

STAR WARS

KNIGHT ERRANT INFLUX

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Star Wars: Knight Errant - Influx **by John Jackson Miller**

"We ought to shoot you where you stand!"

The hooded human trudged over the hill, his boots raking through the mud. "We're here," he said, keeping his voice firm. There wasn't any point in apologizing. Not in this place -- or to these people. "Just show us where our ride is."

The Daimanite Sith warriors didn't lower their rifles. Even on rain-drenched Oranessian, Lord Daiman insisted that his troopers shine their silvery combat suits every day. This day, the planet seemed especially intent on testing their armor. Hailstones ricocheted off them in all directions, raising such a raucous din that the first speaker -- a burn-scarred woman in worker's overalls -- had to shout to be heard.

"You're not where you're supposed to be, pilot!" Stepping between the warriors, the woman flashed a hand-held light in the face of the newcomer, a rugged man in his fifties. "You were supposed to be here for flight prep twenty minutes ago," she yelled. "What in blazes were you doing down in the mud flats?"

"Our shuttle was damaged in the storm," the arrival said, pointing over the hillcrest. Two similarly cloaked companions arrived behind him, both flashing their identification badges. "We landed where we could. What does it matter? We're here." Ice blue eyes squinting, Vannar Treece surveyed the surroundings. Beyond the scabrous ground crew chief and the four sentries loomed a massive, multi-gunned Sith transport, waiting for its flight team. Identical transports were already lifting off in the distance, climbing over the towering nu-

clear furnaces that provided fuel for Daiman's vessels at this waystation. The flames atop the massive perma-concrete cones provided the only lighting for the area, forcing the ground crews to use their helmet-lights even at high noon -- which it was now.

Welcome back to Sith Space, Vannar thought. See the sights -- if you really want to.

Vannar took a step toward the waiting transport, only to be blocked by the ground team leader. Shining her light at his gloved hands, the age-worn woman flew into a rage. "Where's your dispatch case? You'd better not tell me you've come all the way here without it!"

Vannar's short female companion stepped forward. Hazel eyes flashing beneath her cowl, she raised her hand before the Sith crew chief. "We don't need a dispatch case."

"You sure as blazes do, little missy!" The ground crew leader ripped at the newcomer's hood, revealing a girl of eighteen, dark of hair and complexion. "I don't know what they're thinking, sending younglings out here as pilots. Surely Daiman can do better than you!"

Smoldering, the girl looked urgently to Vannar. He already knew. This wasn't working.

"This isn't right," the scarred woman said, stepping back toward the troopers. "One less transport in the convoy won't make any difference. Kill them."

The quartet of warriors raised their rifles. Vannar's companions leapt forward, light flashing in front of them. The girl reached the Daimanites first, cleaving the muzzle of the nearest warrior's weapon in two with her light-

saber. A fraction of a second later, she did the same to the sentry himself.

"What the--?" The crew chief stumbled backwards and pulled her blaster. "Jedi!"

Leaping out of her cloak, Kerra Holt pounced, vaulting over the second warrior's shoulders and diving for the boss. The comlink flew from the older woman's hand, burying itself in the Oranessian muck. Seeing the second sentry turning toward her, the young Jedi thrust her lightsaber backward into the crew chief's body. The woman's cry of pain was still on the air when the attacking sentry collapsed before Kerra, slain by the yellow lightsaber of Vannar Treece.

Vannar looked to the right to see Dorvin Eltrom, his other companion, standing over the corpses of the other two Daimanites. The Cerean removed his hood, raindrops spattering off his conical cranium. Vannar quickly extinguished his lightsaber and scanned the area. The hail had turned to a cooling rain, the downpour and darkness combining to screen their melee from the massive service hangar nearly a kilometer away. Timely, he thought. A good omen for a long mission's first step.

Hair dripping, the girl knelt over the dead crew chief's body. "'Little missy?' Is that how Sith swear these days?"

"I never know what to expect," Vannar said, chuckling to himself. Part of the novelty of this mission would be seeing Kerra's response to Sith space, territory she'd studied so long from afar. Kerra had been under his tutelage for most of the decade since he helped to evacuate her from this region. Now, she'd had her first

contact.

It was no surprise that Kerra's Force skills had gone undetected when she lived the Grumani sector. With the Republic abandoning much of the Outer Rim, Jedi scouts were no longer identifying potential students in those regions. As far as Vannar was concerned, it was almost better for Sith slaves never to learn about their potential Force talents, lest they be pressed into service as Sith adepts. Anything was better than that. But Kerra had escaped, and while Vannar would have wanted to remain a part of her life regardless of whether she had Jedi potential, the fact had made it possible for him to play an active role in her education.

She had taken to the training quickly. Her mind and body were all she had left in the galaxy; these, she committed fully to absorbing skills and knowledge. Vannar wasn't her Master in the formal sense; she didn't really have one. A lot of the regular ways of doing things had changed by necessity in recent times. With Knights needed at the front, there simply weren't enough teachers to go around; Padawans tended to apprentice for short periods under whoever was available. But Vannar, as much father as mentor, had made a point of following her progress. Once he began waging his own private war in Sith space, Kerra had begged to assist him in any way possible.

While there was no thought of taking the adolescent on any of his missions, Vannar found that teenage Kerra was helpful to his cause in innumerable ways. She was an organizational dynamo, helping him to transform his lofty visions into concrete actions. He had the connections and the personal magnetism necessary to attract followers and material support; Kerra made sure it got where it needed to go. He was sure she'd made it pos-

sible for him to mount one additional operation a year. None of those were grand missions to free her homeland -- Vannar wondered if anything could do that -- but it was making a contribution.

And now, years later, she was finally here.

"I'm guessing she's got what we're looking for," Kerra said, sorting through the items attached to the dead woman's belt. Finding a control device, she turned to face the huge transport and pressed a button. The massive forward hatchway groaned open, revealing a yawning cargo area inside.

As their intelligence reports had suggested, the giant transport was empty, waiting for a flight crew that would never arrive. Vannar raised his comlink to his mouth. "Objective vessel secured. Influx begin. Team may approach."

"Influx confirmed. Stand by."

Vannar's full Jedi team was stationed beyond the next ridge, with the wreckage of the small personnel shuttle they had intercepted during their approach to Oranesan from Republic space. Intercepting the flight crew and arriving in their stead had gotten Vannar and his companions close enough to the Sith transport landing zone to secure it. The big transport -- a Daimanite Heavy-Lift Starcrosier, if the information in the reports was accurate -- would be his team's ride for the rest of Operation Influx. Vannar slapped the side of the cargo door as Dorvin dashed up the steps, headed for his intended station in the cockpit. The ship would be a pretty big gift to a Republic Defense Ministry starved for information about what Daiman's forces were flying these days. But it was also completely secondary to the mis-

sion's main goal.

Kerra had selected the name for the operation, as she'd done for all of them since she was thirteen. It was kind of a good luck charm, Vannar thought. Her original idea had been to call this operation "Deadlock" until Vannar pointed out that, while stalemating the squabbling Sith Lords against one another was, indeed, one of their goals in this mission, it was a poor thing to root openly for. When the Sith battled the Republic, at least one side was usually looking to avoid civilian casualties. When Sith Lords fought each other, as Daiman and his hated brother Odion did, anyone caught between was in grave danger. Indeed, nihilist Odion lived to mow down innocents. Another sick Sith Lord.

Standing guard at the bottom of the ramp, he watched as Kerra scrunched her nose at the foul Oranessian air. It was the first time she hadn't been in motion since they left the jumping-off point in the Republic.

"Fly and die for Lord Daiman," Kerra said, looking back at the corpses. It was far from her first kill; Vannar knew that was years earlier. But she seemed troubled. "Why is anyone willing to do anything for Daiman?"

"He's the one in charge."

"He's mentally ill," Kerra said.

Vannar nodded. Anyone who imagined himself the creator of the universe, with all other organics simply soulless automatons placed here (by himself, of course) for his own amusement definitely had some issues to work out. Most of the warlords out here did. But Vannar wasn't really interested in the state of the health care system for Sith Lords.

Neither was Kerra, he saw, who changed the subject quickly. "What's a dispatch case?"

"No idea," Vannar said. The ground crew chief had asked them about it, earlier.

"It could be important," Kerra said, looking back at the dead woman's body, drenched in the mire.

"It could also be nothing," Vannar said. He knew what was coming on. Kerra was driven and detail-oriented -- and nothing drove her like realizing there was a detail she hadn't considered. He'd seen that send her into a spin in her younger days, but she'd been better about that lately. Still...

"Are you sure you're all right, Kerra?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry -- no first-day jitters."

"Oh, I wouldn't have expected them. You changed tactics pretty well with the crew chief back there," he said. Kerra's attempt at persuasion didn't seem to have worked, but he wouldn't hold that against her. She never liked using the Force to influence others. It was just part of her makeup. "Still, it is your first mission..."

"I'm fine," Kerra said, tromping off in the mud to watch for the arrival of the rest of the team. "I just didn't like posing as Sith."

Vannar laughed. "Without subterfuge, we wouldn't get very far," he called after her. "This isn't a place where you can be yourself. Not for very long, anyway!"