found herself on autopilot,

somehow accessing that blind violence that Beviin had shown her, that absolute focus, and for a moment-for long enough-it shut down every warning about the dark side.

There was no anger, only her body taking over, and a voice inside saying, You can't kill Mirta, she's getting married, her mom died, she's found her grandma. It felt like perfect logic right then. Jaina swung at Tahiri like a madwoman. Mirta rolled clear and there was the shunk of a vibroblade. She ducked under the flashing lightsabers, taking a fair few accidental hits, and Jaina saw it unfold in that odd slow motion of desperate combat-Mirta's blade connected with Tahiri's leg and dug into her thigh. Blood spurted: she'd hit an artery. Her blaster went spinning across the deck.

And then there was firing from behind; and boots, running. Tahiri fell back, clutching at her leg. Jaina twisted to see what was coming her way and there it was: three, four men in brownish gray uniforms and caps running toward them. One turned to fire behind him and got a bolt in the chest for his trouble. The rest opened fire on Jaina and Mirta, and it was clear they wanted to get where Tahiri was going. Tahiri herself was second priority at that moment. Jaina slashed at the flying bolts. Fett, Carid, and Vevut came pounding up behind the Moffs and the firefight sent Jaina spinning on instinct alone, following her lightsaber.

She felt the breath of cold air behind her. Metal rasped. Tahiri had dislodged whatever had jammed the hatch, and when Jaina turned, she saw Tahiri scrambling through the deckhead. There was blood everywhere on the deck; Mirta was on her knees, clutching her throat one-handed. "Your shabla brother," she gasped. "He's up there." The Moffs lay dead. Jaina felt Jacen then; he was throttling Mirta to let Tahiri escape into the docking tube above the hatch. Jaina put every scrap of strength she had into breaking Jacen's invisible Force choke hold on Mirta. She saw it like a black chain and visualized the links flying apart just as Carid shot past her and scrambled up the ladder followed by Vevut. Fett skidded to a halt and grabbed Mirta by her shoulder, as if he thought the blood on the deck might be hers.

"I'm okay," she said.

"If he's hurt you, I'll break my own rule and take a long time killing him," Fett said.

"Don't worry." Mirta rubbed her neck. "I got my own Jedi..."

Then the hatch above them slammed shut. Fett took a couple of steps up the ladder and hammered on it.

"Let me up there." He hammered again. It must have been the air lock: they could hear nothing. "Carid? Open the hatch. Now. Leave the scum. You too, Verut."

But there was still silence; and then Jaina could feel scraping vibrating through the hull.

MED SPRINTER: BELLY HATCH DOCKING TUBE

"Tahiri!" Caedus could see her in the dark tunnel of the tube, through the transparisteel viewport set in the outer hatch. The tube was five or six meters deep, long enough to extend through the

multiskinned hull and into the air lock beneath. He opened the hatch; it was a simple manual opening, the kind that flipped back on itself. “Tahiri, come on - “

“I’m stuck, “she said weakly.

“You’ve only got a few meters to go.” Jaina... he could feel Jaina very close. “Come on.”

“I’m... I’m bleeding. I’m trying to hold it together.”

“Where?”

“Thigh... the blood’s just pumping out... my suit’s caught...”

Femoral artery. She’d be dead in a couple of minutes. He could Force-lift her.

“Here’s a trick we can learn you, son, “a voice below snarled. “Breathe vacuum. We can. We’re well ‘ard. It goes like thisThere were Mandalorians below Tahiri, in the tube.

A power tool began whining, and Caedus smelled metal being ground. Air rushed past him, whipping small scraps of flimsi down the tube.

They’re cutting open the docking tube.

“I’ve caught my suit...” Caedus could see Tahiri now, the blood-soaked leg of her environment suit bunched up in one fist-maybe to seal the cut, maybe in some futile attempt to stop the hemorrhage. “My suit’s caught on something sharp...”

Tahiri didn’t scream, but Caedus felt her terror and heard little gulping sounds as she struggled to release her suit from whatever had snagged it. She was ripping it as she pulled.

I could stop the bleeding.

I could seal the breach.

I could pull her clear.

He could Force-push their attackers, or grab her to free her, or snatch the cutters, but that would just open the rip in the docking tube, too. He couldn’t do it all. He was still exhausted from the effort of the battle link and bringing down Fondor’s defenses.

No, I am not omnipotent.

And he could pull up into the body of the med sprinter to save himself, and leave her to die.

But he needed Tahiri.

“Don’t you dare die on me.” Caedus slipped into the tube, catching onto the handholds. “Grab me

when I'm in reach and hang on.”

He'd Force-jump when he had hold of her, and pull free of the docking ring. It was fine. He could do that.

And then something above made the med sprinter shudder. The tube creaked and strained at his end. The hatch slammed shut overhead.

He was shut in a docking tube that was venting atmosphere, with a dying woman beneath and some psychotic Mandalorians bent on suicide.

“They've.... got vacuumproof suits...” Tahiri said. It had never crossed Caedus's mind to wonder how Mandalorian armor and their undersuits worked. It was obvious: they were like trooper suits. The battered and archaic appearance masked the best technology that could be built into armor.

If I push hard, I can open that hatch again. The air wasn't venting as fast as he'd feared; the men below were using some kind of powered saw on the tough material, and the aperture they'd managed to create was small compared with the volume of air rushing to escape. Caedus dropped down into the tunnel, and something grabbed his leg. He thought it was Tahiri, but it was a gauntleted hand, and it hurt.

It was crushing his ankle. Someone grabbed him around the waist, too.

But that was Tahiri, he hoped. His ankle twisted. That was not Tahiri.

“Hi there, Jacen. I feel like I know you already, you hut'uun.”

There were only so many competing elements that even a Sith Lord could handle at once. Caedus had to choose, and fast.

# Chapter 18

What's a hut'uun? A coward. Physical coward, moral coward, any kind of scum without the spine to stand their ground or do the right thing. We don't have a word for hero. Being prepared to die for your family and friends, or what you hold dear, is a basic requirement for a Mando, so it's not worth a separate word. It's only cowards we had to find a special name for.

-Baltan Carid, explaining the finer points of Mando'a and Mandalorian culture to Jaina Solo over a buy'ce gal-a large ale

DOCKING TUBE, MED SPRINTER: CLINGING TO THE HULL OF IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER BLOODFIN

I can't leave Tahiri.

But I might not get out of here alive, either.

Caedus was staring into the Mandalorian's face now, or at least his helmet. There were no eyes to fix on, just a T-shaped nothing set in a pocked and scarred violet metal visor.

It seemed to go on for minutes, but it could only have been seconds. The man had a tight grip on his ankle. The muzzle of his blaster was in Caedus's belly.

And then the man didn't fire.

Caedus didn't even need a second; a fraction's hesitation was all he needed to get free. It was a trick that had bought him time with Mara, not a full illusion but enough to check someone at the reflex level-the face of a loved one even though they knew the identity of the enemy they were fac-ing.

He had no idea what might stop a Mandalorian.

He opted for Ailyn Vel's face.

"Doesn't suit you, dar'jetii, "said the Mandalorian wearily, and then simply held his blaster to Caedus's kneecap as Tahiri clung to him in the tangle of limbs and weapons. "Ah, Fett, you spoilsport, I have to have some fun..."

He fired into Caedus's leg. Then he just let go. The agony was suddenly somewhere else. It wasn't happening to Caedus at that moment, but to another Caedus a long way away. He put his last, best effort into Force-punching the hatch overhead-not pushing, nothing so refined-and bursting it open. At the moment he did that, he pushed off hard with his uninjured leg and rocketed through the docking ring into the sprinter with Tahiri clutched to him.

The next thing he knew he was on the med sprinter's deck, Tahiri sprawled beside him. He slammed the inner hatch controls and the hull sealed. He needed to get clear; whatever had smashed into him outside was going to pur-sue him, but Tahiri needed help now. He concentrated everything

on holding that blood back, every Force trick he could muster, and scrambled for clamps and dressings and fluid lines.

She was unconscious. He expected to feel a barrage of cannon fire just before his ship broke up and he had a few final seconds of feeling that he'd fought in vain. But he was still in one piece, and nothing was hammering on the hull. He couldn't understand why he had several clear minutes—he was certain it really was that long, not the effect of adrenaline and panic on his brain's time perception—and nothing had happened to him while he put a line into Tahiri's arm and pumped plasma into her as he put a proper compression dressing on her thigh.

He'd managed to get the suit stuck in the dressing, too, but she wasn't bleeding out now.

And he was still alive.

It really was his destiny. Nobody could be that lucky without a reason.

Caedus hit the automated controls as he stumbled past the pilot's console and sent the med speeder shooting vertically away from Bloodfin's hull.

"It's okay, Tahiri," he said, centering himself again. "We're both going to live to fight another day. It's our destiny."

IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER BLOODFIN

"Leave him!" Fett said. "Grade, back off. I said he was Jaina's and I mean it."

Grade's voice came out of nowhere. Jaina realized she could hear the comlink from Mirta's helmet as it lay on one side on the deck.

"Yes, Mand'alor.... you can't blame a boy for trying, though."

"Let me go after Jacen," Jaina said. "He's hurt, he's tired, he's got an injured apprentice..."

"In what?" Fett said. "The Bes'uliik? Great. And then what do you do when you catch him? You're not ready to do what needs doing. We'll make you ready."

Fett had hold of Mirta's shoulder as if he was going to shake the daylight out of her. Instead he just reached out to touch her hair, a couple of awkward smoothing gestures that suggested she was burning his fingers. It struck Jaina that he might never have stroked his own daughter's hair. It was disturbingly poignant. True to type, Mirta bristled and Fett shoved his thumb in his belt. The brief attempt at being grandfather and granddaughter had evaporated.

"I'm fine, Ba'buir," Mirta said. "Me and Jaina, we're a good double act."

"You're a maniac," Jaina said. "Tahiri could have killed you."

"She had to get past the beskar first, and anyway, you got her."

“No, you got her.... you severed an artery.” “Well, that’s for killing an old man.”

Jaina tried to imagine how Mirta felt being so close to the person who’d killed her mother and not being able to get at him. Jaina was now in a world of unsettling emotions post-combat, of feeling the rush dissipate, and thinking of who might have been killed and who might have done the killing, and an odd urge to find everything both funny and terrifying at the same time.

Fett cut in. “Let’s get back below. In case it slipped your minds, we’ve still got a few troopers to calm down.” He cocked his head suddenly as if he was listening to comm chatter. “Okay. Talgal says she’s done that. It would be nice if someone told me when they were storming a hangar deck.”

The hatch overhead opened and Carid dropped down with Vevut, the pair of them hitting the deck with loud thuds. Carid lifted off his helmet and shook his head like an animal shaking water out of its coat.

“I enjoyed that,” he said, all smiles. “No offense, jetii, but kneecapping your brother made my day, it surely did. If the Mand’alor hadn’t been such a spoilsport and made me stop, I’d have enjoyed putting that bolt in his...”

Vevut slapped Mirta’s back enthusiastically. “Kandosii! Now that’s a daughter to have in the family. Does Grade know you can stab like that?”

Mirta grinned at him and shoved him in the shoulder, all rough Mandalorian affection. “I can cook, I can dig trenches, I can stab a chakaar...” And she laughed. It was quite transformational; she was a different woman. She seemed far more at ease with her father-in-law than she ever did with her grandfather, and Jaina wondered if seeing that hurt Fett.

Fett just shook his head and walked off down the passage, stooping slightly because there was so little head-room. Jaina and the others trooped after him. Somehow it felt much harder to climb back down those shafts now the adrenaline had ebbed. They picked their way out of the citadel and into the ship itself, suddenly finding crew everywhere and shock troopers in white-some, not all being herded at blasterpoint along the main passage. Others, helmets under their arms, were talking to crewmates as if nothing had happened. Clearly not all of them felt obliged to die in a ditch for the Moffs. They might well have been more sympathetic to Pellaeon, after all.

“What a mess,” Fett said, head turning in a slow scan as he seemed to take in Bloodfin’s sorry condition. The ship was a mass of scorched paint and buckled hatches; it looked like every vertical surface had been damaged somehow. “Brand-new ship. Disgraceful.”

“Could have been much worse,” Carid said defensively. “We were pretty careful, under the circumstances. If Daala starts bleating about the paintwork, she can shove it.”

“I think she’s got other issues,” Fett said. “I’m going to find Pellaeon’s body. We’re not savages, after all.”

Jaina trailed after him at a discreet distance, knowing he could see her in his helmet’s 360-degree

vision, but not wanting to crowd him. She let him enter Pellaeon's day cabin and stood back to wait, but then she heard him talking to someone. The lighting was returning to normal all around the ship; machinery whined and hummed as systems came back online.

"It's a dirty deal, Reige."

"Is Daala coming?"

"Yeah. I'll leave you two to sort this."

Reige's voice sounded shaky. "Well, this crew will serve her out of respect for the admiral. We'll settle the score for him."

Jaina edged forward. Fett was talking to a man in his thirties in naval uniform, a lieutenant commander, and there was a body under a blanket laid on the couch. Jaina noted the immaculate boots protruding. Poor old Pellaeon. This was hardly the first person she'd known well, lost touch with, and then next seen as a casualty of war, but it seemed a terrible thing to reach such an age and then be killed, alone and betrayed.

Reige nodded politely to her. Fett came out of the cabin and walked slowly away. Jaina caught up with him.

"After all those years," she said. "What a terrible thing." "It's war," Fett said.

"I meant that if you reach your nineties, you should have a reasonable expectation of dying peacefully at home."

Fett sounded as if he'd snorted. "Not Pellaeon. He died well. Men like that don't want to fade out quietly."

Jaina wondered if Fett had that kind of end in mind. She couldn't imagine him sitting on a porch in Keldabe in his dotage.

"Mirta's handy in a fight," Jaina said. "Why am I trying to be sociable?" "I hope you're proud of her."

Fett shrugged, still walking. "She's a fighter. I know." "I learned a lot today. I even found myself doing a Beviin. You know. Red mist, crazy, swinging away like a maniac."

"He'll be delighted."

"Doesn't it bother you that you've let me learn so much?" she asked. "I know a lot about how Mandalorians fight now."

"So what have you really learned, Solo?" Fett recoiled his fibercord line. It vanished into a housing on his armor, and it didn't seem possible that so much cord could fit in there. It reminded her of a conjuring trick. "Our weapons? Everything from a Bes'uliik to our bare hands. Our technology?"



We're still using tech four thousand years old. Our secret headquarters? We're everywhere. Our numbers? We don't even know. How to assassinate our leaders? We don't need any. If I got shot tomorrow, they'd all regroup and carry on without me. The only secret we have is how our metalworkers forge beskar. And we're not even reliant on that."

Jaina shrugged. "When you put it like that, it's zero."

"Everyone can see how we win, but it's another thing to do it."

"I was saying thank you, actually."

"You're welcome, Solo. By the way, did you know your brother can change his appearance in a fight, to look like someone else?"

"No," Jaina said. Jacen liked his illusions, though; it didn't surprise her. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks again, Fett."

If he walked much farther, he'd end up treading vacuum. He was trying to make some space to think in, she could tell that.

And he left Jacen for me.

Jaina pondered that for the rest of the day.

AFT ENGINEERING FLAT, FORMER IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER BLOODFIN

Daala walked along the row of bodies, looking as if she were carrying out a parade inspection on troops who just happened to be lying flat on their backs.

She paused a couple of times to put her weight on one polished boot, the other leg extended gracefully for balance, and leaned over slightly to frown at a name on a badge. Quille's coup days were over. One Moff earned a closer inspection and an exploratory prod with her boot.

"That's one of the misogynist parasites I wanted to kill personally for Liegeus," she said. "Fett, I'm disappointed."

"Shab, we always forget to check ID when folks open fire on us..." Carid lifted his helmet and wiped his forehead with the palm of his glove. "We'll fix our quality-control process, ma'am. I can stand him up again, and then you can put a round in him if you like."

Daala said nothing and didn't take her eyes off the Moffs, but stepped back and patted Carid's helmet with unerring accuracy as he held it in one hand.

Fett understood her, even if the comment was veneered in a joke. "Ten percent discount for killing the right barve too fast at the wrong time."

"You're a gentleman, Fett. Come on, we'll leave the sanitation crew to their task. Let's keep this

ship immaculate for poor Gil.”

So Bloodfin was her ship now, another toy taken from the squabbling boys who wouldn't let her play the last time. She walked along the passageway with the confidence of ownership, but she didn't go into the day cabin where Pellaeon had been murdered. Instead, she carried on through the ship and down a couple of decks to the wardroom, where small clusters of gray-uniformed officers were sitting around small tables, talking in low voices. They looked like men—they were all human males, which no doubt made Daala bristle—who'd suddenly realized what it meant to be exiled a long way from home. They jumped to attention when they spotted Daala. She pressed all their admiral-on-deck buttons without even trying.

“As you were, gentlemen.” She gave them a little nod and a hand gesture that said not to bother with protocol right then, and settled herself in one of the more luxuriously upholstered seats in a private corner. There were blaster burns everywhere. “So that's the new Sith approach, is it, Fett? Shooting a man Gil's age, after all the years of service he's given the galaxy. Do you think the Jedi can get rid of them this time?”

Fett thought of Jaina Solo, stuck with the dilemma that removing Sith the permanent way meant becoming like them, at least for a short while. Expedience messed up those high-flown morals. “If they do, they'll only come back again. Swing of the pendulum.”

“As long as you've got Jedi, you'll get Sith,” said Daala. “One begets the other.” Fett tried to recall his history lessons, the sort that Mandalorians knew even if nobody else did. “Yeah. Gets tiresome.”

“Come on, Fett, you did all right out of Vader.”

“Sith paid Mandalorians for millennia. We had a war with them, too, and guess who didn't win. It's a cycle of sectarian brawls. Everyone else gets hit by the flying bottles. I've done my bit to remove the problem, but they just keep coming back.”

“Folks say the same about Mandos.”

Daala examined her nails, deep in thought. A steward darted out from behind the counter with drinks on a tray, a real human steward and a real ionite tray, because the Imperials were particular about that kind of thing. Daala nursed the glass for a while but didn't drink. Fett didn't touch his at all.

“I think there can be a third way,” she said. “No Jedi Council. Keep them in their box, away from politics, and certainly never arm them.”

“Ordinary barves running their own affairs? You crazy woman, Daala. It'll never catch on.”

She fondled the glass again, and didn't put it down this time. “You have a better idea?”

“No. But arrogant stupidity doesn't always come bundled with midichlorians. It's everywhere.”

“So who succeeds Jacen Solo when someone finally drops him down a reactor shaft, come the

glorious day? Because it won't be that poisonous little Vong-bait Tahiri-over my dead body. And hers, of course."

Fett didn't like many beings in the galaxy. He was indifferent to 99 percent, and most of the remainder were on his target list. But he could manage a scrap of approval for Daala. She talked his language.

"You sound like a woman who cares what happens in the Core," he said.

"If I did-you're the resident Jedi countermeasures expert. Would you be too retired to do some consultancy work for me?"

Fett indicated his forearm plate, a weapons platform in its own right. The flamethrower needed servicing, he noted. "Consult this. I'm always negotiable." "Seriously."

"If you're ever in the position where you need a place to lock up your Jedi-we can do you a good price on beskar restraints, and we'll always have the troops to make use of them."

"Let's keep that in mind." Daala raised her glass, and Fett thought she was going to make some informal deal. But she indulged in a little sparing sentimentality, and he approved of that too. "To Gil Pellaeon. The last of the Empire's true gentlemen. Safe harbor, my friend."

Fett just inclined his head. The galaxy liked its heroes better dead, when they didn't hang around doing inconvenient things like shaming everyone else and setting glittering examples. Or being fallibly mortal. The worst thought he'd ever had in his life was that if his father had survived, he might not have lived up to the dead paragon that still shaped his every waking moment. It was one of the few missing pieces he didn't want to track down, and he still hadn't found time to shoot the barve who'd planted and watered the doubt in his head.

So what if Jango Fett wasn't the holy Fenn Shysa. He was my dad, he loved me, and I loved him. That's enough of a hero for me.

"I forgot how effective your iron can be against Force-users," Daala said, dragging him out of his thoughts. "You'd be amazed what ended up at the Maw Installation when the Emperor's closets got cleared out."

Daala never disappointed. She was solid granite, always on the ball, always looking for the angle, even when she could have relaxed her guard. Fett liked being kept sharp.

"I always wondered what the Empire did with the beskar ore they strip-mined out of Mandalore."

"Found they couldn't make it work the way your people could, that's what they did..."

Fett enjoyed the idea of all that beskar needing Mandalorian expertise.

"Yeah, you need to ask a Mando metalworker, and ask him nicely."

“I’m glad we understand each other, Fett.”

“Crystal clear, Daala.”

“Mind if I visit your fine but challengingly rustic world?”

“Come and have an ale at Mirta’s wedding.”

“I’ve got a son and a granddaughter. Where did the years go?”

Fett almost asked where she’d found time to have a family. But the way years just collapsed on themselves, and how you woke up one morning to find you were suddenly fifty years older than the last time you checked, reminded him of the looming task of coming clean with Sintas.

“Better go find my tame Jedi,” he said, sliding his un-touched glass toward her. “Before you give me back our iron to make a box to put her in.”

Jaina was pacing the silent hangar, completely in a world of her own, swinging her lightsaber-deactivated-in some drill or other. He wasn’t sure if it was unalloyed good news to see her getting on with Mirta or not, but it beat having Mirta rip herself apart dealing with the sister of the man who had killed her mother. Jaina stopped and looked up at Fett on the gantry.

“Come on,” he said, and trotted down the durasteel mesh ladder. “Time for bounty-hunting class.”

“Aren’t you whacked after today?” she asked.

“No.” Fett checked his fibercord line, coiled ready to fire and trap, and flexed his fingers. “If I don’t hand you back to the space bum smarter than I found you, he’ll just brag about being my nemesis for another forty years, and then I’ll have to shoot him to shut him up.”

“Just remember to shoot first...” And she almost grinned. Almost.

Jaina Solo was okay, he thought. And she couldn’t help being a Jedi.

Fett thought of a Jedi agent called Kubariet, and wondered if he had a granddaughter out there somewhere.

“Okay,” he said, waiting for her lunge. “Come and get me, Jedi...”

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF STATE, CORUSCANT: FOUR DAYS LATER.

Routine-salaries paid on time, nightly holodramas, predictable prices-was the anesthetic that had kept Coruscant docile in Caedus’s brief absence. He inhaled the familiar scent of carpet, warm datapad plastoid, and fresh-brewed caf as his office doors sighed apart and he limped to his desk.

I could have shot her, of course.

If the debacle of the Fondor operation had been the Force's patient way of removing Niathal neatly, making her a traitor and Caedus a wounded hero defeated by treachery, then he was prepared to concede it was another necessary source of pain. He took off his gloves and laid them on the desk. Shoot her, and people would have called him a despot. Lose ships and personnel, both the destroyed and the stolen, and Caedus could return with some honor, with the same end result. It was all illusion. If Luke Skywalker thought his Fallanassi conjuring was fine sleight of hand, he didn't understand the power of presentation.

The new admin droid glided in. "I've prepared a digest of the nonurgent matters that arose during your absence, Chief of State," it said, placing a neat stack of datapads on the fine desk that used to belong to Cal Omas. "I've taken the liberty of clearing Admiral Niathal's office and transferring all defense business to this department. Two matters for your diary today-the appointment of a new Supreme Commander, and Senator G'Sil would like to see you."

"Oh, I'd forgotten him," said Caedus. The Senators who were left after so many defections and secessions from the GA seemed to huddle together for comfort, forming protective herds in committees. They talked; droids listened patiently, interpreted creatively, and then just did what Caedus told them to. It was a therapeutic arrangement. Many government departments were now overseen by droids. Caedus liked their efficiency and an absence of ambitious self-interest. "Does the Security Council still sit?"

"I believe so, Chief of State. Quarterly. Hence the Senator's wish to see you."

"Very well."

"He's waiting for me to summon him."

"Now would be ideal, then. Get it all out of the way. I've got a tight schedule this week."

"I've thinned out the diary a little, sir," said the droid. "I anticipated that you might be tired after the events of the last week."

"Excellent." That really was most impressive. "I appreciate your foresight."

"How is Lieutenant Veila?"

"Recovering well, thank you."

Caedus found a cup of caf poured for him-piping hot-and settled at the desk to skim the datapads. The galaxy was calming down. He could feel it. The vista from the window caught his eye and distracted him for a moment; the transparisteel wall of his office was full of Coruscant as it always should have been, canyon towers and orderly skylanes full of patient traffic; jobs, peace, ample food. The vague echoes of the Yuuzhan Vong occupation, visible in some of the alien vegetation and the more recently constructed buildings that had filled yawning gaps left by destruction, seemed to haunt the citizens no more now than the Lahag Erli occupation of Har Binande, which left the Har worlds full of exquisite architecture that attracted tourists, with no real memory of the suffering and misery

inflicted centuries before. There was a point where the past stopped nagging to have a voice in every daily decision, and simply became history.

The droid had collated media coverage of the past week, too. Caedus shuffled through the pads to choose one digest to play on the larger desk screen. He skipped through the battle footage and the studio analysis of who failed and why-irrelevant, all history already-and his eye was caught by a headline from one of the scurrilous gossip holozines, not one focused on the sleazy private lives of emotidrama and holoivid stars, but one of the more preten-tiously political versions that mixed satire-really very funny, he had to admit-with real news, savagely written. JACEN'S GAME OF HAPPY FAMILIES: JOINT GANGSTER OF

## STATE

Caedus was used to the steady stream of attacks about the removal of Cal Omas and indefinite emergency powers, but it was all talk in the fringe media. Citizens did nothing about it and got on happily with their lives. This story opened with the coup, and went on to list actions against members of his own family-the attempt to court-martial Jaina, the arrest warrant on his parents, and the rift with Luke and the whole Jedi Council. Then there was a reference to the death of "Luke Skywalker's wife on Kavan, at a time when Jacen Solo was away from Coruscant" juxtaposed with the death of Ailyn Vel-dubbed "Fett Junior" - Cal Omas, Dur Gejjen, and a much more direct line about his involvement in an "alleged fatal assault" on Lieutenant Tebut not being investigated by the fleet or CSF.

Caedus laid his cup down on the desk and read the summary again. He found he was actually upset by it-no, offended. Hurt. None of it was actually untrue; he explored his feelings, surprised that he could be stung by such a minor episode in a turbulent, painful life, just chatter from beings who didn't count and who couldn't affect his destiny.

But that's not how it happened. It wasn't like that.

The report made him look like a common gangster, a thug who had seized power and then went about removing anyone who offended him or stood in his way, like some Hutt crime lord. Caedus wanted to comm the holozine and tell them they'd got it wrong; he was serving the common good. Gangsters were driven by wealth, by lust, or by some sick desire to see people cower. He wasn't a criminal. He didn't deal in drugs or rob anyone. He'd done what he had to do, because nobody else was willing to tackle the anarchy, or stand up to the old power elites. Did they think he could change the galaxy by asking people nicely to stop being monsters to each other?

All those things had to be done.

Mara, Lieutenant Tebut-I didn't kill them for personal reasons. They were part of the path I had to take to be worthy of this office. How can you understand what a Sith has to do? How can you apply laws to us? Your ordinary laws weren't meant for us.

Who would make the tough choices if they were hide-bound by conventional law? Had anyone protested about Luke Skywalker bringing down Palpatine? The Rebellion broke every law in the book, and killed many people, but citizens were ready to accept that because change was needed.

Caedus was only doing the same thing, and yet he was vilified for it. He was wounded by the blindness around him. Why could they not understand? He wasn't explaining it clearly enough, perhaps.

He slammed his cup down on the desk and commed the droid. "Tell Senator G'Sil I can't see him today. Tell him we'll reschedule."

The droid's voice was even and patient, not a hint of disapproval in it. "Sir, he says the Security Council must meet within the next week because it's a legal requirement that they convene a minimum of once every three months, and he must have your input."

Caedus could feel his perspective changing, as if the office was a holoinage being adjusted to monochrome and its depth of field distorted. His desk appeared to recede into the distance, bleeding color. "Well, if that's all he's worried about, just get the law changed." "Sir?"

"I set that up months ago-the amendment to the Emergency Measures Act." Had everyone forgotten how he'd stripped away all this bureaucracy? Memories were short, it seemed. "The clause I used to change the law and arrest Cat Omas. I can change any law I need to without taking it to the Senate. Just use my administrative powers. Change it. Go on, remove the whole section about any requirement to hold meetings. Simple."

"Yes, sir," said the droid. Like HM-3, the excellent legal droid who had spotted the loophole for Caedus, he didn't fuss over right and wrong, only what was definably legal. And Caedus decided the law. It was a legitimate government responsibility, and he was the government. "Oh, and get Captain Shevu in here, please." While Caedus waited for Shevu to arrive, he took deep calming breaths, seeing the color return to the room and its proportions revert to normal. I don't meditate much these days, do I? Action had to be his meditation. He had so much to do. Tahiri would have to shoulder more of the burden. She was a Sith apprentice now, and that meant work.

Caedus had been planning to summon the editor of the holozine to his office and demand a full retraction and a new article explaining the truth of his actions, but the longer he waited, the less pressing it seemed.

Did anyone who mattered read the holozine? Had it started riots? No. All that really mattered was that the few key people around him understood his burden.

Shevu, for example.

Caedus changed his mind. He wouldn't ask Shevu to send a GAG squad out to arrest the editor and so guarantee that the hack would listen to Caedus carefully. It was a tawdry errand for a man who'd done a fine job of keeping Coruscant safe during the last year.

A pot of caf, then, and time to catch up on policy. Caedus had missed having Shevu at his right hand during the battle. Valuing loyalty was something his grandfather had understood well, but Caedus was also aware that subservience wasn't necessary. A little honest contention was far more important.

The doors opened. Shevu, looking carefully unemotional as always, walked in and stood in front of the desk.

“Welcome back, sir.” His quiet dislike was tangible. “Eventful few days.”

Caedus gestured to the chair. “Are you surprised about Niathal?”

Shevu sat down. “Not really, sir. Just the timing.”

“Better that than trying to oust me while I was offplanet.”

“Yes, I can imagine that would have been messy, sir.”

He was telling the absolute truth as he saw it. Caedus could feel the solid certainty in him. “Look, Caedus said, offering him the holozine. Just thinking about the report triggered his anger again. “Look at this ungrateful nonsense.”

Shevu looked at it quickly in a way that said he either didn’t want to read it, or had already done so, in detail. But he was a former CSF officer. He’d have read it.

“Do you want me to take action, sir?”

“If you’d asked me half an hour ago, I’d have said yes.”

“So you’d prefer to forget it. The allegations are pretty strong... but then it’s a satirical holozine known for that kind of lurid story.”

“Oh, I’m not disputing the facts, Captain.” “Really?” Shevu flared a little in the Force, a white-hot burst of surprise. Caedus realized few of the man’s superiors could ever have been totally honest with him. “They would have to prove the accusations if you pressed the issue.

“It’s just that they don’t seem to understand why I took certain actions. They make me sound like a criminal.” Caedus clenched his fist in his lap and let out a breath before feeling in control again, back in his own skin and not watching himself from the outside. “They’re only saying what I hear crew whispering in the mess-saying that I’ve killed a lot of people, and that I wasn’t on duty when Mara Skywalker was killed, and that they wouldn’t put it past me to assassinate even my own aunt-like one of those lunatic inbred Irmenu emperors. That’s what they say, isn’t it?”

Shevu was never one to show apprehension. He sat with his hands clasped in his lap and met Caedus’s gaze straight on. “Does that worry you, sir?” “Do you think it should?”

“Well, they seem to have sources within the fleet and other departments.”

“I despise disloyalty, too, but is it worth chasing gossiping clerks when we have admirals handing battle plans to the Jedi Council?”

“Depends on the effect on morale, sir.” “You sound just like Niathal.”



“Command is all about harnessing the troops’ willingness to suspend sensible self-interest and put their lives on the line when everyone else is running the other way. That’s morale. You’re better placed than anyone to feel what your troops really think of you.”

A lesser man would have agreed frantically with a capricious superior, afraid of saying the wrong thing, but Shevu wasn’t intimidated. Caedus still sensed wariness, but also a powerful sense of certainty like a permacrete slab. This was a man who knew his own mind and wasn’t afraid to stand up and be counted, and as he hadn’t fled like Niathal, that meant he was here because he wanted to be on Caedus’s team.

He understood justice, too.

“Do you want to know how it happened?” Caedus asked.

Shevu pursed his lips as if embarrassed. “Do you think I need to know? After all, I was involved with Gejjen. It’s not like I’m going to be shocked by this.”

I’m not a lunatic or a common criminal. I didn’t kill Mara in cold blood, and I care what you think of me, because I see all reasonable, good beings when I look at you. You’re my gauge of how ordinary people see me.

“I’d like you to know, “Caedus said. Shevu might not have understood the complexities of Sith prophecy-if he did, Caedus suspected he was too rooted in the physical world to give it any credence-but he would see why Caedus had no choice. “If I’m not burdening you.”

“No, sir.”

“I knew that Mara or Luke would come after me sooner or later for... taking their precious son as my apprentice.” Caedus knew Shevu liked Ben. There was no point explaining why Caedus had once thought he might be forced to kill him. “Do you know what I mean by apprentice? I’m a Sith Lord.” Oh, it felt good and clean to be able to say that openly. Shevu didn’t recoil. “Do you know what a Sith is? We’re Force-users.”

“Is it like the old-fashioned wing of Jedi philosophy, sir?”

“That’s... an excellent description. Yes, we’re more inclined to bring law and order than the Jedi Council.”

Shevu’s expression said it was an academic point. “So did she come after you, sir?”

“She vowed to kill me in front of witnesses in the Senate lobby.” “Oh.”

“Two Bith Senators, H’aas and Ph’Olla. And she was as good as her word. I was leaving the Rapes Cluster when she ambushed me in her StealthX, and we ended up on Kavan, where she pursued me into the abandoned tunnels and tried to kill me. We brawled, actually brawled-she brought down the ceiling and she was like a madwoman. Complete blind rage. I had lightsaber, blaster, and crush injuries, and the only way I could stop her was to use the poison darts I keep as a last line of

defense.”

Caedus had omitted some detail about Lumiya, because it wasn't relevant; but the rest was completely true. Mara had ambushed him, had tracked him into the tunnels, had tried to kill him-not arrest or detain him, but kill him.

Shevu looked shaken. “Well, at least I know why Ben changed his mind about serving in the Guard now.”

Everything Mara had done was about Ben. Caedus had had such high hopes for the boy, but Lumiya had been right after all. Ben didn't have the stomach for the fight: he didn't have what it took to be a Sith. Caedus wished he could talk to Lumiya now that he knew so much more, and that meant that he missed her. He never thought he would. But she'd diverted Luke Skywalker's focus from him, however temporary that might eventually prove to be, and paid for that with her life. It was a heartbreakingly noble act. He had to live up to that sacrifice.

I miss her. And... I miss Allana, but I have to forget her. “It really wasn't personal revenge, Captain,” Caedus said, concentrating again. “That's for small people. It was part of my path to Sith ascendancy.”

“That must be very distressing, sir,” Shevu said. Caedus felt some deep, raw emotion in him that he couldn't quite place, but it was pity in a way. “Being one of your family.”

“Yes. I'm putting it out of my mind as best I can, because we were very close once.”

Shevu adjusted his jacket in that awkward way of someone who wanted to end a painful conversation. “Try a po-lice tip, sir. When we're faced with something horrible, something disgusting, a terrible crime, we try to forget what we feel about the perpetrator in case the anger distracts us and makes us careless. You know-cutting corners to get the guy, maybe losing the case in court because of that. So we focus on the victim. We find the pity. Pity keeps us going. We want to give the victims and their family justice-closure. Think about that sometime, sir.”

“That's very helpful, actually, Captain.” Caedus hadn't thought much about how non-Force-users might use techniques just as Sith did to channel their emotions productively. Given that Shevu didn't like him, the advice was touching, a recognition that they both had dirty jobs to do, a mutual respect. “By the way, I have a title, now. Darth Caedus. Would you mind using it in future?”

Shevu's expression was now unreadable. “Yes, sir.” He seemed to be trying out the name under his breath. “Do I still call you sir?”

Jacen knew it was a lot to take in at one sitting. Shevu had absorbed it quite well, all things considered.

“Technically, it's my lord,” Jacen said. “But sir is fine on duty.”

He glanced at the chrono on the wall, feeling a lot more positive than he had for days. The debacle at Fondor was a temporary setback, rapidly receding into the past; he had the Imperial Remnant at his

side now, a shadow of its for-mer glory but still a massively powerful force to be reckoned with. And Shevu understood him and his motives.

Caedus smiled at him as he got up to leave. “You know, Captain, I feel the hand of history on my shoulder. I really do.”

# Chapter 19

Ben, I'm so very sorry. You'll hate me if I don't send you this, and you'll hate me when you hear it anyway, so better that you have the evidence than not. It's going to be hard to listen to, my friend, like recorded interviews with suspects often are. Their reasons for what they do-well, they make sense to them, that's all I can say. I can tell you that it took everything I had to keep my reactions under some sort of control. Here's the bad news before you play the recording-his factual account of what went on at Kavan matches the physical evidence.

Comm me if you need anything else. I'm always here for you.

-Captain Lon Shevu, GAG, in an encrypted comm to Ben Skywalker, following an interview with the suspect

FORMER IMPERIAL OUTPOST, ENDOR

Ben had spent an hour working himself up to playing the holorecording Lon Shevu had risked his life to get.

Han and Leia had found a new, safer location for the Jedi base. Now Ben stood in the center of the stark room that had been his quarters, all the fixtures and equipment crated for the pullout from Endor. The rickety folding chair had gone. He was sleeping on a GAG-issue bedroll, with just his mess tin to eat from and a basic hygiene kit, but sitting on a comfortable seat wouldn't have changed a thing. Sooner or later, he would have to move off that spot. He'd have to walk down the dusty passage, picked clean of anything that might be a clue to where the Jedi resistance had gone, and say to his father, uncle, and aunt that he had things he needed to show them.

Here's Jacen, Dad. Here's Jacen telling my buddy how he killed Mom, and why he had to do it, and why he isn't a bad guy.

Ben willed himself to move. It wasn't that he couldn't, not like some weird psychiatric paralysis, but he knew that the moment he shifted his weight and began walking, the short journey would end with showing his family - his poor dad - that awful, awful conversation between Jacen and Shevu. The image wasn't good, because Shevu had been forced to use a holocam with an aperture like a pin-head, just so it would sit on his tunic unnoticed. The sound was perfect, though. Shevu risked wearing the wire, as he called it, because Jacen was so used to GAG officers carrying surveillance kits that nothing like that struck him as unusual.

Ironic: the Jedi danger senses that Jacen had, the ability to sense weapons and threats, had proved pretty useless to him in the end, because he was constantly surrounded by war and deceit, saturated in it. He'd grown too used to it all as background noise to be filtered out.

Do I wish I'd killed him now?

He wouldn't have been able to spew out this garbage to Lon about his duty, and how much he

cares about the galaxy. So fast as well I didn't.

Ben checked himself. When he had thoughts like that, and bile literally rose in his throat, he concentrated on his father and asked if he thought ugly thoughts. It did the trick, usually. Ben forced himself to pass beyond impotent, furious grief.

Move. Now.

Ben walked. He went to find his father first.

On the lower floors, the local Ewok tribe had hauled in temporary furniture so the Jedi and their support staff could have some creature comforts while they waited for the final preparations to be completed. Ben found Jag and Zekk in the former briefing room, with their boots up on a rough plank table about knee-high, chatting in dejected tones.

"Hi, Ben." Jag gestured to the seat next to him. "You coming in, or what? Are you all right?"

"No, he's not all right," Zekk said. "I could feel him seething two floors up."

Ben needed to take a run at it if he was going to do it at all. "No offense, guys, but can you leave? Please?"

"Yeah, but are you sure we can't help?" Zekk sat up straight and shuffled himself to the edge of the seat. "Whatever it is?"

"Actually, you could go find Dad, Uncle Han, and Aunt Leia for me. Tell them I've got stuff to show them, and they all need to see it together." He thought of Jaina, a little later than he should have done. "And Jag-can you try to get hold of Jaina? I need to set up a comm so she can hear and see what I show everyone else."

Both men shut up right away. There was no more gentle ribbing for Ben these last few days, no attempt to play older brother when he looked so ground down by events. They responded to his officer voice, as Jori Lekauf had called it, and knew he was serious.

Jori didn't have to die, either. He didn't, Jacen. You made me carry out the Gejjen assassination to make me just like you, and Jori was only some detail, one of the small people. Ben didn't want anyone else dying for him. All this, all over me?

He set up a table so he could lay out evidence on it and stand the comlink where it could best transmit the session to Jaina. He simply couldn't face having to repeat it to her. Everyone would think he was doing things by the book, and presenting the same case to everyone like a professional would; but the real reason was that he could only hold it together long enough to do this once.

He could hear Leia's voice getting closer outside, saying how it would be handy for seeing more of Allana, which he took to mean the new location for the base. When she walked through the door, she stopped in her tracks for a second. Han nearly piled into the back of her.

“Hey, sweetheart,” she said. “Whatever it is, we’re all here. And we’re going to listen to you carefully, okay?”

“It’s not me talking,” Ben said. “The evidence can do that.”

Han, hands on hips, blew out a breath, then walked up and hugged Ben with one arm in that half-embarrassed male way. Luke came in a few minutes later with his hair disheveled as if he’d been running.

Ben shunted the datapads around the tabletop. “Plenty of time, Dad,” he said quietly. “Just waiting for Jag to track down Jaina and get a stable comm connection, then we’ll start.” It struck Ben that he’d just pointed Jag at the Jaina issue, and never thought what Zekk might feel about it. “Take a seat.”

He couldn’t turn and face them all yet, so he must have shuffled those ‘pads and charts a dozen pointless times before Jag came back brandishing a live comlink. He set it down where Ben showed him.

“Can you see all this, Jaina?” Ben said.

She looked as if she was standing in a storage room. Behind her, the walls were covered with shelves loaded with cans and boxes, and the doors were slightly parted. Noisy conversation and the clinking of metal and transparisteel wafted through; a restaurant, maybe.

“I can see all of you, and the table,” she said.

“Okay...” Ben had to warn them. “This isn’t easy to hear. I’m going to show you the physical evidence first, and then a recorded conversation. I’m going to show you things that link Jacen to Mom’s death, and then what he told Captain Shevu about it. Remember that folks sometimes confess to things they haven’t done to look tough or to get attention, so compare the physical evidence with what Jacen says so you’re sure what’s true. I’m not going to say what I think. I’ll just show you what I’ve got.”

Ben took a breath. Oddly, it was easier from this point than he’d had expected. Using the datapads, and projecting the images onto the screen they used for small holocharts, he showed them a copy of the GAG StealthX log that proved when Jacen had left Coruscant, and when he’d returned the vessel to the hangar. He showed them the logs for Mom’s flight. He showed them the charts, with Mom’s known movements in Hapan space, provided by Hapan ATC, and Tenel Ka’s note confirming when Jacen had arrived at the palace and then left. He showed the forensics droid, cracked open, and explained how he and Shevu had used it to collect trace evidence from Jacen’s StealthX.

When Ben got to the data about his mother’s blood-contaminated hair, he caught his father’s eye after managing to avoid it so far, and then he nearly wavered. The locket. I’ve still got it. Dad needs that back. But Ben carried on, through the recordings he’d made at Kavan showing Mom’s body and the surrounding crime scene, to his own brief, detached statement that Jacen Solo had found his exact location even though he had no beacon, made no comms, and was shut down in the Force.

Then... he played the conversation between Shevu and Jacen, and sat back in silence.

He couldn't watch this time, and just stared into his lap at his clasped hands, hearing Uncle Han inhaling every so often as if he was about to cough. When he risked a quick glance at Dad and Aunt Leia, both of them had adopted the same posture, right arm across the waist, right hand cupping the left elbow, left hand loosely held to lips.

The recording ended. Nobody said anything for a while. It was Jaina who jerked them out of it.

"Ben," she said softly. "Ben, can you transmit that recording to me now, please? I need some time to study it." "Yeah, sure. Sure."

It was an excuse to stand up and occupy his hands while he thought of something to say. Aunt Leia, always the one who said the perfect thing at the perfect time and got everyone organized in a crisis, walked up to him, turned him around slowly by his shoulders, and just held him in silence. When she drew back, there were tears in her eyes. Ben had never seen her cry before.

"Thanks, Ben," she said. "You did a good job, and you did it right."

Ben hung on long enough to send Jaina the recording, and then just had to get outside. He scrambled up one of the nearest trees to a platform that had been part of an Ewok walkway into the forest and sat with his legs dangling, staring out into the haze over the valley.

Whether it was a few minutes later or much longer, Ben couldn't remember, but he heard someone climbing the creaking ladder of twisted vines. Then his dad sat down next to him, letting his legs hang over the edge of the platform, too, but with a little less ease, as if his knees were stiff. Ben leaned against his shoulder. They ended up propped against each other, just looking out across the forested slope and watching the day run out of things to say to itself.

They didn't talk, either. There was nothing to add, and both of them no longer needed words anyway.

It was a flame and garnet sunset, spectacular even by Endor's standards.

BRALSIN, NEAR KELDABE: FENN SHYSA'S MEMORIAL

Jaina knew she should have commed Fett and told him she was going to be late for their training session.

He'd be annoyed; he never got angry, but his annoyance was bad enough. And she was professional enough to get a grip, however bad the news, and simply tell him she might be a little distracted today.

Instead, she ended up here under Fenn Shysa's imagined scrutiny, cross-legged on the turf with a datapad playing a nightmare in her lap.

She replayed Jacen's sweetly rational, polite explanation of why people had to die half a dozen

times before she found that she didn't get a pang of recognition when she saw his face, and his words sounded like an alien language, in the way that all words did when you repeated them incessantly. He did it. He really did.

"Shysa was always a magnet for the ladies," said the voice she was dreading. "He's got better luck dead than I have alive."

Jaina didn't look up. At least it was some kind of humor, not a dressing-down at a time when she wasn't really up to one. Bursting into tears in front of Fett was out of the question. "Sorry, Fett. Should have commed you." "I add wasted time to my invoice." He squatted back on his heels with his arms loosely folded on his knees. It seemed to be a comfortable way of sitting in armor. Jaina wanted to explain what had made her bolt up here for solitude, but showing Fett the recording was probably the quickest and easiest way of getting the message across. Was she betraying her family by showing him the Solos' lowest ebb? Would he gloat? She wasn't sure how she'd react if he did. Right now, she was as raw and emotionally devastated as if Jacen had died. Her Jacen had, of course.

"Before I show you this," she said, holding the 'pad out to Fett, "it's going to make you mad because it's my brother. And however callous you look, you've got to be devastated by Ailyn's murder."

Fett took the datapad and thumbed the controls. "First time anyone's called it that." "Clear cut. Unarmed prisoner." "Unarmed interrogator..."

"Don't go all reasonable on me. Jacen killed your daughter."

"I don't do reasonable. Sure you want me to see this?" Jaina hadn't expected that consideration. But maybe he was even more unfeeling than she thought; gloating took some emotional attachment. Even his lifetime of Jedi hunting seemed to lack the passion and triumph of full-blooded vengeance.

"Yes," she said. "Tell me what you see. And remember that what he says is corroborated by forensics." "Jacen telling the truth? Well, well." Fett's tilt of the head suggested he was mulling it over. Then he flicked the key and squatted absolutely motionless while the conversation played. When it ended, he didn't move. Jaina waited for a reaction. "Well?"

"What do you want to know?" Fett said. "Whether he's crazy? Whether he's better dead, or locked up?"

"Anything." Suddenly Jaina almost slapped her hand to her mouth, appalled by her own lapse of judgment: Shevu was easy to identify as the man who'd set Jacen up. Stang, she really wasn't on top form today. "You know the officer risked his life to get that..."

"I know how to keep my mouth shut. You should have noticed by now." Fett still seemed to gaze at the static-image on the small holoscreen, although it was hard to tell with a man in a helmet; he could have been talking on his internal comlink for all she knew, because they could switch in and out of audio channels in those sealed buy'cese literally in the blink of an eye. But she guessed he was chewing something over that bothered him.



“Here’s what I see,” he said. “A sane man. Because they all slide down that path when they get power, and then they have to tell themselves lies to explain how they got there, and how it wasn’t their fault. That’s when reality becomes a stranger to them. And there’s you, ashamed of yourself because you’re thinking that maybe Mara Skywalker started the ruck, but you want to see her as some uncomplicated completely innocent victim.”

Jaina knew it was true, because it hurt so much. “And?” “That’s a barve who nearly got his backside handed to him by Skywalker’s wife. He still looks scared when he remembers it. Because she went at him like a maniac. Just like Beviin showed you.”

It was the most she’d heard him say in one conversation; he’d need to shut up for a couple of years now to even out his average word count. Jaina was smart enough to recognize uncomfortable truth, though, and began unpicking all the implications in what he’d said. For a man who didn’t seem to have a heart or any normal emotions, he knew plenty about everyone else’s. It could have been just the sharp eye of a hunter, or he might have felt things more keenly than he let on. Jaina bet on the latter.

“Yes, I didn’t want to think Jacen killed Mara, but if he did, I wanted him to be completely to blame,” she said.

“Mara didn’t ask for it.” Fett put his arm out behind him and shifted into a proper sitting position, legs stretched. “She just went to do some necessary pest control. She nearly succeeded.”

“You’re saying he needs... that I have to kill him.” “It’s not that simple.”

“Why haven’t you ever gone after him personally? Why did you tell your men to leave him for me?”

“Because if I put him down like the vermin deserves, your family can blame that rotten Boba Fett again when the truth wears off, when you need an excuse to stop feeling bad about what you had to do. No, you clear up your own mess. I wondered—am I standing back to let the Solos and Skywalkers fight each other because I want them to suffer? No. It’s only Jacen who deserves it, and on balance I’d prefer to see him live a long time in a lot of pain. Like I’ve said before.... he’s no use to me dead.”

Jaina tried to work out if she was on the receiving end of a subtle gloating lecture from Fett, or if he’d brooded about this long enough to have a lot of words looking for an outlet. Even her Force senses strained to pick up clues. He really did seem to be thinking aloud, trying to find some answers.

Jaina felt suddenly irrelevant. “You can manage quite long sentences, can’t you?”

“It’s all billable time, Solo.”

“You hate Jedi, I understand that. Seeing your father killed, having to survive on your own...”

“No. You don’t get it. But if any of your kind could, it’d be you.”

Fett put his weight on one arm and jumped to his feet, looking pretty fit for his age. He walked off

down the slope toward Keldabe and didn't look back. With the 360-degree sensor in his HUD, he didn't need to. Jaina wasn't sure she'd had an answer at all, but she had a stack of extra questions. She broke her own rule and scrambled after him.

"Hey, don't give me the cryptic treatment, Fett." Jaina reached up from behind for his right shoulder, and a little Force pull made him turn. That probably didn't help, given the topic. "Jedi killed your father. You hunted mine. I went on hating you and feeling pretty unfriendly about Mandalorians for a long time. We all do it."

"I'm trying to keep this simple."

"What?"

"Mace Windu killed Dad. The barve ends up taking a walk out Palpatine's window, so I don't get to blow his brains out. Add a few years of lashing out at any Jedi, and then I stop and ask why I carry on. Because Force-users are all trouble. Sith, Jedi, no difference, although the Sith al-ways paid well. Every big war since the Old Republic apart from the Vong has been about you two having your sectarian conflicts and dragging everyone else in. I say it, guys like Venku say it, and then folks start thinking that maybe galactic peace doesn't include you."

"You'd starve if you didn't have a war to go to." "Making virtue out of necessity."

"And we're peacekeepers. You can't always do that by-appealing to folks' better nature."

"Yeah, I forgot. The compassionate Jedi." He held out his palm. "Give me your lightsaber. I left all mine at home." "Why?" "Give."

Jaina took the hilt off her belt, and thought that only a Jedi who put excessive faith in her Force certainties would hand a lightsaber to an irritated Fett. He snapped the blade casually into life-he'd handled the weapons more than he admitted, that was clear-and sliced the humming beam clean through the branch of a small tree. Then he shut it off, tossed the hilt back to her, and bent to grab the severed wood.

"A weapon for a civilized age, you reckon?" Fett thrust the end of the branch into her face so she could see it was a clean cut, not a lot of sap. "You cut someone's head off, you trap enough oxygenated blood in the brain for two minutes' consciousness, maybe. Then go and retrieve your dad's body parts and see how well you sleep some nights." Fett walked away again, and this time Jaina let him go. It was a little while before she recovered enough to think of yelling after him to demand how many of his kills had been instantaneous, but that was probably for the best. One moment she was close to thinking they had a good understanding; the next, it was war again.

Was this his plan all along, to set her up to harm her own brother so the most powerful Jedi families could tear themselves apart?

You can go crazy thinking like this. He's just a man. It's your own brother who's plotting and planning.

Fett hadn't planned to see his daughter getting killed, and he hadn't known Jaina was going show up asking him to make her a Jedi hunter. He was an injured but dangerous bystander, landing a punch any way he could.

Okay, Jacen, would you think twice about killing me if I got in your way like Mara did?

Jaina thought she knew the answer, but the next minute she doubted herself. Combat training was definitely out for the day. She decided to use the downtime to try building bridges with another Mandalorian who probably didn't want to talk to her: Gotab, or whatever his name had been when he'd still used a lightsaber.

It must have been a very hard life for him. He must have been mad to choose it.

Or desperate.

Or maybe the last place anyone would look for a Jedi was in the middle of hostile country like this.

BEVIIN-VASUR FARM, NEAR KELDABE

"Mirta, where have you been?" Sintas asked.

"Been on a job, Ba'buir."

Fett watched Sintas making her way competently around the room, navigating by touch. Watching her when she couldn't see him made him uncomfortable now; he was predatory, intruding. He wanted more than anything to do what was right for her but he was going around in circles.

She located Mirta and the two women hugged. "What job, sweetheart?"

"We seized an Imperial Star Destroyer."

Sintas parted her lips slightly, then laughed. "Oh, just a little job. Nobody hurt?"

"Loads of people. But not us."

"I can remember how to strip down a blaster."

"You were a bounty hunter, Ba'buir."

"I can recall chasing a man who had something I wanted back-a metal box. I'd better remember how I did it, if I want to earn a living again."

Watching Sintas desperately grabbing at scraps of her life and trying to build herself back into a whole woman made Fett feel scared and dirty; it reminded him that he'd failed in every aspect of living, except his job-except killing people. It wasn't the killing that bothered him. It was the failing, and not being like his dad. Jango Fett had taught him how to be a perfect soldier, but he'd also shown

him by example how to be the ideal father. He'd managed one out of two.

"Sin," he said. "You never have to worry about scraping a living again. I owe you credits. A lot. I'm paying up."

Sintas felt her way toward him. She was going to touch him. He could see it coming, and he dreaded it, because it was going to bring it all back, not just the memories that were better left forgotten, but the way it felt to touch her, because that part of his life was dead and buried. You left her.

She found his hand and took it. "I know I must have married you for a good reason. And whatever went wrong, you still seem like a good man."

"Sin, there's some more bad news you need to know." She still had a grip on his hand. He'd seen her at her best and worst, although she'd never seen the best of him, and he never got over how beautiful she always was, whatever the circumstances. He needed her to let go of his hand; but he didn't want her to. There was nothing salvageable in the relationship and he didn't even want to hear himself think if only.

Imagine if you'd both been happy when she went missing, though. Imagine pining all those years, getting her back so many years later, and then having to face the separation of age-that she couldn't want you again, even if she tried.

Yes, it was better this way, if it had to happen at all.

"I can feel some of the things in the heart-of-fire," she said. "But I can't make sense of it."

"Okay. Sit down." He steered her to a chair. Mirta watched as if she was waiting to pounce on any mistake. "Our daughter died."

Sintas took the news with a few blinks. It was awhile before she spoke again. "I feel bad that I can't remember enough about her. What happened to her? She must have been an adult, because Mirta's here."

It was a guessing game, and Fett hated those at the best of times. "I'm going to get it all over with now, or I'll just be giving you a fresh bit of misery every day," he said. Or maybe it's because I need to blurt and run. "She was killed, Sin. She was a bounty hunter. She blamed me for you going missing on a job, because I should have been there to look after you both. She stalked me for years and she tried to kill me. But she got picked up by the secret police on Coruscant, and she died under interrogation. She was fifty-three or fifty-four, I think. And that's about it. Except she raised Mirta to hate me, too, and Mirta tried to kill me, but we got that out of our systems."

Mirta was as tough as they came. She just stood there, and the expression on her face was acceptance. The boil was lanced. Sintas did a reasonable job of controlling the shock, but her lips moved silently as she tried framing a question and failed for a few moments. The anguished expression in her eyes was all the worse for the fact that Fett knew she couldn't even see their

expressions.

Regret, guilt, pain, anger. That's what you're missing, Sin. But I bet you can imagine it well enough.

"The barve who killed my girl-where is he? Is he still alive? I'll fix that..." Sintas burst in anger. Maybe it was all so terrible and alien that she was too shocked to cry, and Fett knew it was better to act rather than feel. "And how could you want to kill your own grandfather, Mirta? You didn't even know him."

Life was unraveling again. Fett had tried to do it right and take the blame, as he deserved, and now it was spinning off like a broken rotor and hitting Mirta, who'd stuck by her mother through thick and thin. Fett felt that his whole life had been about others taking the shrapnel from the blasts he caused.

"Don't blame her, Sin," he said. "Whether Ailyn knew it or not, she was right to loathe me. The only good news is that I'm a rich old man now, and you're still young, so I can pay and you can do some living."

That was his emotional limit. He'd hit the end-stop today. If he'd been like Beviin, all heart and pure courage, unafraid of love or the risk of being hurt by it, he'd have held Sintas, and told her all the little details that would have softened the blow and made more sense of it once the shock wore off. But he wasn't Beviin, nowhere near. He al-most got the whole thing off his chest and told her why they'd split up, but he lost his nerve. There was a limit to how much osik could hit the fan after all.

"I'll see you later," he said. "I think we can find a special doctor to get your memory back, and maybe your sight." Sintas had her hand to her mouth now in a kind of slow-burn horror. "Well... at least I'll be ready for it..." "I'm sorry."

She rubbed her eyes. "I'm sorry, too, Bo." She didn't even seem to realize she'd said it. Bo. It was what she'd always called him.

"Go on," Mirta said, "you've got things to do. I'll sit here awhile."

Fett tried to calculate how many hours he'd spent with Sintas since she'd been revived, and it probably didn't add up to a full day. No, it wouldn't be any different this time, even if the years they'd lost were magically erased; he couldn't face spending time with people. As he slipped out of the farmhouse, Beviin was sawing planks in the front yard.

"How's it going?" he asked, looking as if he knew any-way.

"Bad. Could be worse." This was Beviin's home, and somehow Fett filled it with the detritus of his own disastrous life, and Beviin never complained. The man found room for Fett's damaged ex-wife and a passing Jedi whose family was pretty well as screwed as Fett's now. He had to ask, or else it'd look as if he was the only person who didn't realize that Beviin had saved him time after time. "Why do you bail me out all the time, Goran? And don't say it's because it's duty to the Mand'alor."

“Because nobody can live the way you do and not notice how much it hurts.” Beviin carried on sawing. “I suppose it’s me being grateful for not being that way.” Beviin never pulled his punches.

“I don’t understand why any of you do it, “Fett said. “Shysa, Spar-why didn’t they say, ‘Fett doesn’t care, why should I do anything for him’? I didn’t even know Spar.”

“I hear Spar did it for Shysa, actually, because he told him Mandalore needed to look strong and stable to the outside world, like the Fetts were back.”

Fett never kidded himself it was because of his lovable personality. He had his uses. But then that was how he treated everyone else, so he had nothing to complain about.

And problems went away if you threw enough credits at them: buy an assassin, a bounty hunter, or someone to look after your neglected wife. The only one that wouldn’t go away with a good dose of creds was time.

But Mirta was right. He had things to do, and if he didn’t, he’d find some. He strode back to Slave I, opened the comm, and called his broker.

They said the man could acquire anything. He could prove it, then, by finding the biggest blue heart-of-fire gem on the market, the rarest and costliest of gems.

OYU’BAAT TAPCAF, KELDABE

“They said you wanted to see me, Jedi.”

Jaina looked up. She’d felt him coming anyway; Gotab left a very distinctive impression in the Force. Venku, al-ways hovering close to support the old man if he faltered, was a dim light next to him. They were both edgy and a lit-tle hostile.

“I do, Gotab, “she said, and stood to pull up a chair for him. Cham the barkeep lined up ales. “And you, Venku. Please, sit down.”

Both men lifted off their helmets. She could see Fett reflected clearly in Venku now that she was so familiar with that face. The mouth was different, but this was definitely Fett’s genetic material. She’d learned fast not to call it fam-ily.

“You want something from me, “Gotab said. “Spit it out.”

“You’re a healer. Am I right?”

He pulled off both gauntlets, revealing age-spotted, veined hands, and held them up. “Yes. I did a lot of healing. I look even older than I already am, don’t I? Drains you, healing.”

“How many folks here know you’re a Jedi?” “I used to be a Jedi, “he said quietly. “I left the Order sixty years ago and became a Mando’ad. But I suppose I’m pretty easy to spot for someone strong in the Force like you.”

“What about you, then, Venku?” They still hadn’t said whether anyone knew what they were. “You’re harder to pin down, but you can use the Force, can’t you?” “I can,” Venku said. “But I avoid it.” “So who knows! Nobody, I bet. Are you scared even now? Come on. I know what it’s like to be a Jedi and walk into a cantina full of Mandos.” “Why do you care?” Gotab said.

“In case it has serious consequences for you, of course.” Venku and Gotab looked at each other as if in some unspoken debate. Venku sighed and shook his head. “Buir, “he said, “if you want to come clean after all these years and any Mando’d so much as looks at you the wrong way, you know I’d kill them. After all you’ve done for Mandaioire, nobody can call you jetu. “And what about you, Kad’ika?” “I’m not that much use to the Kaminoans now.” Gotab snorted. “Fett would still sell you.” Jaina realized she’d hit a few nerves, and now Fett’s name had been mentioned, she knew she would hit a few more.

“So you don’t like Fett, “she said.

Gotab shrugged. “He’s completely amoral. He cared nothing for Mandalore when we were occupied by the Empire.”

“I’m missing something here, Gotab, so let me tell you what I’m asking for.” Jaina was surprised to feel an urge to defend Fett. He wasn’t completely without morals; he had principles, all right, pretty rigid ones, but they didn’t fit a lot of folks’ idea of ethics. “Fett’s ex-wife Sintas-she was stored in carbonite for over thirty years, and now she’s blind and suffering from amnesia. I was hoping you might be able to heal her. She’s done well to recover as far as she has, but there’s not much more that doctors can do.”

“You sure she wants to remember being married to Fett?” he asked.

It was probably a random insult, but maybe Gotab knew that their past was a messy one.

“He thinks it’s fairer if she knows everything so she can make better decisions about her future.”

Gotab leaned back in his seat and looked at Venku as if they’d had a bet on something. “Well, I’ve lived to see a lot of unexpected things, but Fett growing a conscience-wayii.”

Venku took one of the glasses of ne’tra gal, the sticky sweet black ale, and stared into it. “You probably guessed that we have misgivings about Fett, although he’s lived up to more of his responsibilities as Mand’alor lately.” “So you wouldn’t help his ex-wife.” “Will it help her?”

“Well, staying blind and not recalling much of your past, not even your own kid, doesn’t sound a better deal than finding out what a scumbag your husband might have been.” Jaina was getting impatient; she needed to know if exposing the two men as Jedi would end in trouble. “And if your neighbors know what you are, will you have to go into hiding?”

The doors parted and Carid came in with a couple of other men, laughing loudly. He waved to Jaina as if she were just another regular. She couldn’t imagine him coming after this frail old man and harming him for once having been a Jedi. If Gotab had been here for sixty years, then he must have

known that Mandalorians, however violent and uncompromising, tended not to blame folks for who their parents-or brothers-were. On Mandalore, you could erase your past.

“It’s going to come as a shock to Fett, for a start,” said Venku. “But maybe it’s time, because even if anyone knew and wanted to exploit it, they’d have to take me first, and I don’t come from a family of pushovers.” “Look, just tell me.”

Sixty years was a long time to sit on a secret that big. It grew to be a habit, and then it probably became unthinkable to imagine naming it. Jaina knew the size of the secrets in her own family, the ones about her grandfather. The longer she spent with Fett and the Mandalorians, the more she saw of how parallel their lives were in so many ways, and she wondered how much of that had fueled the ani-mosity.

“I was a Jedi general in the Clone Wars,” Gotab said at last. “I left the Order because I couldn’t stomach how we talked about compassion and then turned a blind eye to using human clones for our slave army. The clones I served with were my brothers. I helped them escape, I healed them. I did whatever I could to atone for the wrong that Jedi did those men. And Venku-Kad’ika-his mother was a Jedi and his father was a clone soldier. We hid from the Empire for years because they could have bred a whole new clone army from him. We hid so well that not even Fett’s fixer, that Beviin, knew who we were, or even what our true clan name was.”

It didn’t answer the question about Fett, but Jaina felt she’d pushed it as far as she could go. Living in fear and se-crecy bred a certain paranoia. “So would you do it for Sintas Vel?”

“Healing’s hard work,” Venku said. “Look what it’s done to him.”

“Fett would pay, and if he wouldn’t, I would.” Gotab nodded as if she’d confirmed something. “Well, your brother killed her daughter. It’s the least you can do.” Was there anyone here who didn’t know every sordid detail of her family’s troubles? “But I don’t want your credits or Fett’s. I’ll do it because I can. It’s wrong to refuse just because the poor woman used to be married to Fett.” It was a breakthrough. “She’s at Beviin’s farm.” “They’re not going to think we’re Kiffar anymore, are they?” said Gotab.

“No. But nobody’s persecuting Jedi these days. It’s not like the Purge.”

Venku hadn’t drunk much of his ale, and Gotab hadn’t even touched his. Venku stood up, making it clear the meeting was over. “That would explain why the Jedi Council has fled from Coruscant,” he said. “Because it’s totally okay to be a Jedi now.”

They didn’t miss much, even if they did live in the wilds-and wilds here must have been seriously isolated.

“You’re not a Jedi, though,” Jaina said. “You were never trained.”

“No, and I’m all for keeping Jedi away from government-and Sith, of course. But I’ll still always be a Force-sensitive however hard I try not to be, and that won’t always sit well with folks if they



know about it. They think you mess with their minds.”

Jaina wanted to press a credit chip into Gotab’s hand, because he needed to eat as much as anyone, but she didn’t know how he’d react. She went back to the farm and spent the rest of the daylight hours overhauling Beviin’s harvester droid and composing endless messages to Jag in her head, but when she got to the point of committing anything to the datapad, it all seemed like too much to tell him. In the end, she avoided comming him, or her parents, and just sent a message to all of them saying everything was fine, and that she’d be in touch soon, and that flying a Bes’ithik was a lot a fun. They’d all seen Jacen’s confession. Fine and fun didn’t come into it. She felt guilty for expressing such trivial sentiments. Sometimes, though, life needed the illusion that ordinary pleasures still existed and could be found again even after the depths of misery.

That evening, while she was eating dinner with Beviin’s family and making Shalk and Briila giggle by moving their plates with a Force-push, she felt Gotab and Venku approaching the farmhouse.

“Beviin, “she said, trying not to say it in front of the kids, “It’s Gotab. He’s the one who’s going to be doing the healing. He’s a Jedi. He used to be, anyway. Don’t punish him, please. He’s been one of you for nearly sixty years.”

Beviin and Medrit looked at each other, and it was obvious that Fett’s fixer, as Gotab called Beviin, was clearly rattled that a secret of that magnitude had eluded him. He chewed thoughtfully, gaze fixed on the pot of caf on the table.

“We won’t even tell Fett it’s him, if he’s that scared, “he said at last. “Well, fancy that. A jetii throwing his lot in with us. Puts Venku in an interesting context, though.”

Much as Jaina liked Beviin, she didn’t think he needed to know that Venku was the son of a Jedi. If Venku wanted anyone to know.... he could tell them himself. She’d already gone far enough.

She smiled as best she could. “Gotab’s a healer, remember. Maybe Venku owes him an old debt of honor.”

It was probably true. It was true enough for her not to feel guilty about saying it. Beviin got up to let Gotab in, and Medrit gave Jaina a knowing look. Dinua and Jintar distracted the kids.

“We’d always heard rumors, “Medrit said. “Never thought it was Gotab, though.”

Jaina wished she’d thought ahead a little more and moved Sintas to the Oyu’baat for the healing session. “I’m sure he’s paid his debt to society...”

“He didn’t have a choice to be a Jedi, did he?”

“No, but he chose to be one of you.”

“Then the matter’s closed, “Medrit said. Shalk stared at him in the way that only a voraciously curious child could when he thought the grown-ups were talking secrets. “And that makes Jaing

Skirata one of his clan. Which is even more interesting.”

Gotab edged into the room with Venku looming over him like a bodyguard, and the two children stared at him.

They didn’t say a word. Gotab nodded politely and followed Jaina into Sintas’s room.

“So, do you work miracles?” Sintas asked, turning her head towards him. “I could do with one.”

“You can still say no,” Gotab said. “You know you have tragedy in your past.”

Sintas, amnesiac or not, showed a streak of tough resolve that must have stood her in good stead as a bounty hunter. “Then I’ll face it,” she said. “Because it’s part of who I am.”

Jaina suddenly felt pity for the whole Fett clan, imagining what it might be like to lose Jag and then find him again when she was too old and their bond was too damaged. Nothing could put Fett’s family right: Mirta’s children would be the first to grow up with a chance of ordinary happiness. It was a wake-up call for Jaina, too.

“Stay,” Gotab said to her. “Just in case we need a little extra Force help.”

Force-healing was low-key and tedious for a spectator. Gotab sat on the edge of Sintas’s bed and placed both hands gently on her head. Even for Jaina, used to meditation, two hours of sitting with relative strangers and saying nothing was a trial.

“Oh,” Sintas said at one point. “Oh, that’s.... that’s odd...”

Gotab smiled. It transformed him. “I’ve healed brain injuries before, and my patients tell me they get disjointed flashbacks. Don’t be afraid.”

“It’s not memories,” Sintas said. “I can see flashes of light.”

Jaina felt genuine elation. It sounded as if the impulses to the optic nerve were getting through again. “How many sessions might this take?”

“I don’t know,” Gotab said. He took one hand off Sintas’s forehead and moved the lamp closer to her. “I’ve never healed a Kiffar before.”

Sintas flinched. “I can see the contrast.” She rubbed her eyes, straining, and turned to the lamp. “I can see light and dark...”

Jaina tempered her own excitement with the reminder that if Sintas’s memory came back, it wouldn’t be quite as welcome.

Gotab seemed to be flagging. Venku took the old man’s elbow and steered his hand back to his side.

“Enough for tonight, Buir,” he said. Jaina knew he wasn’t really Venku’s father, but she wasn’t sure if the term was simply respect or an indication of adoption. “Let’s get some rest. We have a long way to go.”

Medrit gave Venku a package as he left, a bundle of packets that looked like an assortment of meat and preserves. Mandalore was still a hungry place to live.

“I’m sure Fett will be grateful,” he said.

“No need.” Gotab headed for the door, leaning on Venku’s arm. “It’s for Sintas Vel, not him. And don’t feel so bad about never finding us when Fett sent you after the clone with gray gloves... Jaing is an expert at covering his tracks, the best there is, as are we.”

Beviin listened to the speeder’s drive fade into the night. “I think I scared them off,” he said. “I don’t know if they’ll come back.”

Jaina lay awake that night, wondering what would happen when it got around-as things seemed to do here-about Gotab and Venku. Had either of them had kids? Were there Force-sensitive Mandalorians everywhere? It was all getting complicated, and making her mind race when she needed to sleep, and to concentrate on making the most of the training time she had with Fett.

Sound carried a long way in the quiet night, and she could hear some celebration still in progress at Level’s farm a little way down the dirt road. Revelers were laughing raucously, and she was on the point of storming over there through the field and snarling at them to shut up so she could get some sleep, just like a Mando woman would. Then there was a sudden, complete silence before a lone male voice, a surprisingly sweet tenor, began singing a slow ballad with the kind of perfect top notes that caught her off guard, and made her throat ache and her eyes fill with tears for no reason. One by one, other voices joined in until it was a choir.

Jaina couldn’t understand a word of it, except for Mando’ade and Manda’yaim. It still transfixed her. She held her breath. The chorus repeated twice, and then the voices trailed off one by one to leave the solo tenor to fade into silence.

The song spoke to her of yearning for home, and loves left waiting for the warriors’ return. She was having trouble fighting back incipient tears. She made her way down-stairs and found Beviin pottering around the kitchen doing chores in total silence.

“You’re very stealthy,” she whispered. “I didn’t know you were awake.”

“Singing,” he said. “I’m not a heavy sleeper. It’s my suspicious nature.”

“Yeah, I heard it, too. It was absolutely beautiful. Is it a love song? It sounds so lonely and longing.”

Beviin stifled a laugh. “It roughly translates as, ‘Nobody likes us but we don’t care, because we’re Mandos, and we’re the best.’ Sorry to spoil the illusion. But we do have our mournful ballads.” He cocked an ear in the direction of Sintas’s room. “I think she’s having nightmares. Whatever Gotab’s

done, the old neural pathways are connecting again...”

Sintas was definitely having nightmares; Jaina listened outside for a while and then went in to sit with her just in case she woke up screaming. She was thrashing around, muttering incoherently, and the only words Jaina could understand were “you could have told them...”

Jaina found herself unable to keep her eyes open, and dozed in the chair. She woke with a start; Sintas was sitting up, and it was starting to get light outside. “Stang, “Sintas said. “Daylight.” “You can see?” “I can.”

“That’s excellent news.” Jaina took her hand. “You were having a nightmare.”

“I had a dream, but I don’t think it was one. I remembered something. There was a bounty I was hunting, but I ended up being grabbed, and there was this barve saying

I’d be worth something for ransom, and he shot me full of some sedative or other...”

“Someone who knew you were Fett’s ex-wife?”

“Bo.... oh, stang, it’s coming back... Bo never took kindly to anyone messing with me, even after we split up. Then there was.... oh, Ailyn, no...”

Jaina braced for some trauma to emerge. Just ending up in carbonite would have been enough, but she had all the bounty hunter baggage, plus Fett, and then a dead daughter. “Hey, take it easy.”

“She was so excited. I said I’d be back from the job in time to take her to Coruscant, see the big city, buy her some nice things.”

Ailyn had been about sixteen. Carbonite and fate had wiped out the best part of forty years and a family lifetime that could have been. Sintas seemed as tough as old boots, but tears were now streaming down her face.

“Bo, “she said. “He shot someone.”

That didn’t narrow it down much. Jaina handed her a cloth to wipe her face. “Maybe you need some meds to slow all this down a little...”

“No, no, I need to remember this, I need to.” Sintas put her hand to her mouth. “Ailyn, and then Mirta-whatever did I say that made her go and do all that? I never told her about it. We never talked. I never told her why Bo and I divorced.”

“Mirta thought he abandoned you.” It was definitely none of Jaina’s business, and she shouldn’t have said it. Too late now. “Ailyn blamed his not being around for your.... well, death.”

“I know, but.... look, Bo was exiled for murder. It wasn’t like that. It was much more complicated.”

Jaina preferred Fett's more succinct analyses: he'd left her and he obviously felt bad about the effect it had on her. It sounded pitifully small and domestic, the kind of stuff the divorce lawyers thrived on, not the catalyst for a vendetta on Ailyn's scale that ended up with Jacen killing her. But Sintas was getting increasingly distraught as memories were starting to connect. She seemed to have a much more complicated recollection of the breakdown of their marriage. So the law had caught up with Fett at least once in his life. All that surprised Jaina was that he'd been caught at all.

But he'd always have his reasons, she knew that by now. "I think I'd better go and get Mirta," Jaina said. "No, please, not yet. You look like a sympathetic person who understands how families can tear themselves apart." They said Kiffar people were psychic. They weren't wrong there. Sintas had the Solos and Skywalkers down pat.

"Okay," said Jaina. "But I still think I should go get your granddaughter."

"Not yet," Sintas said. "I need to work out how I'm going to explain this to her-that her grandfather was ex-iled for killing the man who raped me... his superior officer."

# Chapter 20

My lord Caedus, I disobeyed your instructions about where to search for the Jedi Council, and went back to the locations where Luke Skywalker had hideouts in his Rebel days. I'm now on Endor. There's an old Imperial base here, just full of force energy, even though the camp's been abandoned. The Jedi have been here very recently, but I don't know where they've gone-yet.

-Comm message from Tahiri Veila, Sith apprentice, to Darth Caedus, Dark Lord of the Sith and Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance

KELDABE, MANDALORE: A WEEK LATER

Mirta and Grade had exchanged marriage vows that morning, Vevut said, and so it was high time to have few drinks and celebrate.

Fett heard about it from Beviin. If he allowed himself to think about it too much, it would eat at him. He sat in Slave I's cockpit half listening to the HNE financial news while he did the maintenance on his HUD. Mandalore, self-sufficient and well able to pull itself up by its boot-straps minus Fett, went on thriving all around him.

You have to give her the stone. It won't change a thing, but at least she can sell it, and she might even listen to what it's got to say.

He fished in his belt pouch and held the oval stone up to the light from the viewscreen; a royal blue heart-of-fire as rare as they came, five centimeters long and superbly cut. His broker had done pretty well to find it. If he held it just 50, the rainbow of colors was complete. He peered into its heart with a magnifier from his HUD tool kit and admired the play of internal fire that created the iridescence. Geolo-gists said it was due to microscopic bubbles of pinacrite trapped when the crystal was first formed, and also that the substance might have explained the stone's ability to store data from people who'd owned it.

Kiffar preferred the more mystic explanation, that it trapped a little bit of the soul of both giver and receiver. It definitely did record something. Gotab-the barve was a Jedi, and Fett had worked that out even if Beviin didn't want to discuss it-could certainly skim Fett's unhappy marital history from it in painful detail. He wondered how much he'd burden Sintas if some of his soul got trapped in the magnificent blue stone.

You know the thing actually does it. You had proof. Loud hammering on the side viewscreen made him look up. Beviin was standing on the hull, making impatient gestures.

"S'open," Fett said.

"Get your shebs to your granddaughter's wedding feast, Bob'ika." Beviin stood in the hatchway in his cobalt-blue armor, with a dark navy leather kama, the traditional Mandalorian half kilt. He didn't normally wear that. It was his holiday best for a special day. "It's a disgrace if you don't."

Fett held up the gem between thumb and forefinger. “Matches your beskar’gam.” “For Mirta?” “Sin.”

“Is that a good idea?” “It’s a good-bye. I’m not delusional.” Beviin just shook his head. “She’d probably prefer one of your properties.”

“I’m way ahead.” Fett reached inside his dump pouch and slid out a flimsi envelope, the kind old-fashioned lawyers used. “Portfolio here of shares and property. She’ll never have to worry about bounty hunting again. When you give it to her, say that...”

“Shab, Bob’ika, “Beviin said. “Tell her yourself. It’s one errand I’m not running for you. But when you want to tell me what happened-I mean what really happened-then you know where I am.”

Beviin jumped down off the airframe, kama slapping against his plates, and stalked off. How did he think Fett could show up to celebrate her marriage, with what Sintas had told her? It was better that the girl had a fresh start and got swept up in a clan that didn’t have a reputation like the Fett one, or its remarkable bad luck.

Sintas won’t want for anything. Nor Mirta. It’s the least I can do.

Fett went on tinkering with his helmet and wondering if Jaina Solo had what it took to deal with her brother.

“What’s the matter, Bo?” said a voice behind him. “Don’t you worry about security anymore?”

He stopped. Sintas was right behind him. She wasn’t going to leave his life in a tidy, anesthetized way. He’d been naive to think he could avoid the pain.

“I can leave my hatch open here. I don’t have to worry about Mandos, Sin.”

“That’s just what Jaster said and look what happened to him... so, as soon as I get my memory back and I can see, you’re gone again.... still angry?”

“No.” He waited for her to edge forward into the front of the cockpit and look at him, but she stayed aft. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“And why haven’t you shown at Mirta’s celebration?” “Cowardice.”

“I told Mirta the truth. She’s devastated.” “You shouldn’t have done it before her wedding.” “Bo, I never made Ailyn hate you. I never told her anything. That was the problem. She filled in the gaps too much. I should have explained, but I wanted us to get on with our lives.... forget you.... hey, you know.”

“I know.” But Fett knew that he could have stayed in touch, or visited, and then Ailyn would at least have seen he was around, and not totally callous-just mostly. It might not have made any difference in the end. “I’m not good at telling people things, either.”

“If you’d told the magistrate why you shot him, you’d never have been convicted.”

“And have everyone know what he did to you? You didn’t tell anyone. You didn’t want it dragged out in public.”

There was only one thing Fett could have done with a scumbag like Lenovar. He wasn’t just any rapist, although that would have been bad enough; he was a Journeyman Protector, Fett’s superior officer on Concord Dawn, a constable who should have been upholding the law, not betraying his uniform and Fett’s trust. If I could have killed him a few more times, I would have. No, the only regrets Fett had were the stupid rows with Sin, the cruel things he’d asked about whether Ailyn was really his, and all the words that couldn’t be unsaid now. She would never have told him about Lenovar; finding out for himself had been the tipping point.

Unrepentant, the magistrate said. You bet I was.

With the fights, and recriminations, and everything he owned taken by the courts, and then the exile... how did anyone repair a marriage after that? Better men did, all the time, but he didn’t know how.

Sintas edged closer behind the pilot’s seat. Fett thought it was better if she didn’t have yet another illusion ruined.

“I’d have gone anywhere with you, Bo,” she said. “I didn’t care if we lost everything.”

“I know. I was the one who didn’t have what it took.”

“The last time I saw your face.... what were you, nineteen?”

“Close enough.”

She was desperate to look at him. Fifty-odd years. He understood why she needed to, but it was still a bad idea for both of them.

Being Sintas, she did it anyway.

She slid around in front of his seat and looked into his eyes; her, midthirties, perfect, him, over seventy, and with a savage life in those absent years that etched itself in every pore.

“Oh, Bo... whatever happened to you?” “I survived.”

She could have looked more shocked. She just seemed ripped up by regret, but not half as much as he was. She touched the scars on his cheek—scars that had been etched by the Sarlacc’s acid. It was another story he needed to tell her. “Come and see Mirta,” she said. “Please?” “She’ll give me the full number on why it was my fault for not telling her.”

“No, she’s a big girl now. She knows things are never as black and white as we want them to be.”



Sintas had never expected him to be eloquent, which was a blessing right then. He handed her the envelope. That was the simplest bit. “Got a few things for you.” “Bo, you don’t have to do that.”

“Just shut up and take it.” Shysa would have done this so much better. He could do anything with a grin and that accent. “And I should have bought you one of these at the time... and this is yours anyway.”

Fett went back to calibrating his HUD just so he didn’t have to watch. Sin could do the strong-and-silent routine just as well as he could, as long as their eyes didn’t meet.

“I know what’s in the canister, “she said, “and I can’t look at it right now.” It was the only holoimage of the three of them as a family, in that short, idyllic time before it all collapsed. “But you’re insane to buy me the stone. I’m never worth that much.” “Sell it. It’s yours.” “I’ve got the first one.”

“Half of it. And a lot’s happened since, so there’ll be a different set of Fett memories in the blue stone. If you ever want to do some catching up.”

Fett wondered if Mirta had taken her to visit Ailyn’s grave yet. The problem with Mirta telling Sintas that he’d gone to so much trouble to recover Ailyn’s body and then buried her with half of the heart-of-fire, was that it made him look like a nice, normal, loving father. And however decent his motives were when he destroyed his marriage, he’d never been man enough in the years that followed to visit his family and try to repair the rift. It took more guts than facing an army.

You get the life you deserve, Fett. Everyone does. “Sin, after I left - did you find someone else?” She was holding the blue heart-of-fire between both palms, one flat above, one below, almost as if she was rolling it, eyes a little distant as if she’d already started listening to its silent voice.

“I did, Bo, more than once, “she said at last. “But in our line of work, it never lasts, does it? You?”

“I don’t remember, “he lied. She could tell anyway. “Let’s go do the family thing, then.” Sintas put the stone in the hip pocket of her pants. “Just this once.”

He hadn’t finished calibrating the HUD, but he put his helmet on anyway. And once it was on, he looked like the Bo she once knew and loved, and the lost years vanished for a brief time. They went to Mirta’s feast.

Maybe Sintas would do that Kiffar thing with the new heart-of-fire, and read and discover everything that had happened to him while they were apart, and what he just couldn’t manage to tell her even now.

It was just three words. But it was three too many for Boba Fett.

NOVOC VEVUT’S HOME, KELDABE: WEDDING FEAST OF MIRTA GEV AND GHES  
GRADE

“I’ve found a use for Jedi!” Carid bellowed. “I knew I would one day! Look!”

The line of ale bottles stretched the length of the duraplast trestle table in Vevut’s crowded courtyard. Jaina concentrated, knowing how critical the timing would be. Then she inhaled slowly, stepped back, and Force-pulled all thirty caps off in a rapid sequence that popped and rattled like a Luit pyrocracker. Froth welled from the necks of the bottles; the guests showed their approval with shouts of “Oya!” and “Kandosii!, “hammering their fists on the thigh plates of their armor.

Jaina took a bow. “Now you know why Jedi apprentices spend years in quiet contemplation and earnest study at the academy. “

The celebratory feast was packed; guests had spilled out from the courtyard onto the grass outside the low retaining wall. A man in gray armor had an animal with him, a predator with a deeply folded coat and six legs. When she passed, it looked up sharply as if it recognized her, and made plaintive grumbling noises, slapping its whip-like tail on the ground. Mirta edged through the crowd toward her, not looking radiant or blushing.

Jaina could sense her misery, but she also knew the specific cause of it, because Sintas had told her: a single traumatic event whose consequences had spiraled out of control and finally fed into the crisis that now engulfed Jaina’s own family, and much of the galaxy. It wasn’t a di-rect causal chain, but it was so close and personal now that it might as well have been.

Fifty-odd years ago, what was happening to us right then? Mom was growing up on Alderaan. Uncle Luke was on Tatooine, no idea what was coming ten years down the line. Dad.... Dad was probably learning to steal speeders. And Sintas, who none of us knew or even thought about until this year, was a teenager with a baby daughter going through the worst time of her life. And none of us knew that we’d end up on this collision course.

Mirta finally pushed through the sea of bodies and steered Jaina to a quieter corner.

“Ba’buir was here with Grandmama earlier, but I can’t find them now, “Mirta said.

“They’ve probably got some talking to do.” “All I can think of now is-what if I’d killed him?” “But you didn’t.”

“You don’t understand, Jaina. It’s all I can remember with my mama now. She built her whole life around hating Fett and making him pay, from the work she did to the man she married. And everything she taught me. I grew up on hatred.”

“But you’ve changed all that, Mirta, “Jaina said. “You stopped that cycle, didn’t you? That takes some doing. Put it behind you. Live your life. I think Fett wants you to be happy, even if he doesn’t give you any clues.”

“I’m talking about what I nearly did. I was going to kill him. If your mother hadn’t diverted my blaster back on Corellia, he’d be dead now.”

Mirta hadn’t struck Jaina as the kind of woman who worried about things like that. She was hard;

pure and simple, an unsentimental and unforgiving woman. But in all that struggle to survive, and all the violence she had meted out, there remained someone who could challenge the core of her upbringing. It was an extraordinary strength. “What-ifs can be corrosive,” Jaina said. “You should...” “It’s not about me, Jaina. It’s about you. How do you think it feels when you find out that none of the events happened the way you thought, or even happened at all? But you were prepared to kill your own flesh and blood on the strength of it?”

“You think I’m going to kill my brother.” “I think you need to hear from someone who nearly killed their own grandfather. Think about what it’ll do to you.”

“Mirta, he murdered your mother. He killed my aunt.”

Jaina had an image of Jacen in her mind as he once was, and then imagined bringing a lightsaber down across his neck. It made her unsteady for a moment. “Are you saying I should forgive him? Is that what this is all about?”

“No, I think there are things you can’t forgive. But executing someone is a step beyond, and if you’re thinking about it... just remember me.”

Jaina seriously considered a little careful mind influence right then just to stop Mirta being brokenhearted and guilt-ridden on her wedding day. But given Mirta’s strength of will, Jaina was sure it would bounce right off her. She didn’t even try.

“No disrespect to your granddad,” she said, “but he wasn’t totally blameless, was he? I can imagine how much damage it does to a marriage when something that awful happens. But other folks handle it differently. He could have, too. He could have stayed in touch, at least.”

“When you’ve got the blaster in your hand and his back lined up in your cross-wires, it doesn’t feel like that. And things happened to him to make him that way. Maybe they happened to your brother, too.”

“I can’t believe you’re pleading for Jacen,” Jaina said. “If he walked in here now, wouldn’t you shoot him dead for what he did to your mother?”

“Yes, I would.” Mirta had a few wild flowers twisted in her hair, but she was still in yellow battle armor. It was incongruous and very Mandalorian. “Without a second thought. I’m Fett’s granddaughter in every sense. But that doesn’t mean it’s the right thing for you to shoot him. Do whatever you can to get him locked up and treated or whatever. Maybe let fate take its course and leave someone else to.... kill him.”

And that was incongruously Mandalorian, too. Family-not bloodline, but the living fabric of being a family-meant a lot to them, and maybe that was the root of Mirta’s anguish.

She’s worrying about me going through what she nearly did. Jaina was taken aback. That dualistic Mandalorian mindset-extreme violence, profound love-always threw her.

“I’ll never forget what you’re trying to do for me,” she said at last.

Mirta looked suddenly embarrassed, as if she didn’t want to be caught being kind. “Funny how I’ve only really got to grips with my own messy family since I’ve been talking to a shabla Jedi.”

“I’ve learned more than I ever thought I would from all of you, and I don’t mean saber tactics, either.”

There was nothing like living close to someone who wanted to kill their granddad to make you look at the lightsaber in your own hand and ask if you could really use it on your own brother. Jaina had been thrown up against the choices and consequences here in a way that she would never have experienced in her own polite, restrained, reasonable Jedi family. She was also a lot clearer about what it meant to be a Jedi, because of the mirror held up to her by Mandalore. Everyone needed to see themselves as others saw them.

But she still didn’t know exactly what she should do when it came to stopping Jacen on his headlong rush to disaster.

“I’ll be back later,” Jaina said. “I need to mull over what you’ve said. But please go back to the party and be happy today. Promise me?”

Mirta didn’t have a lot of happiness genes, that was obvious, but she managed a smile and clasped Jaina’s arm. “Let’s never be in opposing armies, but if we are, we’ll make sure we avoid each other. Deal?”

“Deal,” said Jaina.

Jaina knew she wouldn’t have understood that a couple of weeks earlier, but she certainly did now. She passed Sintas walking up the dirt track toward Vevut’s house from the center of Keldabe. She was clutching something tight in her right hand as she ambled along slowly, looking down at her fist as if she had a comlink in it, but when Jaina got close to her she could see that it had to be something much smaller than that.

Sintas looked up as if she hadn’t seen Jaina coming, and almost stepped out of her way. There were tears in her eyes; Jaina would have been stunned if there hadn’t been. Losing your memory was bad enough, but having to recover memories as bad as hers was living through pain twice.

“Sorry,” Sintas said, unfolding her fingers. There was a huge deep blue gem in her palm, shot with brilliant rainbow colors as it caught the light. “Just been doing some catching up.”

Sintas walked on. Jaina marveled at the ability of beings to recover from the worst experiences, and hoped her own family would be able to find some of that resilience.

She could still hear the wedding guests singing-that same plaintive ballad she’d heard the other night. She chose to hear it as a song of love and homesickness. It would always sound that way to her for as long as she lived.

If Fett had wanted a drink in the tapcaf today, he'd have had to get it from behind the bar himself.

Everyone was at his granddaughter's wedding feast, including the barkeep, Cham. Fett waited for Admiral Daala, thinking that it was a perfect freeze frame from his life that he was waiting to do business here while his granddaughter and his ex-wife were doing the right thing and celebrat-ing the marriage.

He watched Daala walk through the doors, reflected in the mirrored panel next to his table.

"I've been arranging Gil's funeral with Reige," she said.

"Did that involve a strafing run over Bastion?"

"The somewhat depleted Council of Moff's couldn't see why we wouldn't release the body for a state funeral. I gave them back a few dead Moff's to bury instead." "Corellia, then."

"Reige said Gil would have preferred that anyway." "You can invite Jacen Solo. He's a popular man on Corellia. They'd give him a warm welcome.... heat-seeking missile, maybe."

Daala didn't sit down. She looked as if she had somewhere else to go. "Niathal's formally declared the government in exile of the Galactic Alliance on Fondor." "Who says Mon Cals don't have a sense of humor?" "And the Fondorians. Forgiveness is a wonderful thing." "Sit down."

"You said, if I might remind you, that I could have an ale at Mirta's wedding." "So I did."

"You seem reluctant. Is that because your ex-wife will be there?"

"My ex-wife saw my face today for the first time in fifty-two years."

"I've never seen you without the helmet." "Time was when I said this was my face." "Seen one Mando, seen them all." Fett clamped his hands on the helmet's cheek pieces, thumbs under the rim, and twisted slightly as he lifted the helmet clear of his head. Daala watched in complete silence with her arms folded. The silence went on a little too long for him to feel comfortable.

"It's not about the scars," he said. Daala looked him in the face, eyelids closing a fraction, the faintest of smiles passing across her lips.

"You scrub up well for an old man, Fett. I bet you broke a few hearts back in the day."

If he had, it was only distant admiration. "There was only ever Sintas."

"Ah."

"I do a job right, or I don't do it at all."

She understood. “Ah.”

Daala was as hard as a Hutt’s heart on payday; she hadn’t made Imperial admiral in a male-dominated navy by weeping into her handkerchief. But something had cracked that beskar deck plating of hers, and her gaze flickered for a moment.

“That’s a long time to devote to... perfectionism.”

“Saves me trouble I don’t get paid to handle.”

“And trouble that you can’t ever buy again.”

“Thanks for reminding me.”

“Perfection isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, Fett. Sometimes good enough is all you need. No point surviving if you don’t live.”

Fifty-two years alone. Not what I’d planned, but it could have been fifty-two years of misery with bad company. I know which hurts less.

“That thing’s not your face, actually.” Daala stopped a fraction short of actually touching his jaw, but he thought she was going to jerk his face toward the mirrored panel and make him look at himself like some gawky, self-conscious adolescent being told he was fine just the way he was. “And that’s not your father’s face, either.”

Fett had never flinched from his reflection-not out of sore conscience, or insecurity, or because it was also Jango Fett’s face. He had always been able meet the gaze flung back at him-until today. Koa Ne’s smug, sterile, Kaminoan judgment wormed into his brain: But what use is your wealth to you now? Maybe Daala was right. He was already dead, and beating his tumors had only given him more years to contemplate just how very dead he was.

“You’re right. It’s mine.” Fett looked at the reflection again, and survived seeing time ignoring his plea to stop, just like he’d ignored the pleas of so many targets. “And are you another one who thinks it’s unfair I got a blessing I couldn’t use, like Jaina Solo does?”

“I got my second chance with Liegeus. I grabbed it.”

“But Liegeus never stopped loving you.”

“I didn’t make him stop, either.”

Daala stood at the Oyu’baat’s doors, hands in her pockets, and looked up at the cloudless sky. “Lovely day. I need my exercise. I’m cooped up on a ship most days.” She held out her hand to him, palm down, as if telling a dawdling kid to hang on to her and not get lost in the crowd. “Com-ing?”

Fett clipped his helmet onto his belt, feeling it tapping against the small of his back as he moved. It was a strange sensation, like someone trying to get his attention. “Ready when you are, Admiral.”

“It’s Natasi, “she said. “Natasi Daala. A good old Re-natasian name.”

Keldabe had seen him without the helmet often enough now. Nobody would turn a hair, not about the helmet-and not about Admiral Daala.

BRALSIN, MANDALORE: NEXT DAY

“I knew you couldn’t leave it alone, “said Gotab.

It was early evening, and a haze was settling over the Ke-lita valley in the distance. Jaina helped the old man sit down on a smooth-worn outcrop of pale gray granite. Close-cropped grass ringed by stones large enough to sit on lent the spot the air of a small arena. Gotab laid his helmet down and shut his eyes, facing into the breeze as if to savor it on his face.

“I need guidance, “Jaina said.

“Fett’s still too busy.... discussing vital commercial is-sues with Admiral Daala, then.”

“It’s not Fett’s experience I need. It’s yours.” What she said next would either shape the galaxy’s future, or make Gotab walk off in disgust. “I need to hear this from a Jedi.”

“Former Jedi. You’ve got the whole Jedi Council to ask, Jaina. I bet they answer your comm right away.”

“Maybe, but none of them have seen the galaxy from both sides. I haven’t ever spoken to a Jedi who walked away from the Order but who wasn’t a Sith.”

“I didn’t just walk away from the Order-I didn’t exercise Right of Denial. I stopped being a Jedi.” Gotab laughed. “I know the dark side, too. I lived alongside it for too many years, and I can’t say that it was always a bad thing. But you’re right, I’m no Sith. I’m just a man.”

“Do you think of yourself as Gotab?” Jaina looked over her shoulder, knowing Venku was around somewhere.

“In a way. It just means engineer. I was always good at fixing things. And people.” He took out his lightsaber and held the hilt in his palm, hefting it. “My name used to be Bardan Jusik, but I stopped using my second name in case it got me killed after the Purge. In private, to everyone who matters to me, I’m just Bard’ika.”

“Do you have a family?”

“Yes. But I know what you’re really asking. Did I father more little Mandalorian Force-users, and train them as some kind of armored Jedi? No. I had plenty of adopted sons to look after-and daughters. My wife, may she find rest in the manda, thought it was for the best.”

“You could have had children via a donor. Clinics can do clever things.”

“Mando’ade adopt. I chose the finest family a man could have. Why would we have wanted to conceive a child by donor?”

Gotab-Bard’ika-hadn’t struggled to his feet to storm off, nor had he rounded on her. His impression in the Force was relaxed and a little sad, in a bittersweet kind of way that Jaina envied; it was as if he was looking back on a substantially happy life that had nevertheless had its moments of grief. She was trying hard to stay detached from emotions at the moment, because if she felt the good things in life-and there still seemed to be many-then she also felt the pain that reminded her that Mara was dead, that Jacen was responsible, and that Jaina had sworn to deal with the problem. Things were fine as long as she held those events at bay, and stared at them as if they were a disturbing holovid. The moment she let them slip past her guard and merge with reality, they were almost too agonizing to bear. “I’ve got a terrible choice to make,” she said. “I have to stop my brother. I think I’m the only one who can. Mirta Gev, of all people, begged me to think twice about killing him and to leave him to someone else. There is no one else.” “Not even Master Luke Skywalker? My, my. So this one’s bigger than Palpatine, is he?”

“You sound very bitter about the Order, sir.” “I might be ancient, but I’m not an officer. Bard’ika, please.” Flying creatures that Jaina couldn’t identify wheeled and jinked high in the dusk sky like fighter craft; Gotab watched them in silence for a moment. “The Order has long been about justifying its own existence, about acquiring and holding power, and from what I see now, nothing much has changed since my day. I know what I swore to do as a Jedi, and it didn’t have anything to do with turning a blind eye to social evils because the Sith were a bigger evil. But every act of evil we commit creates an environment where the Sith can exist. So Jedi who cut corners-a Jedi Order that cuts corners-forfeit their right to hold the moral high ground. Yes, I’m bitter. That’s why I stopped being a Jedi and just became someone who had Force skills and wanted to do no harm. I’ve killed-and not regretted it. I’ve never wrung my hands while whining about my conscience. So if you genuinely want my advice-well, to hear my view, because that’s all it is-then, Jaina Solo, we talk purely as individuals who can use the Force. I won’t help the Jedi Order.”

Jaina was still aware of Venku wandering around the hill, keeping an eye on the two of them. She couldn’t see him. But he was there.

“This is about me and Jacen,” she said at last. “And you could have stopped him, any of you, if you’d united against him. One Sith can’t stand against hundreds of Jedi. Your problem is that he’s your own flesh and blood, and none of you have had the courage to do the job. You’ve been hoping that he’ll see the light and stop so that you don’t have to do the dirty work. How many ordinary beings have died while you made excuses for him because he’s family?”

“I know. Okay, I know.” Jaina’s gut twisted with guilt again. Yes, if Jacen had been any other Sith with Jacen’s track record, she’d have cut him down without a second thought. Had anyone tried to redeem Palpatine, or that apprentice of his on Naboo? No. But Vader.... Vader had turned out to be family. Uncle Luke had bothered to look for the good in him. “You’re going to give me the speech about no attachment, aren’t you?”

Gotab turned to face her and smiled. The light was failing. He still seemed to have a luminosity about him, the sweetness of great age, despite the harshness of his words. “Attachment-and you



inevitably use your powers to serve your own family, or in your case.... you fail to use them," he said. "Avoid attachment-and you become an enactor of ritual, a sterile creature unable to truly understand love and sacrifice. There's no easy answer for a Force-user except rigid self-control, and I do not mean avoiding the dark side. I mean not using the Force at all." "That's not going to help anyone stop Jacen becoming a galactic tyrant."

"Lovely job title, that. Galactic Tyrant wanted-apply within."

"You're mocking me." "You want to know what I would do in your position."

"Yes."

"I'd kill him, out of love."

The reply shocked Jaina because she felt it. He meant it. He wasn't serene; he was full of swirling passions, with hints of darkness in there somewhere, but he'd loved deeply, and still did. It was vivid within him. "I can't avoid this, can I?" she said. "It's a lot more common than you think. People kill the one they love all the time. The motive can be anything, but in the end... you end the life you would've done anything to preserve, and then... then, you go on living. You can kill out of jealousy, passion, revenge, mercy, duty, justice, greed, carelessness. How many people have you killed in combat? In war? More than one, I'll bet. You didn't love those people, but they're no less dead, so the only difference is how you square it with your conscience each day. We're talking about selfishness here-how will I feel? How will Jaina feel?"

"And the rest of my family..."

"Oh, sorry. I thought we were talking about the welfare of the galaxy. How foolish of me." "Mind my asking why you killed?" "Duty, fear, animal survival, and protecting those I loved. Mostly, to eat." Gotab looked at her and nodded. "It's about all living beings, don't forget that. Not just the ones we recognize as our own kind."

It wasn't getting any clearer for Jaina. "I thought I'd made up my mind so many times, but Mirta brought me up short today. My brother killed her mother, and she still begged me not to kill him, just in case I was wrong." "And what if you let him live, and you're wrong?" Jaina shut her eyes. She could sense Venku still taking a slow walk around the perimeter, a little irritable, growing impatient. The two men didn't live around here. They came down into Keldabe from the remote north, the Oyu'baat regulars said. Even Mandalorians didn't drop in on them for a cup of caf and a chat.

"They call me the Sword of the Jedi," Jaina said. "That's supposed to be my destiny. It's odd how these prophecies start to make sense when it's too late."

"Or maybe you're importing meaning into it that isn't there."

"What do you think?"

"A sword is a symbol of justice in many cultures, Jaina. Real justice is blind, and personal feelings don't matter."

But it wasn't about justice: she could suddenly see that. It wasn't so much about what Jacen had done as what he would do in the future-cause the deaths of many more beings. There was no possibility that he would stop of his own accord. There was no intellectual or ethical argument about this. It was simply about a continuing threat to life.

She realized Gotab was staring into her face. If they didn't activate a glowstick soon, they'd be sitting in the dark. But they didn't need to see each other's faces to know what was going on in their heads.

"It's not justice, and it's not punishment," she said at last. "It's about saying: this is as far as it goes. I have to stop him now."

"It hurts to say it."

"Not as much as I thought, but at the moment, it's just words."

Bardan finally resorted to a glowstick. He pulled it out of his belt and wedged it into a fissure in the rock to cast a soft yellow light. Then he took off his glove and held up a hand torn by old scarring, and gazed at the puckered skin as if recalling a long-lost happier time.

"We keep strills," he said. "Hunting animals, the ones with folded skin and six legs that you might have seen around. A friend of mine loved his, but it started going crazy and attacking everyone, including me. He had to shoot it. Poor thing-it had a brain tumor. It wasn't itself."

Killing it broke his heart, but he couldn't let it carry on, not just for everyone's safety, but for the animal, too, because it was utterly miserable. You sometimes have to kill what you love, end their pain and take it on yourself-because that's what love is, sometimes."

That struck a raw chord in Jaina. Not the thought that Jacen might be mad-if that made any difference to what he did-but that he was miserable somewhere in his soul. She thought of the Embrace of Pain, and the Jacen who had survived it, and wondered if his torturer Vergere had been even more poisonously subtle than anyone had ever imagined. Pain was central to Jacen's life now. He thought he couldn't avoid it or forget it. So he used it.

And in the end, he'd grown to need it, and thought others did, too, and that there was a virtue in necessity, because he could do nothing to stop that pain as long as he lived.

Better that it's me, then, Jacen. Better someone who loves you and knows you, than an executioner who just sees you as vermin.

Did that make any difference?

"To think I blamed Jacen's weakness for getting my other brother killed," she said. "It was me who was going to the dark side then."

"Forget about you," Gotab said sharply. "You have a job to do, that's all. Personally, I never

bought this pious nonsense about Jedi violence being fine as long as it was done with a pure heart. Sophistry, my dear. You're going to kill your brother because he's a power-hungry, murdering dictator, no one else in your Jedi circle has the moral courage to do it, and you stand the best chance of stopping him. Finish the job like Fett and Beviin showed you. Then you can worry about your motives when the galaxy is safe again, and you have time for the luxury of contemplating the state of your soul."

It was as harsh as a slap in the face. But Jaina felt a cold certainty cascade over her as if she'd been doused with icy water, making her instantly alert.

It wasn't the kind of revelation that left you feeling enlightened and uplifted, understanding the galaxy better.

It was the sort that said there was only one way out of the burning building if you wanted to live, and you would have to pass through fire.

She stood up and stretched her legs. "Thank you, Bard'ika," she said. "I didn't come here to feel better about this situation. I came here for clarity. You've given me that." "It has to be your choice, Jaina. Not my orders." "I choose, then," she said. "I bet you have grandchildren, yes?"

"Great-great-grandchildren, actually.... twenty of them."

"Then, Bard'ika, I'll do it for them, so they have a galaxy to grow up in." Her heart broke, and not for the first time. She thought of the strill, desperate and unhappy, biting those who loved it, and knew the burden of being the Sword of the Jedi. Her biggest fear now wasn't that she would have to live the rest of her life with Jacen's death on her conscience. She had found a way to replace it with what mattered-not her personal problems, but the threat to the future of kids like Gotab's great-great-grandchildren, and-yes, even Fett's.

She took out her lightsaber and handed the hilt to Gotab for him to admire in the dim yellow light. "Do you still use yours?" she asked. "I spar occasionally," he said. "But slowly. As much as a man of my age can. It keeps the joints more supple."

"If you could choose, would you give up your Force powers?"

"Yes, all except healing. I justified my existence with that many times." He activated the blade and it hummed into life, casting a violet light. He made a few practice passes. "Well made, Jaina."

"Can Venku use one?"

"He has two, actually."

"Did you teach him to use them?"

"Yes. But not for the reason you think."

Gotab shut down the lightsaber and handed it back to her. She could feel Venku getting closer. He

appeared over the ridge, the lighter-colored plates of his armor picked out by the glowstick.

“Buir, it’s time we got you home,” he said.

“I’m enjoying talking to Jaina,” he said. “Come on, Kad’ika. Join us.” The old man smiled to himself. “Funny, Venku’s nickname is Kad’ika-Little Saber. He’s a sword, too, Jaina, but the sword of the Mandalorians. The one who persuaded us to look after ourselves and not venture out to fight other worlds’ wars.”

Right then that sounded like a good idea for anyone. She activated her lightsaber. It was a beautiful weapon, but Pert was right about recognizing it for what it was. Venku walked toward her and then stopped.

“Want to practice?” she asked.

“I’m not a Jedi.”

“You don’t have to be.”

“Okay.”

Venku took out two lightsabers, both blue, and looked at them for a moment with a terrible fond longing that completely shut out everything around him. Whoever had owned those before.... Jaina would never know, but she understood that sorrow when she felt it.

She took up her stance, saber held two-handed. Beviin’s beskad technique was for another day.

“Begin,” said Gotab.

Far into the evening, the darkness was illuminated with the bright humming blur of blades. And Jaina was illuminated too, and saw that the only way out of her dilemma was an agonizing but necessary passage through flame.

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JEDI CAMP: UNDISCLOSED LOCATION IN THE TRANSITORY MISTS, NEAR THE HAPES CLUSTER

Perfect sanctuary was just a bedroll and a blanket on the dirt floor, and it was all that Ben needed right then. He just wanted to sleep. He crawled into the tent and let himself collapse facedown on the bed.

“You okay, Ben?”

Luke’s voice drifted over the faint whisper of breezes, cracking with fatigue. Ben rolled over and stared up into the tent’s ridge. “Yeah, Dad. I really think I am now. You?”

“You bet. Just checking.”

“Get some sleep.”

“Look who’s talking...”

But Ben couldn’t sleep, not yet. He settled for letting his mind churn, wondering how Lon Shevu was doing and if he’d been able to see Shula since he’d sent the transmission, and if Jori Lekauf’s folks were coping, unable to tell any-one that their son died a hero. There were so many broken people and shattered families in this war. Ben felt as if he knew them all personally.

I do, or at least I know too many.

Sleep would come when his brain decided it was good and ready, so he didn’t fight it. He just let his mind drift for what felt like hours until his father’s voice jerked him fully alert.

Yes: Dad was talking to someone.

Who’s woken him at this time of night? Nobody’s going to track us down here. But Ben slid his arm to his side and felt for his lightsaber anyway, because now he would never wake suddenly without reaching for it, for as long as he lived. It was one more legacy of this war.

“Oh.... sweetheart.... you found me. You found me. Stay awhile.”

Ben wondered if his father was talking in his sleep, then knew that he wasn’t, because he could feel Luke’s sudden emotion like a light being shone in his face. His reflex was to scramble out of the tent and rush to his father’s side, elated, with so much more to say and ask this time; but he stopped himself. This was Dad’s time, not his.

Ben knew exactly who’d found Luke Skywalker.

He smiled, laid his head on the makeshift pillow, and let the tears run down his face unchecked until sleep claimed him.