



Apocalypse: Star Wars Legends (Fate of the Jedi) (Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi - Legends Book 9)

By Troy Denning

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There will be no mercy.

It's not just the future of the galaxy at stake—

It's the destiny of the Force.

In the stunning finale of the epic *Fate of the Jedi* series, Jedi and Sith face off—with Coruscant as their battlefield. For the Sith, it's the chance to restore their dominance over the galaxy that forgot them for so long. For Abeloth, it's a giant step in her quest to conquer all life everywhere. For Luke Skywalker, it's a call to arms to eradicate the Sith and their monstrous new master once and for all.

In a planetwide strike, teams of Jedi Knights take the Sith infiltrators by swift and lethal surprise. But victory against the cunning and savage Abeloth, and the terrifying endgame she has planned, is anything but certain. And as Luke, Ben, Han, Leia, Jaina, Jag, and their allies close in, the devastating truth about the dark side incarnate will be exposed—and send shock waves through the Jedi Order, the galaxy, and the Force itself.

Features a bonus section following the novel that includes a primer on the *Star Wars* expanded universe, and over half a dozen excerpts from some of the most popular *Star Wars* books of the last thirty years!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Troy Denning is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi* novels: *Abyss, Vortex, and Apocalypse; Star Wars: Tatooine Ghost; Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Star by Star; the Star Wars: Dark Nest* trilogy: *The Joiner King, The Unseen Queen, and The Swarm War; and Star Wars: Legacy of the Force: Tempest, Inferno, and Invincible*—as well as *Pages of Pain, Beyond the High Road, The Summoning*, and many other novels. A former game designer and editor, he lives in western Wisconsin with his wife, Andria.

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Chapter One

The starliner swung into orbit around the planet Coruscant, and beyond the observation bubble appeared the glittering expanse of a billion golden lights. Through a thousand centuries of strife, those lights had continued to shine. Nothing had dimmed their brilliance—not the Rakatan enslavement, not the tyranny of the Empire, not the chaos of civil war. And they continued to shine now, in this new age of creeping shadow, when enemy impostors ruled the Galactic Alliance and Sith Lords slept in the Jedi Temple itself. But all those gleaming lights made Jaina Solo wonder whether Coruscant's trillion residents actually cared who won the coming war—whether it mattered that they were living under Sith rule, so long as those billion lights continued to shine.

The answer came to her almost instantly, in the form of a dark tinge in the Force that could only mean Sith. Jaina shifted her gaze to the interior of the starliner, where a teeming mass of passengers hung floating in their transit harnesses, tethered to the walls of the EconoClass hold. Floating down the central access aisle was a Coruscanti Immigration inspector, his zero-g motility pack emitting small hisses as he twirled in slow-motion cartwheels, demanding identichips and ten-credit “expediting fees.” Behind him followed a pair of Bothan escorts, their snouts wrinkling in disdain each time their superior solicited another bribe.

Jaina would have liked to believe the inspector was merely a greedy Sith Saber trying to line his pockets, but she knew better. Vestara Khai, newly defected from the Lost Tribe of Sith, had warned the assault teams to take nothing for granted. In her briefings, Vestara had emphasized that the Sith were not stupid. After insinuating themselves in the Galactic Alliance Senate, they would have moved quickly to take control of the Coruscanti Immigration Service and other key bureaucracies. They would expect the Jedi to be coming, and they would be on the lookout for infiltrators—and petty extortion was an ideal cover for someone trying to identify enemy agents.

The inspector stopped near a pair of human siblings in their late twenties. Both were slender and good-looking, with wary eyes and small expressive mouths. The sister's hair was reddish brown, the brother's merely brown. Their fierce loyalty to each other showed in the way they remained shoulder-to-shoulder when they turned to face the immigration team.

The inspector oriented himself to the same attitude as the siblings—head-down relative to Jaina—and studied the pair without speaking or reaching for their travel documents. The unexpected change of routine sent a cold ripple through Jaina, but she quickly let out a calming breath and forced herself to relax. Allowing her alarm to permeate the Force would only confirm to the inspector that he had found something

worth investigating.

The siblings, Jedi Knights Valin and Jysella Horn, continued to hold their documents, doing a good job of looking like ordinary passengers who were a little bit nervous. The inspector narrowed his eyes and waited, giving them a chance to betray themselves by doing something foolish. Jaina would probably never learn exactly what had caught the Sith's attention, but she did know that it pointed to the one weakness of the Jedi Masters' attack plan. These Sith were both careful and capable, and they outnumbered the Jedi ten to one.

Finally, the inspector said, "Documents."

Valin and Jysella extended their hands, each holding a small packet containing a fare receipt, a forged identichip, and the expediting fee. The inspector took Jysella's packet, then slid her chip into a handheld reader and compared it with the point of origin listed on the fare receipt.

"You were born on Kalla Seven?" the inspector asked. "That's right," Jysella lied. "My brother and I both."

The inspector glanced at Valin, then asked him, "Is this a family trip?"

Valin shook his head. "No, my sister and I are traveling alone."

"Is that so?" The questions were the mundane sort that customs officers all over the galaxy used to probe for story discrepancies. But the real test would be taking place on another level, Jaina knew, with the inspector searching their Force auras for the sour hint of a lie. "Then you've come to visit family?"

"No," Jysella replied confidently. Like every Jedi on the assault

force, she had spent weeks perfecting her ability to lie without betraying herself in the Force. "We're tourists."

"I see." The inspector glanced at her fare receipt again, then spoke to Valin in a casual voice. "Four thousand credits is a lot of money to visit a few monuments and museums. You should have used the HoloNet instead."

"And spend our lives stuck in lower management?" Valin retorted. "I think not."

"If you haven't been to Coruscant," Jysella added, "you go nowhere

at UHI."

"UHI?" the inspector asked.

"Unlimited Horizons Incorporated," she explained, managing to sound just astonished enough to imply that she thought everyone knew what the acronym stood for. "You know—the UHI that controls most of the pallodenite reserves in the Corporate Sector?"

"Ah . . . that UHI." The inspector had clearly been put off balance by the tactic—just as Vestara had predicted. The Lost Tribe's greatest weakness lay in their inexperience with the greater galaxy. Vestara had

said that the quickest way to put a Lost Tribe impostor on the defensive would be to play on that ignorance. “There are so many.” When the inspector pocketed the bribe and returned Jysella’s documents, Jaina finally began to breathe easier. She turned her gaze back to the observation bubble and saw that the Plain Lady was crossing the terminator line into Coruscant’s daylight side. It would not be long now, she knew, before she was on the surface, fighting to save her homeworld . . . again.

Bazel Warv was “Jade Masher,” a celebrated Ramoan float wrestler. Seff Hellin was his human manager, and Vaala Razelle was Seff’s Arcona assistant. The three had just arrived from a series of grudge matches in the Bothan system, and they were passing through the Galactic Center Spaceport on their way to a championship match at the Iblis Globe. All Bazel had to do was remember all that—and believe it. Belief was the key to defeating a Force-user’s ability to detect lies. As long as Bazel truly felt like Jade Masher—the newest, greatest rising star in the Pan-Galactic Float Wrestling Syndicate—he would have no trouble fooling Coruscant’s new immigration inspectors. His friend Yaqueel Saav’etu had assured him of that.

Bazel glanced across the sea of heads that were in Arrival Lobby

757 and found Yaqueel three lines over. She was already at her inspection station, standing alongside another Bothan Jedi, Yantahar Bwua’tu. Wearing the ash-gray tabards of businessbeings, the two Jedi Knights were at the front of a long line of passengers waiting to be formally admitted onto a planet that had once greeted visitors with open arms. So far, the Coruscanti populace seemed willing to believe that these new precautions were due to an influx of spice lords, and Bazel was glad. There was no need for the citizens of Coruscant to get hurt—not when the Jedi were coming to save them.

But first the Jedi had to get past the inspection stations, and that part of the plan wasn’t going well for Yaqueel and Yantahar. Their Duros immigration inspector had been joined by his captain, a narrow-eyed blond whom Bazel judged to be fairly beautiful for a human. She was firing questions at the Bothans faster than they could answer. Meanwhile, a squad of body-armored Galactic Alliance Security guards were standing ready at a nearby security post. Clearly, something was wrong.

Bazel cocked an ear in Yaqueel’s direction, consciously tuning out the general din of the lobby and opening himself to the Force. A cool haze of fear permeated the line a few meters behind him, but he had been sensing that off and on since debarking the starliner. There did not seem to be anything menacing in the aura, so he ignored it and focused on the conversation between his friends and the blond immigration captain. His thick hide began to prickle with the bitter margin of a dark side Force aura. Suddenly he understood why his Bothan friends were having trouble.

Sith.

Ignoring the growing press of the crowd behind him, Bazel ex- tended his Force awareness toward the security post. To his relief, he felt only the weak auras of non-Force-sensitive guards. The immigration captain was the only Sith in the area—probably just a Saber, as- signed to keep watch on the arrival lobby.

“. . . all the way to Coruscant to place an order you could have filled anywhere in the galaxy?” the impostor-captain was asking. “United Hydrologic Institute is hardly the only Tibanna gas supplier in the Mid Rim.”

“But it is the only one with access to Hutt space,” Yantahar replied in his gravelly Bothan voice. “And since Nar Kagga will be the closest inhabited system to our operation, naturally we want to be certain of our supply chain.”

“And your operation will be . . . what, exactly?” the blond impostor asked.

“A trade secret, I’m afraid.” Yaqueel glanced around the inspection

station, then added, “There are spies everywhere, Captain. I’m sure you understand.”

The Sith’s reply grew inaudible when Bazel’s human “manager” grabbed the huge Ramoan’s wrist and asked, “Masher, you awake up there?” Seff Hellin started forward, trying to pull Bazel into the gap that had opened in the line ahead of them. “We’re holding things up.” Bazel paid no attention, for over at the station where his friends were being questioned, the impostor-captain was looking over Yaqueel’s shoulder toward the security post. When the Sith gave a slight nod, the guards drew their stubby Merr-Sonn Urban blaster rifles and started toward the inspection station.

Vaala grabbed Bazel by the other wrist. “Mighty Masher, sir.” The Arcona’s voice was soft and bubbly. “We really should keep moving.” Bazel shook his head, then stepped through the cordon-beams that marked the edge of the queuing area. With matching sighs, Seff and Vaala stepped out of line behind him, each pulling a pair of expensive

Levalug travel cases that were large enough for Vaala to sleep inside.

“Masher!” Seff growled, putting just enough frustration into his voice to sound like a weary manager at the end of his wits. “There’s no time for your temper right now. We have only two hours before the weigh-in.”

They wouldn’t be making the weigh-in, Bazel rumbled in his native Ramoan. He could speak Basic when necessary, but his large mouth had trouble shaping the common language’s delicate vowels and subtle consonants, and he needed to make himself clearly understood. Yaqueel was in trouble, he explained, and he was not going to leave until she was safe.

Seff groaned and carefully avoided looking toward Yaqueel and Yantahar. “Drawing attention to ourselves won’t help anyone, Masher,” he said. “Our friends can take care of their own problems.”

As Seff spoke, the GAS guards shouldered their blaster rifles and fanned out behind Yaqueel and Yantahar. The two Bothans reluctantly opened their tabards, and the Sith impostor-captain stepped forward to frisk them. Bazel knew the woman wouldn’t find a lightsaber or anything else to identify his two friends as Jedi Knights. The assault team’s equipment had been shipped ahead, and it would be returned to them later, by an operative from the Club Bwua’tu resistance society. But Bazel also knew the impostor wouldn’t be searching his friends at all if she hadn’t sensed that something was amiss. He had to find a way to distract her before she confirmed her suspicions . . . a way that wouldn’t seem like it was a distraction.

Vaala clamped a three-fingered hand around one of Bazel’s stubby fingers and quietly bent it back against

the joint. "Mighty Masher, sir, we need to focus on our match." She tried to lead him through the cordon-beams back into the processing line. "The, uh, championship is still on, even if a couple of competitors can't make it to the arena." Balling his hand into a fist to stop Vaala from hurting his finger,

Bazel remained where he was. If a pair of clever Bothans couldn't make it past the immigration inspectors, he replied quietly, there was no reason to think he could. Besides, they didn't know how many of their peers had already been captured, and if the Sith caught even two teams of infiltrators trying to sneak onto the planet, the Jedi would find themselves attacking without the advantage of surprise, and the battle would grow very big very fast. A lot of innocent civilians would get caught in the crossfire, maybe a million of them, and Bazel wasn't going to allow that. He was going to find another way.

Seff exhaled in exasperation. "What other way?"

Bazel wasn't sure. Maybe he could go on a rampage. That would draw attention away from Yaqeel and Yantahar.

"Don't you think that would be a bit obvious, Mighty Masher, sir?"

asked Vaala.

Bazel nodded. Tactical planning wasn't his strong point, he re-minded them, but he could tell that Seff and Vaala just wanted to follow orders, and that meant he had to develop his own idea. Maybe he could just bull ahead to the front of the line and try to push past the processing station.

"And get yourself arrested instead?" Seff lowered his voice to a whisper. "Do you really think you can outwit an interrogator better than a pair of Bothans?"

Bazel had to admit that was unlikely. What he needed was to present the impostor-captain with another reason for the anxiety she seemed to be sensing in Yaqeel's and Yantahar's Force auras. He thought for a moment, then turned back toward the line he had just left and opened himself to the Force.

Soon he felt the same cool haze of fear he had noticed earlier, a cloud of uncertainty and dismay centered on a small cluster of amphibious Ishi Tib who had clearly not been informed of the new security procedures on Coruscant. The three females were shuffling forward reluctantly, propelled by the pressure of the crowd at their backs, while their male escort was slowly swiveling his eyestalks about, trying to appear casual as he searched for a way to bypass the inspection station. All four carried identical luggage—large kaadu-hide traveling cases with matching satchels slung over their shoulders—and it was obvious by their reluctance to set their baggage on the floor that they were as worried about losing it as they were about being caught with the contents.

Spice.

Bazel stepped back through the cordon-beam. Using the Force, he gently opened a path in front of him, then began to work his way toward the pod of smugglers. Seff and Vaala followed close on his heels, Seff grabbing for his sleeve.

"Masher, the inspection station is the other way."

Bazel growled that Seff and Vaala should go on. He had a better plan.

“I’m not sure changing plans is a good idea at the moment,” Vaala objected. “The promoters are counting on you.”

The promoters were counting on them all, Bazel reminded her, and if he saw a way to save Yaqueel and Yantahar, he was going to try it. He came to an Aqualish couple who had taken advantage of the path he had opened to sneak forward. The pair glared at him defiantly, daring him to object. He merely shouldered them aside and stepped over to the Ishi Tib, who instinctively shied away and looked as though they were going to flee.

Bazel distracted them by raising his stubby-fingered hand in a calming gesture, then spoke in Basic, warning them about the security check ahead.

The male curled his eyestalks forward in confusion. “What?” he asked. “Check your head?”

“There’s a security check ahead,” Vaala clarified, stepping to

Bazel’s side. She glanced up at him, silently signaling her reluctant acceptance of his new plan. Then she turned back to the smugglers and put a little Force energy into her voice. “You should allow our friend to take those packages across for you.”

The Ishi Tib let their beaks gape in surprise. “You’re with . . . them?”

“Did you think they would leave a shipment this big to chance?”

Seff asked, also joining them. As the line continued to shuffle past, he lowered his voice and pointed at Bazel. “You need to hand over the cases now.”

The male’s eyestalks quivered slightly, and he turned to his three companions. “We need to hand our cases over.” He gave his traveling case to Bazel, then took the satchel off his shoulder and passed it over, as well. “Now.”

The three females were all too happy to obey, and within moments

Bazel had four satchels slung over his head and four heavy cases tucked beneath his arms. Seff watched as the much-relieved Ishi Tib melted back into the processing line, then looked up at Bazel.

“You’re sure about this?”

Bazel glanced across the lobby toward Yaqueel and Yantahar. They had already removed their outer tabards, and now they stood with their fingers interlaced behind their heads while the imposter-captain searched their pockets. As soon as the Sith found something to use as an excuse for an arrest, she would turn his friends over to her superiors for “questioning.” Yaqueel and Yantahar could withstand any kind of normal interrogation, Bazel knew, but nobody could withstand Force torture. Under that kind of pressure, even Yaqueel would start to reveal important details about the Jedi plan—how Nek and Eramuth Bwua’tu had been running a secret intelligence network, for instance, or how many Jedi Knights had landed on Coruscant. She

might even reveal how much the Jedi truly knew about what was happening on the planet.

Bazel nodded. He assured his companions that he would meet them at the original rendezvous point, and then he began to work his way across the lobby toward his friends. Although it was impossible for a being his size to cut across so many processing lines without drawing attention, Bazel attempted to do exactly that, sliding into each line from the side and shooting a menacing glower at anyone who appeared to object. By the time he reached the target line, the impostor- captain and her GA Security guards were frowning in his direction.

Continuing to hold the Ishi Tib's traveling cases beneath his long arms, Bazel looked away and pretended not to notice that he was being watched. Of course, the act didn't fool anyone.

"You there!" the Sith barked. "Step forward."

Bazel continued to look at the ceiling, pretending to study one of the giant sparkle balls that provided illumination for the lobby.

"You, the big green one!" the Sith called again. "Come forward."

Bazel turned his head away, then heard the clatter of two GAS guards shoving through the crowd. He started to move away, the line now parting before him to avoid getting caught in a fight.

A reedy Rodian voice ordered, "Halt!"

"Don't make us use the shock net, big fella," added the second guard, a human male. "There's nowhere for you to go."

Bazel dropped his chin and let out a long, lip-flapping moan, then slowly turned to face the two guards. The human was aiming a big- barreled netgun at him. The Rodian had shouldered his blaster rifle.

"You are talking to me?" Bazel asked in his rumbling Basic. "Sorry—I didn't know."

The guards scowled at his thick accent, then the Rodian motioned him toward the inspection station. "Captain Suhale wants to see you." "You are taking me to the front of the line?" Bazel forced a nervous grin. "Thank you."

He walked a dozen paces to the front of the line, taking pains to be obvious about trying to avoid the eyes of both the Sith female— Captain Suhale—and the two Bothans she was questioning. Suhale let him continue until he was almost past the station, then spoke in a voice so cold it sent a shiver down his back.

"I will have them open fire, you know."

Bazel stopped and slowly turned to face her. This close up, the Sith was more intimidating than beautiful, with cold lavender eyes and cheekbones so prominent they looked like stone. He glanced toward Yaqueel and Yantahar, who were doing a good job of concealing any alarm they might be feeling, then looked away so quickly he could almost feel Yaqueel cringing at his ineptitude.

Perfect.

“Thank you,” Suhale said. “Now, why are you keeping a watch on these two Bothans?”

“Bothans?” Bazel made a point of not looking in Yaqeel’s direction.

“I don’t know any Bothans.”

Suhale’s eyes flared. “You’re lying,” she said. “And I want to know why. Shall we have a look inside those traveling cases you’re carrying?” Bazel shook his head and clamped the cases more tightly beneath

his arms.

“I wasn’t asking.” Suhale nodded at one of the guards, and the Rodian pressed a blaster muzzle into the small of Bazel’s back. “Place them on the table.”

Bazel exhaled loudly, then glanced toward Yaqeel as though looking for permission.

Yaqeel frowned in obvious confusion, then demanded, “Why are you looking at me, Green Thing?”

“I was just wondering the same thing,” Suhale replied. She crooked a finger and motioned Bazel forward. “Come now. Matters will go very hard on you if I am forced to tell you again.”

Bazel reluctantly placed the traveling cases on the inspection table, then removed the matching shoulder satchels from around his neck and placed them on the table, as well.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Suhale motioned to the first case. “Open it.”

Bazel stood the case upright, then leaned over the latch . . . and saw the weakness in his plan.

Locks.

Confident that his thumbprint wasn’t going to deactivate the security mechanism, Bazel thought for a moment, trying to recall his lectures on spice smuggling. Finally, he held his huge thumb above the tiny scanning pad and shrugged.

“I can’t.”

Suhale scowled. “What do you mean you can’t?” she demanded. “They’re your cases, aren’t they?”

Bazel turned to Yaqeel. Her narrowed eyes suggested that she had finally begun to understand his plan, but she merely curled her lip and snarled, “Like I said, why are you looking at me?”

“Because the cases are yours, obviously,” Suhale said. “Open them.

Now.”

“You open them,” Yaqeel retorted. “They’re not mine.”

“Or mine,” Yantahar added before Suhale could look in his direction. “I’ve never seen them before. Not the big green thing, either.”

“Very well,” Suhale said, pulling a vibroknife from her equipment belt. “I’ll open them.”

Before she could activate the blade, the original inspector’s blue hand shot out to catch her by the wrist. “Captain, you might want to reconsider that.”

Suhale shot the Duros a scowl that suggested she was considering using the tool on him instead. “And why would that be, Inspector?”

The Duros seemed genuinely surprised. “Spice smuggling, ma’ am. The containers may be rigged to keep the couriers from stealing the cargo.”

“Spice?” Suhale turned back to Bazel, the disappointment in her voice a clear suggestion that she was there to catch Jedi, not smugglers. “Is that what you’re carrying?”

Bazel dropped his gaze and tipped his head toward Yaqeel. “Ask her.”

“You’re dead, Ramoan,” Yaqeel rasped, taking her cue from Bazel. “You know that, right?”

Suhale smirked, though without enthusiasm. “I do believe that sounds like a yes.”

She placed her thumbs over the scanning pads. Bazel felt a slight stirring in the Force, and the latches popped. The Duros inspector cringed openly—then drew a look of open disdain from Suhale.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, Inspector Modt,” she said. “It wasn’t locked, after all.”

The Duros—Inspector Modt—stepped back anyway. Confident that Suhale had used the Force to disable the explosives before she un-locked the case, Bazel remained next to the inspection table as she spread it open. The interior was filled with clothes in the glistening materials favored by sea species—sleeveless zhoopsuits in teal scalara, shimmersilk blouses in every color beneath the water.

Suhale pulled out a short orange dress and held it up between her

and Yaqeel, then frowned. “Not really your style.” “Do I look Ishi?” Yaqeel replied quickly.

“That’s hardly relevant,” Modt said.

“Why not?” Suhale asked.

Modt studied her for a long time, his raised chin betraying the con-tempt he felt for a “superior” who obviously did not have the slightest experience catching smugglers. This ignorance of galactic culture was,

Bazel knew, a great part of the reason the Jedi were going to defeat the Lost Tribe.

Finally, Modt said, "It's a common technique." He reached over and pulled the Ishi Tib clothes out of the case. "Smugglers establish inconsistencies so that if they're caught carrying contraband, they can claim the luggage belongs to someone else."

Modt ran his long Duros fingers along the inner edge of the case, then tore the lining away from the top, near the latches, and pulled out a detonator wire. He removed a detonite charge large enough to blast the entire inspection area back to protons and electrons, then used a laser scalpel to carefully cut away the travel case's interior panel. Packed into the space between the panel and the outer shell was a thin layer of blue paste, its surface sparkling with millions of microscopic yellow crystals.

The Duros touched the tip of his smallest finger to the paste, then shuddered and jerked his hand away. "Neutron pixie," he gasped. "Pure!"

"Pure?" Suhale glanced at the other three cases, though she still seemed disappointed at having caught nothing more than a few spice smugglers. "It seems we have made quite a haul, then."

"You could say that," the Duros confirmed. "After it's cut, this much pixie would have to be worth ten, maybe twenty million credits." "That much?" Suhale grew thoughtful, then said, "You seem to have caught a team of smugglers. Perhaps you should take them into custody."

"My pleasure, Captain," responded the Duros.

He signaled for the GAS squad to make the arrests, then closed the traveling case and motioned a couple of agents forward to seize the evidence. Bazel was not surprised to see Suhale raise a restraining hand. "The security team is going to have their hands full with the prisoners, I think," she said, eyeing Bazel's mountainous form. "I'll bring

the spice along later."

The Duros' eyes narrowed in suspicion, but he did not attempt to object. There was a new order on Coruscant, and it did not like to be questioned.

A pair of GAS agents pulled Bazel's arms behind his back and slapped his wrists into a set of oversized stun cuffs. As they spun him toward their security post, Yaqueel caught his eye, then nodded and flashed a barely perceptible smile. Bazel almost winked. They both knew the hard part was behind them. All they had to do now was escape a security detail, and that was not going to be a problem.

* * *

The hologram of a human newscaster was floating above the boarding berth, a huge female face with pouty lips, amber eyes, and a radiant complexion. The few passengers still lingering in the area seemed transfixed

by her silken voice, which rolled across the platform in a steady, hypnotic patter that Luke Skywalker recognized as a Force technique designed to lull listeners into a receptive state of mind.

“Citizens are advised to avoid confronting members of the Jedi Spice Cartel,” the newscaster was saying. Intelligence reports from Eramuth Bwua’tu identified her as Kayala Fei, a Sith Saber who had been planted on the staff at the BAMR News Network. “All members are known to be trained assassins, and most have a documented history of violence.”

Fei’s image was replaced by one of Luke himself, and her lilting voice continued, “In other news, rumors persist that the overlord of the Jedi Spice Cartel, Luke Skywalker, has returned to Coruscant. Citizens are ordered to report all possible sightings of Skywalker—either to the nearest GAS agent, or through normal emergency channels.”

The hologram switched again, this time to an image of a dark-haired male. As handsome as Fei was beautiful, he had a coppery complexion, violet eyes, and a thin face with sharp features.

“GAS Superintendent Vhool continues to investigate the full scope of the Jedi spicerunning operation,” Fei’s voice said. “Vhool believes the Jedi are running spice to finance their own covert operations, including attempts to subvert the abolitionist organization known as Freedom Flight. Senior officers have suggested that their intention is to destabilize the Galactic Alliance by overthrowing legitimate governments along the entire galactic rim.”

Luke looked away in disgust. The Jedi were no more attempting to subvert Freedom Flight than they were running spice, but BAMR was such a tool of the Sith that it did not even bother to pretend its propaganda had any basis in fact.

On the opposite side of the half-empty platform, Luke saw two members of his infiltration team, Doran Tainer and Seha Dorvald, trying to catch his eye. Dressed in the festive, rumpled clothes of vacationers returning home from a trip packed with more dancing and gambling than relaxation, the two Jedi Knights were almost indistinguishable from the handful of passengers between them and Luke. The one difference was how alert they seemed, how unaffected they were by the hypnotic lies rolling from Kayala Fei’s shapely mouth.

Once it grew clear that they had caught Luke’s eye, Seha’s gaze slid away, as though her attention had shifted. Doran tipped his head toward the back of the platform, where a long pedramp descended from the arrival lobby of the Manarai Heights Spaceport.

For a moment Luke thought they were trying to draw his attention to the tall, broad-shouldered male just stepping onto the top of the pedramp. His face was decorated with a web of dark, awl-shaped lines radiating outward from an angry gaze. At first glance, the fellow appeared to be a member of the Lost Tribe attempting to follow Luke’s assault team in full vor’shandi face markings. But as the man descended, it grew apparent that his chiseled features were much too weathered and rugged to be those of a Sith from Kesh, and that the face markings were, in fact, permanent tattoos. Still, there was a darkness in the man’s Force aura that Luke found troubling, and he continued to think this was the object of Doran’s attention until the tattooed man suddenly met Luke’s gaze and nodded toward the other side of the pedramp.

Ascending the up-lane was a squad of GAS guards who had arrived on the last levtram. Their ill-fitting uniforms and bellicose demeanor identified them as new recruits, many of whom Chief of State Kem had rushed into service shortly after assuming office. Their sergeant was at the rear of the squad, his handsome

face showing in profile as he scrutinized a teenage couple descending the other side of the pedramp.

Luke saw no reason for the scrutiny, no mistakes in disguise or behavior to suggest that Ben Skywalker and Vestara Khai were anything other than the two young lovers they were clearly becoming. Their arms were entwined around each other's waists so tightly they seemed joined at the hip, and the affection they felt for each other was a bright heat in the Force. Both were dressed in the latest teenage fashion—sparkling capes over black exercise suits. They had even dyed their hair the same shade of yellow, and they wore it in equally outrageous styles, Ben's gelled into double head-fins and Vestara's lacquered into a straight fall that just brushed her shoulders.

And yet the GAS sergeant continued to stare as the pedramp carried them closer, his attention locking on Vestara. She did a good job of pretending to be unnerved by the scrutiny, allowing her gaze to continually drift back in his direction to see if he was still watching her. Then, when they had drawn to within a few meters of each other, she finally turned on him with a withering teenage sneer.

The sergeant merely smirked and held her gaze.

She looked away almost instantly, and Luke cursed beneath his breath. The recognition had been as plain to see in Vestara's shock as it had been in the sergeant's smirk, and that could only mean they knew each other from her time as an apprentice in the Lost Tribe of the Sith.

Luke glanced back toward the tattoo-faced stranger and found the man's gaze resolutely locked on the BAMR news holo above the platform. Whoever he was—perhaps one of Club Bwua'tu's more sinister operatives—he clearly had no wish to involve himself any deeper than he already had.

And that was fine with Luke. He used his eyes to signal Doran and Seha back onto the pedramp, then began to drift toward the rear of the platform, feeling more frustrated by the turn of events than alarmed. All of the other teams had reported a flawless infiltration, and now an unlikely coincidence threatened to eliminate the advantage of surprise. It reminded him of one of Nek Bwua'tu's favorite maxims: No battle plan survives the first ten minutes of battle.

As Luke drew near the pedramp, he unleashed a powerful burst of Force energy. The hologram of Kayala Fei dissolved into static, and every comlink on the platform began to chime for attention. In the same instant the Sith sergeant whirled around with narrowed eyes, obviously searching for the source of the tempest he had just felt in the Force. Then the overhead illumination panels began to sizzle out, and the sergeant's gaze found Luke just as the entire waiting area was plunged into darkness.

Luke felt the sergeant—the impostor-sergeant—reaching for him in the Force. He allowed the Sith to grab hold—then pulled, jerking the man off the pedramp. The sergeant let out a muffled cry of surprise, then activated his lightsaber in mid-flight.

The lightsaber was a big mistake. Totally unaware of their sergeant's true identity, one of the GAS recruits cried out in alarm, and another yelled, "Jedi!"

Blasterfire began to scream out from the pedramp, turning the darkened platform into a blinding storm of color and flashes. The impostor began to bat bolts back toward the GAS recruits, and shrieking passengers raced about in the dark, slamming into walls and one another.

Then the impostor landed less than two meters away from Luke. He whirled into a shoulder-high slash, simultaneously batting bolts aside and trying to behead Luke. With his own lightsaber still waiting for him at the rendezvous point, Luke could only drop to a crouch and spin into a sweeping heel kick, which the Sith avoided by leaping back out of range.

A gurgle of pain and astonishment suddenly spilled from the sergeant's mouth, then his lightsaber dropped to his side and deactivated. An instant later his body thumped to the platform, and he began to wail in agony.

"Everyone okay?" Vestara asked, using the wailing of her victim to mask her own voice.

"Yep," Ben answered. When he spoke again, his voice was moving closer to Vestara. "Are you?"

"I'm fine." Vestara's voice was warm. "How about you, old man?" "Not a scratch," Luke said, more surprised at Vestara's quick reaction than he should have been. How many times had she saved his life?

And Ben's? "Thanks . . . again." "My pleasure," Vestara said.

More blasterfire sounded from high up the pedramp, followed by the snap of breaking bones and the thud of bodies being thrown into walls. In the flashing light, Luke caught a glimpse of two athletic shadows—Doran and Seha—leaping over the separation barrier onto the down side of the pedramp.

"A levtram should be arriving any second," Luke said. "You two go ahead and board."

"You coming?" Ben asked out of the darkness.

"Right behind you." Luke reached out in the Force and found the boiling cloud of anguish that was the wounded impostor's Force aura. He hated the idea of killing any enemy in cold blood—even a Sith. But he couldn't take Sith prisoners, and leaving the man alive was not an option. He had recognized Vestara Khai, and if he survived to report that to his superiors, the Lost Tribe would realize that the Jedi had arrived. "I need to take care of something."

A soft female hand touched his arm. "No, you don't," Vestara said. "He's not going to tell anyone what he saw."

The lights of a levtram appeared in the transit lane, and Luke felt Doran and Seha reaching out to him as they scurried past. They were pouring reassurance into the Force, letting him know that the fight had been obscured by darkness. And that meant it would be difficult to confirm that Jedi had been involved. After all, no matter what the GAS recruits thought they had seen, anyone the Sith sent to investigate would quickly realize that the only lightsaber involved belonged to a member of the Lost Tribe.

Luke breathed a sigh of relief, then glanced toward the levtram boarding berth. In the brightening glow of its headlamps, he could already see the silhouettes of dozens of passengers lining up to escape the chaos on the platform. He turned back toward Vestara's voice. The recruits might not have anything useful to tell their superiors, but their wounded leader would.

"Go," he ordered her. "I won't be a second."

"No," Vestara replied. "Trust me. He won't live long enough to tell anyone anything."

Something small and glassy shattered on the platform at her feet, and Luke realized why the impostor was still screaming in anguish. Vestara had attacked him with a shikkar, a glass stiletto used by members of the Lost Tribe to express disdain for the victim of the assault. After stabbing an enemy, they would snap off the hilt and leave the blade buried deep in a vital organ, condemning the victim to a death as certain as it was painful.

“I had to use his own shikkar against him, so the High Lords will assume this is a vendetta killing.” Vestara tried to pull Luke toward the boarding berth. “But it won’t work if we’re still standing over the body when the lights come on.”

“We won’t be.” Luke pulled his arm free. As much as he admired Vestara’s quick thinking, there was a ruthlessness in her casual willingness to prolong the man’s anguish—a coldness—that made him wonder if she would ever be capable of becoming a true Jedi Knight. She still didn’t seem to understand that the way a person won a battle was far more important than whether she won it. “But there’s no need to make him suffer. Dead is dead.”

Luke reached out in the Force and found the sensation of burning cold that was the shikkar buried inside the Sith’s torso. It seemed to be only a few millimeters below the throbbing fire of the man’s heart, a placement likely to kill him a bit more slowly than Vestara believed. Luke touched the blade in the Force and tipped it upward just a millimeter—then heard the impostor gasp as it sliced into his heart.

Vestara’s hand tightened on Luke’s arm. “What happened? You didn’t—”

“It will look like the blade shifted,” Luke assured her. “Even the

High Lords will never know why. Who was he?”

“An old friend of my father’s,” Vestara said, sounding a bit sad and disappointed. “Master Myal.”

“I see,” Luke replied.

The levtram arrived at the boarding berth and opened its doors, and panicked passengers from the platform began to push inside without giving anyone on board a chance to debark. Luke took a moment to look around, then—when he did not see any trace of the tattooed man from the pedramp—he and Vestara pushed into the panicked crowd.

As they entered the glow from the lights inside the car, Luke was surprised to see that there were tears welling in Vestara’s eyes.

“What did he do to make you hate him so much?”

“Hate him?” Vestara looked up to meet Luke’s gaze. “I didn’t hate him. He was always very kind to me.”

Luke frowned. “Then you used his own shikkar because . . .” “Because I didn’t have mine, and we have a war to win.” Vestara rose onto her tiptoes and whispered into his ear. “I did it for the Jedi cause, Master Skywalker.”

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