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LOST TRIBE OF THE SITH SECRETS

JOHN JACKSON MILLER

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Lost Tribe of the Sith #8

SECRETS

By John Jackson Miller

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Chapter One

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Like all Sith on Kesh during the Time of the Rot, the Hiltz family had ambition. It was just never very big on execution.

Varner Hiltz's father spent years earning the confidence of the leader of the local faction in Beray. He took great care in selecting the shikkar blade intended for his liege's back. But the elder Hiltz used somewhat less care in fastening the dagger's sheath, and the glass blade fell from his belt and buried itself in his ankle. He was dead in a gangrenous month, a mercifully short time to have to endure the nickname "Slippery Hiltz."

Unfazed, the widow Hiltz soldiered on, targeting the faction leader for seduction the very next week. Minions carefully delivered her to the leader's private bedchambers in a massive ceremonial urn. Unfortunately, the lid was stubborn, and no one had told her the leader was spending the month campaigning in the high country. However, she did achieve her surprise, if the horror of the cleaning servants counted.

Varner Hiltz had lived longer than either of them, rising quietly—if inoffensively—to a position of responsi-

bility within the Tribe. He'd worked every day in the greatest palace on the mainland—and had viewed Yaru Korsin's Testament not once, but twice. He'd ventured closer than anyone had in years to the Temple that held *Omen*, the ship that had brought Korsin and the Lost Tribe to Kesh.

And now he was about to be killed by a plant.

"Jaye! Jaye!" Hilts called, struggling upside down within a thorny web of vines. Every motion caused the bonds to tighten around the old man's limbs. He spotted his assistant looking down at him from atop the green-tressed stonework. "Jaye, cut me down!"

Black eyes blinked. "With what, Caretaker?"

"With anything!"

"Oh!" The purple-faced Keshiri vanished for a moment before reappearing with his satchel. "The lightsaber you found!"

"Whoa, no!" Hilts flared the fingers of his free hand in panic. Predictably, Jaye was holding the weapon by the wrong end. "You'll kill yourself turning it on!"

Jaye knelt closer to where Hilts was dangling. "Should I pass it down to you, then?"

"No. Look, go find a sharp rock," Hilts said, settling as best he could in his knotty prison. "I'll just . . . hang around here."

Hilts listened to the Keshiri skitter off and cursed himself for his wild scheme. No one had dared approach the mountain Temple in centuries—and now a sixty-year-old archivist and his cowardly clerk would do it? During a week, no less, when every settlement on the continent of Keshtah roiled with riotous convulsions? Hilts shook his head, ignoring the scratches from the vine wrapped beneath his chin. He'd been mad to make the journey!

And the journey had been maddening. Hilts had returned first to his museum in the capital city of Tahv,

where he'd long preserved the ancient maps of *Omen's* Temple. But pillagers had struck the palace, burning every scrap of parchment in the archives. Everything breakable had been broken. The sight of the smashed Sandpipes had driven Jaye to tears.

Hilts had been prepared for that. The self-destructive rampage had been going nonstop since the Tribe's discovery that their ancestors hadn't been conquerors, but slaves to aliens. Nonetheless, the sight of so many human corpses lying in the streets had unnerved him. No Sith saw any single life as precious, but their species as a whole certainly was. The survivors of *Omen* had been so few in number in the beginning. How many generations' increase had been lost? Could they ever recover?

The forbidden Temple might hold the solution—but Hilts had to get there first, avoiding the roving bands of Sith thugs on killing sprees. It was why he'd brought Jaye along. Keshiri families that once worshipped humans now feared them; none would have granted him shelter. But any Sith who would travel with meek Jaye Vuhld was probably not someone on a murderous rampage. They'd taken refuge in Keshiri shacks in daylight hours, making their way west at night.

The journey was long, but necessary: the Temple sat atop the Takara Mountains at the northern tip of a long peninsula running parallel to the mainland. It would have been a short hop over the inlet for an uvak—but nothing could get Hilts onto the back of one of the flying beasts. They'd taken the long way along the southern coast before turning up the hostile spit of land. There was no shelter here, nor sustenance; just as well, as Hilts had tasted only his own stomach acid since the riots began. Finally, they'd arrived at the base of The Blocks, massive granite barriers lodged in a narrow pass by Nida Korsin to prevent anyone from accessing

the forbidden heights on foot. With each cube ten meters tall, they gave the impression of a staircase for the gods—a formidable obstacle, indeed. But sometime in the intervening centuries, a hardy foliage had taken root in the stones' crevices—strong vines, providing a way up.

Or a way to hang upside down until you hemorrhage and die, Hilts thought. He looked up. Where was that blasted Keshiri?

A light flashed in the sky. Weary eyes focused. A reflection? But from what?

“Here, Caretaker!”

No sooner did Hilts hear the squeaky voice than he felt a violent tug, and then he was being dragged up the side of The Blocks by his legs. “Jaye! What are you doing?”

The Keshiri groaned, pulling on a clutch of vines wrapped around his spindly fingers. Hilts righted himself and clambered atop the barrier, where he spent a full minute gasping for breath. Rolling over, he saw Jaye had found a series of postholes in the stone surface. The base for some scaffold centuries earlier, each hole was large enough to accommodate a Keshiri foot, allowing the frail clerk some mechanical advantage as he hauled his master up the side.

“This . . . is the last barrier,” Jaye said, wiping blood from his palms and looking behind them. A modest scramble-down led to an open trail up the gorge—and to the Temple mountain, farther above.

But Hilts's attention was higher still. “Look there!” In the eastern sky, an uvak beat its wings as it arced downward toward the Temple. Hilts squinted. There was a rider aboard. Another flash of light—a reflection, like before. On metal-poor Kesh, that usually meant one thing: the handle of a lightsaber.

Hilts frowned and looked toward the Temple. “We'd

better get going.” Standing, he pulled the remaining shreds of vine from his portly frame. With renewed purpose, he took a step forward—

—directly into a posthole.

“*Caretaker!*”

The granite felt cool on Hilts’s face. “I’ve decided, Jaye . . . that first . . . we’re going to rest here . . . for a while . . .”

The Keshiri didn’t argue.

“You must finish the job of removing the Tribe from this mountain. Our destiny, for now, lies in ruling the part of Kesh that lives . . .”

So Yaru Korsin had instructed his daughter in the Testament, and his decree had been followed. Followed, and respected, by a people that respected nothing. Hilts marveled as he stepped from the rocky path onto the windswept stone of the site. Sith would look for any edge they could find in their squabbles, yet none had ever returned here, to his knowledge. It could have been superstition, but Hilts thought it more likely that they understood the futility of returning. What advantage could be found here that Korsin and the other passengers of *Omen* wouldn’t already have taken?

And yet, that was his quest. Thousands of meters below, all across the continent to the east, his civilization was in the process of expunging itself. Twenty warring factions had already destroyed the Sith state. But the revelation of their common—and lowly—origin had left every human soul detached and despondent. A thousand-year sclerosis could be survived, but not another week of self-mutilation.

What can I find here that no one else has? Hilts wondered anew as he looked to the twin spires flanking the royal residence far ahead. Vanity had led him to this,

surely. But maybe it wasn't such a crazy dream. Anyone else would have looked here for a weapon, some ancient technology from the stars. Hilts was looking for a message. Something Korsin had hinted at in his dying words, something that could lead the Tribe back onto a singular path. "*The true power is behind the throne,*" Korsin had said. "*Should disaster befall—remember that . . .*"

Jaye stepped fearfully onto the southern terrace of the holy place. Shabby stone buildings lined the sides, worn down by wind, sun, and neglect. "It's bigger than I imagined, Caretaker."

"That's fine," Hilts said, ignoring his sore ankle as he strode confidently ahead. "I know where we are."

And he did. He didn't have the maps now, but they'd been with him for years. He'd committed to memory this lower terrace, where the service personnel had lived. North past the uvak stables were the steps to the middle terrace, with its training academy, dormitories, storehouses, and wardroom. Up more stairs would be the outdoor colonnade where Yaru Korsin had held his public court. Then, finally, the quadrangle of the main plaza, formed by the royal residence to the west, the watchtower and guardhouse to the east, and the Temple dome to the north. Part of the upper plaza actually sat atop *Omen's* honored place of rest; the structure had been built around and atop the damaged ship, to protect it.

Just thinking about *Omen* brought more spring to Hilts's step. He didn't even blanch when he saw the multitude of stairs to the middle terrace. Anyone looking at the edifice from afar would assume it had been built by a culture that loved climbing.

Indeed, it had been.

"Come on, my boy," Hilts said. "Keep up the pace."

* * *

The body was freshly killed. One quick, inartful slash to the throat had been the end of the uvak. Hilts studied the smelly beast baking in the noon sun. It surely was the creature he'd seen approaching—slain here, right in the middle of the terrace.

"I guess the stables didn't suit our visitor," Hilts said.

Jaye covered behind him. "Do . . . do you want the weapon?"

Hilts looked around, feeling through the Force. Something was here. "Yes," he said. "Give it to me."

Jaye fumbled through the knapsack and produced the lightsaber. Hilts hadn't owned one as Caretaker—what was the point?—but on their way out of Tahv, he'd pilfered one from the corpse of a massive warrior. He never knew what he might need.

"Do you know how to use it?" Jaye asked.

"Sure. Just get them to stand right in front of me, and I'll turn it on."

Levity didn't lift the unease. Hilts wasn't practiced in the use of the Force for defense, either. He'd had the same training as a boy that other Tribe members had, but apart from deflecting chunks of falling aqueduct, he'd had little use for the Force's physical manifestations in recent decades.

Still, he knew a bad feeling when he felt it—and this wasn't more acid in his throat. In fact, he recognized this particular sting . . .

"The wardroom," Hilts said, sensing the source of the twinge up ahead. "Stay outside. If you hear trouble, run and never return."

There may have been no statues of Seelah Korsin in the palace in Tahv, but the figure in the bas-relief carved outside the hospital was unmistakable. As Yaru Korsin's wife, Seelah was the Mother of the Tribe; but before that, she'd been Devore Korsin's wife, and the mother of a traitor. Hilts had never seen Seelah in any

depictions, but looking at the smooth skin, the coiffed hair, and the perfect figure in the marble, he knew he'd seen her twin—and recently.

“Iliana Merko,” he called, stepping through the doorway. “It’s Caretaker Hilts. I know you’re here. I think we should talk.”

Chapter Two

“Iliana? Iliana?”

Hilts gaped as he saw the figure in the shadows. The last two weeks had been hard on everyone on Kesh, but he barely recognized the leader of the Sisters of Seelah. Iliana sat huddled in the cold corner of the dark store-room, gently caressing a skull.

She sobbed gently, not registering his presence. Hilts looked back nervously to the outer room and its rows of marbled surgical tables—and then down to the lightsaber in his hand. He clipped it back to his belt. Iliana Merko was a dangerous faction leader, but the figure before him was something else. Her once-bright hair was dirty and tangled; her once-flawless skin was smudged with ash and blood—and amazingly, with something he’d never thought he’d see on her face: tears.

“She died here,” Iliana said, bringing the skull to her forehead. “Alone.”

Hilts looked down. Here in the cool darkness, some portion of a skeleton had survived, clumped in a corner. Realizing who Iliana thought the skull belonged to, he spoke cautiously. “How do you know it’s Seelah?”

“I know,” Iliana whispered. Opening her gloved hand, she revealed a ring bearing the Korsin family seal. A Tapani commitment band.

“They just left her here,” Hilts said, kneeling to look at the remains. The femurs appeared whole, but only tiny shards remained of the bones beneath. Time hadn’t done this, he thought—and as he noticed the cane nearby, history fell into place. He’d known that Seelah’s betrayal had been exposed, and that Nida Korsin had punished her mother. But the records never said whether it was exile or death. Now The Blocks down below made sense. The barrier would keep a crippled Seelah here as much as it kept others out. “Exile,” he said quietly.

“She was betrayed!” Iliana angrily blinked back tears. “She deserved better than this!”

“And she’d still be dead, whatever memorial she had.” Watching the woman gently return the skull to the floor, Hilts rose and stepped back. “You’re alone here. What happened to . . .”

“The Sisters of Seelah?” Iliana kept her face to the wall as she composed herself. “We fought hard when the factions fell upon one another. But then we fell apart—just like everyone else.” She shook her head and looked back with golden eyes shot with red. “We had nothing to follow. Seelah was born a slave!”

“I guess so.”

“I know it,” she said, balling her gloved fists in anger. “As a girl, I once had a Force vision of Seelah. She asked me to avenge her.”

Hilts thought about the bas-relief outside. “So that’s how you knew how she wore her hair.”

“But what I never told anyone is what she was *doing* in the vision,” she said. “There was this *monster*, this red monster, looking just like that Ravilan in the message. And she was washing its feet!” She lashed out with the Force, shattering the precious bones against the wall. “*Its stinking, disgusting feet!*”

Hilts nodded. Yes, he’d want to be avenged for something like that.

Iliana pushed past him and stomped into the ward-room. “Apparently some of the other Sisters had had similar visions.” She rubbed her eye clean of a lingering tear, and then flicked it away, as if it were only grit. “We couldn’t stand together long after that.”

Among the marble biers, Iliana paused. In a flash, her hand went to her lightsaber. “There’s someone out there,” she snapped, eyes on the doorway. “*They’re here!*”

Hilts hurried into the room, past her. “It’s okay. He’s with me.” He called out for his assistant. Jaye timidly appeared from outside.

Iliana lowered her lightsaber and rolled her eyes. “The figurer? The world’s coming to an end and you’re still keeping pets!”

“I’ve got to have something to take care of,” Hilts said. “It’s my job, after all.” He interposed himself between the woman and Jaye. “But what did you mean, ‘They’re here?’”

“They’re looking for me,” Iliana said.

“Who?”

“Everyone. Korsin Bentado. What’s left of Force Fifty-seven. Those crazy Golden Destiny people,” she said. “Everyone who’s left. All the final grudges are being settled before we all die.”

“They followed you?”

“They will,” Iliana said. “I took pieces out of enough of them before I left. I was flying west the last time their trackers saw me. There’s nothing farther west than this.”

Hilts twirled Jaye around and shoved him back toward the door. “We don’t have much time,” he said. “Follow me—I’ll explain as we go.”

The tall woman glared defiantly at him. “I’m not your little clerk. Why should I follow *you* anywhere?”

The Caretaker stared up at her. “Because we may

need help to find what we're looking for—and you're at a dead end. You said so yourself." He gestured toward the exit. "Meanwhile, I actually have a plan."

Iliana breathed deeply and stepped toward the exit. "I'm sure it's a foolish plan," she said as she passed.

"My, you're a hateful thing," Hilts said. "Do you come by this naturally?"

She looked down at him and gave a ruffled smile. "Forged myself in Seelah's spirit."

The woman whose skull you just kissed—and then smashed against a wall, he wanted to say. Hilts smirked. Iliana had chosen Seelah to idolize, but anyone nasty would have done. He'd never trust her—Sith never trusted anyone, anyway—but he was beginning to understand her. "Make for the portal up ahead," he said. "At the least, you'll see something no one alive has seen . . ."

Hilts watched as Iliana traced the contours of the dark metal with her fingertips. So something *did* exist that could impress her.

"It's wonderful," she said.

Omen sprawled beneath the arched ceilings of the Temple, gently lit by the glow rods Jaye was igniting. It had long been said that *Omen* resembled a lanvarok, an ancient Sith wrist-weapon. But no one on Kesh had ever seen a lanvarok—nor had anyone seen *Omen* for centuries. The founders had done their best to preserve it, using only polished stonework around it and limiting the number of entrance passageways, yet the battered vessel still wore a layer of dust.

And battered it was. Even ripped open in places. What did it take to soar in the stars? Hilts wondered. What kind of protection? Quite a bit, judging from the twisted tongues of metal half peeled from the hull. And so much metal! More in one place than anyone alive had ever seen,

despite the fact that much of the precious material currently in circulation had been scavenged from fragments of *Omen* left on the mountainside after its crash.

What a calamity that must have been, Hilts thought, observing its size. It was a wonder both ship and mountain had survived.

Iliana claimed the first steps inside for herself, as he had known she would. That was fine with Hilts: he was content to follow along with one of the glow rods Jaye had brought. Seeing the Keshiri quaking timidly on the marble floor outside the hatch, Hilts waved him in.

“It’s a sacrilege to be here,” Jaye stammered. “I’m a Keshiri, not worthy—”

“Forget about that. We need more light.”

Hilts found Iliana in a forward section of the vessel. There, as everywhere else aboard, *Omen* had seen a catastrophe. The ceiling overhead was bowed and buckled. Forward windows were shattered, their panes twisted outward. Had something knocked them out from within? Hilts had no idea.

Nor had he any notion of what he was looking at on either side. Smooth, ebon panels alternated with ruptured ones, exposing the crisped, wiry guts of the ship. Hilts studied one, and then another, recognizing the Sith characters but not all of the terms. *Telemetry*. *Hyperspace*. *Astrogation*. They read as magic words to him. Scholars with the Tribe had attempted to keep the knowledge of space travel alive, but that had faltered like everything else in recent centuries.

Iliana tapped repeatedly at the black panels, as if pressing harder would bring the ship to life. *Yes, she’d be looking for a way offworld*, Hilts thought. *Like everyone else*.

The woman slammed her fist on a panel, cracking it. “Nothing works here!”

“No,” Hilts said. “One thing works.” At the rear of

the bridge, Jaye knelt, spellbound, before a gently glowing display. Sith numbers appeared on its face, one melting into the next as seconds passed. It was the device their beloved Sandpipes had been designed to emulate: *Omen's* chrono.

"It's still working," Iliana said, stupefied.

Hilts shrugged. Everything aboard the vessel required some kind of energy; maybe the timekeeping device didn't use much. He stepped closer and touched the hypnotized Keshiri's shoulder. "Today the day you thought it was, Jaye?"

Jaye's mouth opened, but no sound emerged. Finally, his voice dry, he responded. "Yes. The Sandpipes were off by eight days. Just like my theory . . ."

Hearing the words trail off, Hilts looked fondly at his clerk. "Very good, Jaye. I'm impressed." He and Jaye had spent their entire lives studying big questions, knowing they'd never learn whether their solutions were correct. Here Jaye had seen his calculations vindicated, once and for all. It struck Hilts as strange. It was wrong to think that Sith and Keshiri could aspire to the same goals—and yet he and Jaye had. And now Jaye had his answer.

Hilts felt a sudden pang of jealousy and averted his eyes to the center of the room. What *he* was looking for wasn't here.

"Was this where the command chair went?" Iliana pointed to a bare platform. "The thing you came here to find?"

"I always knew it wouldn't be inside *Omen*," Hilts said, stepping toward the dais. "I figured you just had to have a look around." It was well known from the Keshiri paintings that Korsin had removed his captain's seat to the colonnade on days when he received visitors. It certainly wasn't out there now—nor here.

Iliana looked anguished. "I don't understand. With

such a ship, why did Korsin move everyone off the mountain, to Tahv?" She loomed over Hilts as he squatted beside the empty spot. "Maybe *their* generation couldn't have repaired it—but to stop work entirely and leave? I was right. Korsin *was* a fool!"

"He wanted the Tribe to commit to their lives on Kesh," Hilts said. "He knew better than anyone what shape the ship was in. They weren't going anywhere. You saw the room outside us—there's no way *Omen* can leave unless they dismantle the place. They built the shelter around it." He stepped to the gaping hole forward and looked out at the stone walls beyond. "This isn't a stable for an uvak, Iliana. It's a *tomb*."

Remembering the face from the Testament, Hilts imagined Korsin's voice describing his strategy. Korsin would have ordered the enclosure to protect it from the elements, and the other castaways would have agreed. But once the Different Ones—Ravilan's grotesque people—were out of the way, Korsin would have increasingly turned the survivors' attention toward ruling Kesh. That was the best they could hope for. Sealing the Temple and leaving the mountain ended the temptation.

Until now.

Movement caught his eye, and he gasped.

"Someone's outside!"

Hilts ducked beneath the shattered viewport. Lights outside cast long shadows against the curved walls. Iliana violently shoved Jaye to the deck and dashed forward to join Hilts. The two carefully peered out as figures entered the Temple bearing glow rods.

The Caretaker counted eight newcomers that he could see, but he could hear the voices of others. Some he recognized instantly. There was bald and burly Korsin Bentado, recognizable as the leader of the Korsinites but badly damaged from the past week's vio-

lence, having lost his left hand somewhere. Three other figures wore the once-shiny tunics of the Golden Destiny, the faction obsessed with the Tribe's offworld origins; their flashy uniforms had lost their luster.

And one looked familiar. "I know that man," Hilts whispered to Iliana, pointing to a young blond warrior. Edell Vrai had been one of the few regular visitors to the museum, fascinated by Korsin-era architecture as well as tales of *Omen*, a topic he could go on and on about. Hilts expected Edell to be delighted to see the spacecraft of his dreams at last. And yet the figure outside wore a sour expression.

"It sickens me," he heard Edell say. "This—this *thing*—is nothing but a carrier for *chattel*!"

Hilts nearly stood at Edell's words, but Iliana pushed him back down. Together they listened as Edell and his companions, some from different factions, spoke with disdain of the damaged starship.

"A carrier for *vermin*, you mean," another said.

"It began our race's imprisonment here," Bentado added. "It is an omen—but for despair."

"You're right," Edell said, his words echoing throughout the chamber. "*We have to destroy it.*"

Hilts and Iliana looked at each other, stunned. Outside there were rousing calls of agreement, from people who'd never agreed about anything.

"It is right," Bentado's deep voice boomed. "A last, defiant stab. Our people will end—but they will end with a fist clenched in hatred against fate."

"I know just how to do it, too," Edell replied. "One last act of cooperation. We will succeed."

Hilts felt sick as he heard boots on the floor outside, tromping toward the exit. He'd expected the newcomers to try to board *Omen*, as they had. But this was something else. Had the rush toward self-destruction claimed everyone's senses?

Yes, he thought. *Yes, it has.*

“They can’t destroy anything this size,” Iliana said, her voice raspy as she looked around the bridge. “There are no explosives left. What are they going to do, stab it with lightsabers?”

Hilts didn’t know—but he knew not to doubt Edell. “He’ll find a way,” he said, rising. He grabbed her arm. “Quickly! We have to find what Korsin left behind, before it’s too late!”

Chapter Three

Edell had been thinking about this plan for a while, Hilts realized as he peeked through the narrow window of the dome. Situated atop the roof of the Temple, the fancy cupola offered a clear view of the main quadrangle—and from here, Hilts had observed all the activity in wonder.

With the sun setting over the vast western ocean, the Sith warriors' workday was just beginning. At least thirty were here, some in the garb of their different factions; others had abandoned their partisan dress altogether. Many had arrived while Hilts and his two companions awaited their opportunity to leave *Omen* without notice, and all were now engaged in a massive engineering project. Or, rather, a demolition project. Warriors clung to the sides of the giant watchtower, looping long leather cables around the supports. The tower was a marvel, improbably top-heavy with observation decks high aloft; it wouldn't take enormous effort to bring it down.

Hilts saw exactly where it was intended to land. Edell stood on the plaza, directing warriors on how to position their uvak teams. With the beasts on the ground and in the air pulling the cords in unison, Edell clearly expected the heaviest deck of the stone tower to land right on top of the chamber that held *Omen*.

“That room was well constructed,” Iliana said, looking over his shoulder. “Could this harm it?”

“It’ll crack like an uvak egg under a hammer,” Hilts muttered. He knew Edell—intense, but studious. Edell understood how the classical structures had been built, and he’d seen *Omen’s* lair up close. “They may not blow the ship up, but they’ll definitely bury it.”

Iliana sneered. “It was already dead and buried.”

Hilts could only shake his head and stare. There were so many out there, all working at their common, destructive cause. He even recognized Neera, deformed leader of Force 57, throwing her enormous muscled back into the work alongside the other warriors.

“Aren’t some of those your Sisters of Seelah with her?” Hilts squinted into the creeping darkness. “Don’t you lead them? Won’t they listen to you?”

“Haven’t you seen what’s been going on lately? No one follows anyone now,” Iliana said, shrugging. “But they’ll work together in this. People need a mission.”

Hilts blinked. The unity he’d hoped for—in the cause of crushing all hope. He studied Iliana. “*You* could live—by joining them.”

“Not likely. Who do you think took Bentado’s hand?”

From behind in the anteroom, a loud click. “I’ve worked the latch, Caretaker,” Jaye said, rising. The massive inner door to the rotunda groaned open for the first time in centuries.

“Small fingers,” Hilts said. “Helps to have *someone* following you.” Jaye waited for his master and Iliana to enter before following, fresh glow rod in hand.

Where *Omen’s* home below had a humongous occupant, nothing stood in this smaller rotunda but a single chair beside a brazier. Hilts stepped eagerly toward it. Yes, it was what he thought it was. The command chair. *The Grand Lord’s throne.*

Close enough to touch the seat, Hilts paused and looked around. It was a strange place for it, alone here in this room atop the Temple. He squinted into the void above. Jaye's single glow rod wasn't enough to light the place. "Do you see something up there?"

"I think I know," Iliana said. Grabbing Jaye, she violently ripped the tunic from the startled clerk's back. Without a word, she balled the cloth up and tossed it into the brazier. With the help of the flint tool chained to the side, she soon had a small fire going. Smoke wafted up to slits near the ceiling apex.

Made chilly, Jaye fretted. "Someone outside might see the smoke."

"I don't care," Iliana said. "I've got nothing left but to fight it out."

Hilts looked at his aide and shrugged. It did get surprisingly cold up here—cold enough to discomfit even a traveler from the stars. "Just stay close to the fire," he said, before glancing upward.

For a moment he thought he saw the stars outside. Then with another look, he realized that he had—in a way.

"A planetarium!"

Embedded in the rounded ceiling were crimson stones, glowing warmly as the fire below flickered. One by one, he picked out the stars of Kesh's summer sky—and saw many smaller ones he wasn't familiar with.

"Are those Lignan crystals up there?" Iliana asked.

Hilts laughed. "Why not?" *Omen's* crew would have had plenty of them.

He turned his attention back to the chair, the missing piece from the starship's bridge. It wasn't hard to imagine Yaru Korsin here, sitting at night, contemplating his people's return to the stars. He thought again about Korsin's line from the Testament. What was behind the throne? Nothing here that he could see—just empty

wall. Was it something in the star map? No, that was above.

Indifferent to the display overhead—and to any sense of history—Iliana flopped onto the chair, throwing her booted legs over the armrest.

Hilts gawked at her. “You’re going to sit *there*?”

“I’m not going to. I am.” Casually, she unclipped her lightsaber and tossed it from hand to hand. “Those people outside will either bring the Temple down underneath us, or they’ll find us here. If I’m going to wait, I’m going to sit.”

“Whatever.”

“You know, this room is pretty useless,” Iliana said, cracking her wrists. “It only shows the sky at one time of the year.”

Hilts nodded. It was more decorative than useful. But his thoughts were still on the chair—and Korsin’s Testament.

“Do you have a knife?”

“Of course,” Iliana said, using the Force to whip a glass blade from a compartment in her boot. The weapon paused in midair, hovering near Hilts’s face.

“Thanks a lot,” he said, taking it and kneeling behind the chair.

Behind the throne. Tentatively, almost fearfully, Hilts slid the tip of the shikkar into the tough skin of the back of the seat. The Sith didn’t outfit their ships for comfort, he saw—but even the rough hide of the command chair was no match for the Keshiri blade. Careful to cut no more than he had to, Hilts withdrew the knife and slipped his hand inside the furnishing.

Continuing to sit, Iliana watched the old man fish around aimlessly, his arm up to his elbow inside the chair. “You look like a fool,” she said.

He felt like one, too—and was about to stop when his hand reached the level of the armrests. “There’s

something in here,” he said. “Sewn inside!” He drew his hand out quickly, ripping the upholstery more as he did.

The glass vial contained a single rolled-up sheet of transparent film—flimsier than the thinnest parchment the Keshiri had ever crafted. As he brought it closer to the failing fire, figures began to take shape.

“What’s that writing in?” Iliana asked, suddenly interested.

“It’s the old cant of the Tapani—the language of the humans under Sith rule,” Hilts said. “The language of Korsin’s mother.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I studied it—and *she wrote it.*” He nudged Iliana’s legs off the armrest and brought the film as close to the fire as he dared. “Takara Korsin. Korsin’s father left her for Jariad’s mother.” His eyes scanned the page. He’d spent the previous year studying a text on the language. Slowly, surely, he worked it out.

“It’s marked personal,” he said. “Brought by a trusted courier to Korsin.” Swallowing, he recited:

“I know you tire of hearing of my visions, my son. If you do as you always have, I expect you won’t read this until your mission is well under way. I’m pleased that you’ve been given command of an important assignment for Naga Sadow—even as it grieves me, as it does all our kind, to know that your victory is for his glory alone.”

“Yes, I’ve had another of the visions. I saw our descendants ruling a great people one day—free from the Red Sith. We will have something that will be our own. When they are guided well, I see new horizons opening up for our people—new places to conquer.”

“Yaru, only you are wise enough to guide our people. Devore will be his own ruin; I sense strength in his cho-

sen mate, Seelah, but that is not enough. You alone know how to manage the ambitions of many—how to shape your anger, and sculpt it to fit the purpose ahead.

“You do have a purpose. Take care. If you guide our people well, they will always have a mission.”

Hilts drew the letter back from the fire and stared. He didn't even notice Jaye's cautious, reverential approach, behind him. “Look at the time imprint,” the shivering Keshiri said, pointing over Hilts's shoulder to figures along the edge. “He received this right before *Omen* left for Phaegon.”

Hilts nodded as he considered the words. No, Korsin wouldn't have wanted anyone to read the message while he was still working for Naga Sadow—hence the hiding place. But for a quarter of a century, Korsin had kept the message always near to him. “I always wondered how he found the strength to go on,” he said.

“Cheerleading claptrap from a doting mother,” Iliana said. “Even Korsin couldn't have believed this nonsense.”

“Hush, girl.” He glared at her. “She was *wise*. She saw what we would build. And this proves that our people weren't destined to live as slaves forever. We have a future.” Hilts stood suddenly and started toward the exit. “Those people out there. If I could read it to them—”

“They won't listen,” Iliana said. “It's too far gone. I know *I* wouldn't listen.”

Hilts stopped before reaching the doorway. He looked at the letter again and frowned.

Iliana was right. The sentiments were a balm to the spirits—but the people needed a specific cause. Like knocking down a tower and destroying a spaceship.

“What cause *would* you rally to?” he asked, rolling the letter up and putting it back into its tube.

Iliana answered without a second thought. “Myself.”
“Hmmm.”

He could hear more shouts outside, past the ante-room. The wrecking crew would be farther along now. Hilts and his companions couldn’t stay. Not here, not far atop *Omen’s* resting place—

“Wait,” Hilts said, looking to the floor.

Jaye shivered beside the cooling brazier. “What is it, Caretaker?”

“This message—this isn’t what Korsin meant.” He looked to the chair where Iliana still sat. “Remember the quote. The true power is *behind* the throne. Not *in* the throne. Not behind the one who sits in it!”

“You want to argue semantics now?” Iliana shook her head. “No, no. You’re looking for precision in the words of a dying fool—”

“A fool smart enough to conquer a whole native people—and to train a daughter for war under everyone’s noses. No,” Hilts said, rolling the tube with the missive over in his hand. “This message was important to Korsin, but it isn’t what he meant.” He looked back up to the ceiling, where the false stars had faded with the fire. “*None of this* is right.”

Iliana shifted in the seat. “What do you mean?”

“This place. I can’t believe Korsin spent all his time here,” he said. “You’re correct. This map above—it’s not practical. It’s decorative. Korsin’s focus was on building an empire on Kesh. He wasn’t sitting around looking at the stars!” Hilts stalked around the room. “And Korsin. You saw how he looked in the recording.”

“I remember,” Iliana said, interest growing as the Caretaker grew more animated. “He was bleeding to death.”

“The legend says that Korsin was mortally wounded outside, on the western slope, and made his way back to his chair to record the Testament.”

“Back here,” Jaye said.

“No!” Hilts thought back on the shimmering message he’d seen days earlier. No, there hadn’t been any background in the image. They had been able to see the chair, but no more. “We *assumed* that he recorded it here, when we found the chair. But look how high we are. Yaru couldn’t have made it up all those stairs with a gaping chest wound. I’m *healthy*, and I nearly didn’t!”

Iliana stood and looked back at the seat. “I don’t get it. They moved his chair here after he died?” She shrugged. “Why? And where would he have gone instead?”

Hilts stewed for several moments before his aide, now huddled on the floor near the brazier for warmth, piped up. “Perhaps there’s something in the chamber beneath *Omen*.”

“*Beneath*?” Hilts blinked in the near-darkness of the rotunda. “There isn’t any chamber beneath *Omen*. They built the Temple over the ship where it came to rest.”

“But the ship landed on a slope,” Jaye said, “and what we saw was completely level. They shored it up with stonework.” He fidgeted, counting on purple fingertips before looking up. “We entered the Temple through an open passage at the twenty-third step on the staircase from the middle terrace. But we passed a sealed door at the *seventh* step.” The little Keshiri crossed his arms with satisfaction. “Another chamber, at the base of *Omen*’s support structure.”

Iliana rolled her eyes. “He *counted the steps*?”

“He counted the steps,” Hilts said, smirking.

His momentarily improved mood was cut short by a mild shudder, reverberating through the floor. The impromptu allies outside were getting closer to their goal. “What are you waiting for? Let’s go!”

Chapter Four

It hadn't seen a visitor in nearly two thousand years—and it didn't look like it had seen much traffic when people had lived here, either. Unlike *Omen's* resting place above them and the celestial dome atop it all, this lower level wasn't a shrine, and it wasn't for show. The narrow hallway through the darkness lacked holders for glow rods, and compared with the ornate doors elsewhere, the entrance to the octagonal room was positively modest.

Hilts and his companions had entered the catacombs after slipping past confusion on the plaza. Cables had snapped, temporarily thwarting Edell's plan to collapse the tower onto *Omen*—but Hilts knew they'd figure it out sooner or later. *He* had to figure out what Korsin had meant sooner.

Which was difficult in the dark.

“Find some more glow rods,” he ordered. Jaye nodded and scampered out.

Between the few they'd brought and the light from his and Iliana's lightsabers, they'd been able to recognize the room's main feature. A massive stone-carved map of Keshtah, their continent, dominated one of the walls; small Lignan crystals had been worked into the design to indicate settlements. It was the planetary

equivalent of the sky map, upstairs. One wall had the doorway; the other six held only large, blank slabs of slate the same size as the Keshtah map.

“I don’t like being here,” Iliana said, gripping her lightsaber tightly. “This is a dead end.”

“Dead is right,” Hilts said, looking up. “Yaru Korsin died here. I can feel it.”

Iliana’s eyes narrowed for a moment. “I feel it, too,” she said. “It feels good.”

Hilts ignored her, kneeling at the center of the room and bringing his lightsaber close to the floor. “Ruts,” he said, feeling the stone surface. “Four of them. This is where Yaru Korsin’s chair was kept at night.” He looked to the wall map. “And that’s what it faced.”

“Why wouldn’t they leave Korsin’s chair here after he died?”

“Maybe Nida wanted anyone who entered in the future to think that Yaru spent all his time contemplating the cosmos—and their return.”

Iliana sneered. “Then maybe she should have punched some windows in the room where they kept the ship.”

Hilts stood and walked to the map. Yes, it made sense. This wasn’t a fancy place—it was a place for work, where Korsin plotted the Tribe’s management of their new world. He might have brought only his trusted Keshiri aides here, to work on the map. Looking back, he squinted through the darkness at the other walls. Humongous black slates, pegged to the walls by metal spikes that must have come from *Omen*. Hilts could imagine Korsin working here, chalking out his plans for the Tribe. If the captain’s chair always faced the map—and he couldn’t imagine otherwise—then nothing was “behind the throne” at all. Just blank stone panels.

He deactivated his lightsaber and stared into the darkness.

What did Korsin mean?

A thought occurring to him, Hilts took a step away from the map—

—only to see a flailing figure hurtle into the room, launched from the hallway by a massive Force push.

“Jaye!” Hilts yelled as the Keshiri landed meters short of the far wall. The old man scrambled to his aide’s side and turned him over—only to see the wounds seared into the clerk’s bare chest.

The work of a lightsaber. Or several.

“I’m sorry, Caretaker,” Jaye said, coughing as life escaped. “I tried . . . to find . . . some more glow rods . . .”

Stunned, Hilts looked to the side, where Iliana had already vaulted into a defensive posture. One after another, the figures they’d seen outside *Omen* charged into the room, lightsabers in hand.

“Well, well,” Korsin Bentado said, voice dripping with gruesome delight. “So this is where the chief Sister scurried off to!” He raised his truncated left arm. “I’ve been looking for you!”

“You’re not the only one,” barked Neera, alongside Edell and several of his Golden Destiny companions, blocking any escape. “Pretty little menace—it’s time to be done with you!”

“Let’s put her in the tower and watch her plummet,” Bentado said.

“No,” said another, gesturing to a disfigurement that Iliana had evidently delivered. “Let’s chain her to the spot where the hammer will fall!”

“Forget that!” Iliana yelled, poised to move. “We finish this now!”

“*Stop!*”

The Caretaker’s shout echoed around the room, attracting the newcomers’ attention to him for the first time. Cradling his dead assistant in his arms, he yelled again. “*Which one of you did this?*”

“What difference does it make?” Bentado’s teeth glistened in the light given off by the glowing weaponry. “He was a Keshiri. His presence profanes this place.”

“*What?*” Releasing Jaye, Hilts bolted to his feet, feeling anger he hadn’t known since his youth. “The Keshiri helped to *build* this place. And profane? You’re the ones trying to destroy the Temple, and *Omen* in it!”

“All life is profane,” Neera said. She’d added some fresh scars since the last time he saw her. “You saw our alien masters. You know just how disgusting life can be.”

Hilts took a step toward the party, only to see Edell step to the front. “I know how you feel about this place, Caretaker. But the joke’s on us—*all* of us. Everything we were ever told about the Tribe is a lie. It’s over. There’s no sense in clinging to places like this. It’s just one more score to settle. We wipe it out—and then one another.”

“This isn’t the end,” Hilts yelled. “This isn’t the end!”

“No,” Edell said, a chill in his voice. “The end already happened. We just didn’t know it.” The warriors surged forward toward the center of the room, bowling Hilts over as they sought to engage Iliana, the more dangerous of their prey.

Tumbling backward, Hilts saw again the blank slabs on the walls, suspended on their metal spikes. For some bizarre reason, at this moment he found himself thinking the thought he’d had just before Jaye had been hurled into the room: Why waste precious metal on hanging *chalkboards*?

Suddenly he knew!

With a tremendous effort, Hilts yanked at the metal rods through the Force, ripping them from the walls. On six sides of the room, the massive stone panels came loose, falling forward and slamming to the floor. Hilts

yanked at Iliana, pulling her clear of one of the falling monoliths.

Thoom! Thoom! Thoom! Thoom! Thoom!

Doom!

Seeing the other warriors reeling from the surprise and impact, Hilts reached his feet first and grabbed a glow rod. Turning it toward the walls facing the map wall, he saw what he expected to see . . .

. . . the rest of the world!

Edell Vrai looked at the wall nearest him. “What—what is this?”

“It’s a map of Kesh,” Hilts said, bringing his light close to the display on the far wall. The revealed panels adjacent to the map of Keshtah were blank—but the four panels on the other side of the room depicted a massive continent, dwarfing the place they knew. “It’s a map of Kesh’s far side. It’s the rest of the world!”

Iliana gawked. “But there’s nothing beyond the oceans! They explored everything after *Omen* arrived!”

“They only knew what they could see, on uvak-back—and in places where uvak could reach,” Hilts said, excitedly running his fingertips across the map. There were crystals denoting cities here, too—far more than on the familiar map across the room—and Tapani characters etched nearby. “This was what was behind the throne,” he said, turning to face the others. “This is what Korsin meant!”

As the Caretaker turned back, the warriors spread across the room, using their lightsabers now for illumination rather than defense. “What’s this writing here?” Edell asked, frustrated. “There’s a lot of it in this spot.”

“Just a moment,” Hilts said, stepping over to the section. It had been etched with a diamond stylus—an artifact he’d remembered puzzling over as curator in the Tahv palace, years earlier. “This is Korsin’s own handwriting!”

The room fell silent as he studied. There were some new words here, which he made out to refer to the Kesh and Keshiri, terms that wouldn't have been known in the Tapani dialect. Korsin was evidently a wordsmith, along with everything else. Haltingly, he recited, as best he could . . .

“Nida, you will know this language from the studies I’ve assigned you—but you won’t know this map. No one does. It’s based on the last data recorded by the cams of Omen during our descent across the dark side of Kesh. When I discovered a cam with a working display, I hid the device, transferring over the years what it saw to the map panels here until its power finally gave out.

“Our people and the Keshiri have thought this continent was all there was, alone in a gigantic sea. Taking control of the continent of Keshtah gave our people a purpose. But we’ve just been on Keshtah Minor. This map displays Keshtah Major—a landmass dwarfing ours, far beyond the range of any uvak to fly! And with far more people!

“And yes, there are people. There must be. The crystals represent lights—lights!—seen on the dark side of the planet. There are cities there, another whole civilization. Keshiri, likely, but perhaps more advanced—and possibly not in fear of the Skyborn. They could add to our power—or could be our enemies.

“For years, I’ve secretly annotated the map based on what I could make out before the images died. It’s truly another world. I’ve done all I can now, and my trusted Keshiri are sealing the map panels in advance of our move to Tahu.

“But you—or your descendants—may one day need a cause that will unite our people. The knowledge I leave here is true power. Envy has driven the Sith to

great accomplishments. Now there is again something to covet—something that may be within reach of the properly led . . .”

The room remained silent after he stopped reading. Hilts looked at the words again—and the great new map, surrounding the text—and exhaled. Awkwardly, he felt a bulge in his vest pocket and produced the glass tube. “Umm—I have a letter from his mother, too.”

Standing peaceably alongside Iliana before the new maps, Bentado looked back at Hilts. “He’s got more of the same writing everywhere. Are there guides to this language?”

“There were,” Hilts said, “until you people destroyed my archives.” He shuffled his feet. “I’m the only one who knows it now.” Hearing his own words, he straightened. *I’m the only one who knows it now!*

“This is . . . *unimaginable*,” Iliana said. “Why didn’t Korsin tell anyone?”

“He already had a continent to conquer,” Hilts said. “And his feud with Seelah and Jariad was too personal—they wouldn’t have been moved by this.” He looked at the gathered rivals. “But it’ll move our people now. If you need Sith to act in unison—give them an enemy.”

Taking advantage of the peace, Hilts unrolled the missive from Takara Korsin. He read of the destiny of the Tapani humans, who had wandered into Sith territory and had been enslaved—and he read of their future, ruling someplace on their own. And then another place. And another. “*If you guide our people well, they will always have a mission.*”

Edell looked dazzled. “How will we get there?” Everyone in the room knew the problem. The Keshiri weren’t a naval culture. The local woods were either too dense to float or too flimsy to bear any weight.

“It’ll be the biggest thing our society’s ever under-

taken,” Hilts said. “We’ll never be able to do it if we act like we have been. We’ll need everybody.” He nodded to the deformed Neera. “*Everybody*. It will require order, and discipline.” He paused. “*As in the days of old.*”

Abruptly Edell snapped off his lightsaber. “We will craft the society again as in the old ways.” He stepped toward Hilts and knelt. “You are the Caretaker. You alone know the old tongue—and you know the old ways better than anyone. You will guide our people well.”

Hilts looked in astonishment at the young man kneeling before him. Edell’s fellow Golden Destiny members bowed, as well. To the side, Korsin Bentado paused—and finally nodded, dipping his bald head as he fell to his knees. “You have redeemed our faith in Korsin.”

Even Neera knelt. “Where no path existed, you found one wide enough for all. Alone, you have my trust.”

Soon only Iliana remained standing, gawking in shock at the sight of her collected assailants, all genuflecting before the dumbfounded museum curator.

“*All hail Varner Hilts—the new Grand Lord!*”

Epilogue

Hilts had given the previous age its name. Now, with the Time of the Rot ending, he had also named the era to come.

The Hilts Restoration. He liked the sound of it.

The largest surviving faction after the two-week chaos had been the Golden Destiny, and it turned out to be fortuitous. Like their rivals, they wanted to seize power on Kesh, but they'd always had their eyes set in the right direction: outward. Hilts couldn't offer them the return to the stars they wanted, but he'd found a new world for them to conquer. Accompanied by Bentado, Neera, and the others, they'd fanned out quickly onto the mainland, announcing the great tidings. The Tribe's governing system would be restored and set toward a goal.

Hilts didn't worry about how they'd reach the new continent. As his chief engineer, Edell promised to attack the problem with vigor, studying ways to span distances greater than any uvak or watercraft ever had. It might take years, decades, or even centuries—but the Tribe would succeed.

The new Grand Lord did wonder about what they'd find. Had Korsin told Adari Vaal about the new continent? Whether he had or not, if she had somehow

reached there with her flight of stolen uvak, the residents would know the Sith existed. Korsin's note was likely correct. The conquest of the new continent wouldn't be as easy as the takeover of the old one.

The prospect of the challenge made him feel young again.

There was one last thing. It had come to Hilts almost as an afterthought. As soon as Edell and the others had announced his elevation, Hilts had seen the fire flash in Iliana's eyes. She'd been the one vying for power, after all, not the Caretaker. He wasn't supposed to be the one lifted on high. But after the initial shock—and realizing that Bentado and his companions still felt vengeful toward Iliana for her past actions—he'd thought of the absolute right thing to say to her, before all of them.

“If I am to be Grand Lord, I will need a wife.”

The surprise hadn't been all hers, at first; Hilts could hardly believe he'd said it. He never knew exactly what she'd thought of it, either—until now, here on the sun-dappled colonnade outside the mountaintop Temple. Tall and regal, Iliana stood across from him, shimmering in a golden gown, product of the labors of the finest Keshiri artisans. Nuptial rituals were always just one more excuse for a celebration, as far as Tribe members were concerned; fidelity meant little to a Sith believer. But property meant a whole lot, and Iliana had just attained quite a bit. Several of her former Sisters of Seelah were here in their own regalia, he saw; evidently, this turn of events had patched up every rift on the continent.

Twirling Seelah's ancient commitment band on her finger, Iliana smiled weakly for the others—and then glared privately at Hilts. “We both know this is ridiculous,” she whispered. “If you think I'm going to be all thankful to you for saving me—”

“I would never think that,” Hilts said.

That seemed to satisfy the woman for a moment. But as Tribe members passed them on the receiving line, Iliana had a sudden thought.

“Wait,” she said, under her breath. “If you’re restoring the old ways— isn’t the consort of the Grand Lord put to death on his passing?” Her eyebrows flared. “That’s right. It’s in Korsin’s Testament!”

“Oh, is that in there?” Hilts looked up at her, mildly. “I’d forgotten.”

Iliana smoldered. Hilts looked at his young bride and grinned. There would be wise leadership so long as he lived—and he could live another forty years, because there would be someone to make sure he did. Powerful, youthful, and devious, fighting all his battles. Surely some had assented to his elevation because he was an easy target—but *she* wasn’t. And the only way to protect her own life was to protect his.

Hilts looked up to the statue, looming over them both. There he was: Yaru Korsin, wise beyond all—even in matters of marriage. Behind the statue stood row after row of cleanly dressed Tribe members, at attention and waiting their turn to meet the new leader and his bride. Every surviving Sith on Keshtah Minor must be here today, Hilts thought. Some were worse for wear for the past month’s riots, but they were here, celebrating both his marriage and the last day of the Festival of Nida’s Rise. This would be one fête month no one would ever forget!

Along the sides of the colonnade stood hundreds of Keshiri, cheering and applauding. Waving to them, Hilts received a collective squeal of approval in response. The Keshiri couldn’t yet become part of the Tribe themselves, but Hilts would change that. Many of them had useful talents, and the Tribe might well need the help of all in the challenge ahead.

For a moment, he imagined what poor little Jaye

would have looked like in the uniform of a Tyro or Saber. Hilts smiled at the thought. It would take a while, but he would do it.

Reading history had been his life. Now he would write his own.

The Tribe would go on.

Read more about the Lost Tribe in *Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith*, available in print and ebook from Random House/Del Rey in Summer 2012. And follow their descendants' adventures in the far future in the *Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi* novel series, available now.

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

by Troy Denning

Published by Del Rey Books

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’d 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.”

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 Glob. 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 Yaqeel Saav’etu had assured him of that.

Bazel glanced across the sea of heads that was Arrival Lobby 757 and found Yaqeel 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 Yaqeel 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 Yaqeel'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 extended 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, assigned 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.” Yaqeel glanced around the processing 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 Yaqeel’s shoulder toward the security station. 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 Lev-alug 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. Yaqeel was in trouble, he explained, and he was *not* going to leave until she was safe.

Seff groaned and carefully avoided looking toward Yaqeel 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 Yaqeel 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 reminded 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

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 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 Yaqeel 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 Yaqeel 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 some-

thing to use as an excuse for an arrest, she would turn his friends over to her superiors for “questioning.” Yaqeel and Yantahar could withstand any kind of normal interrogation, Bazel knew, but nobody could withstand Force torture. Under that kind of pressure, even Yaqeel 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 all 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 Yaqeel 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 Yaqeel 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 unlocked 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 contempt 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, Yaqeel 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 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 and a deeply etched scowl. 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 the 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 style—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.” Ves-

tara 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 chest. 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."