



STAR WARS[®]

LOST TRIBE OF THE SITH PANTHEON



JOHN JACKSON MILLER

**STAR
WARS**

Lost Tribe of the Sith #7

PANTHEON

By John Jackson Miller

Star Wars: Knight Errant

STAR WARS: LOST TRIBE OF THE SITH

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith: Pantheon

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith: Sentinel

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith: Purgatory

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith: Savior

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith: Paragon

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith: Skyborn

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith: Precipice

STAR WARS®

Lost Tribe of the Sith #7

PANTHEON

JOHN JACKSON MILLER



BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

Star Wars: Lost Tribe of the Sith #7: Pantheon is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

2011 Del Rey e-Book Edition

Copyright © 2011 by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or ™ where indicated. All Rights Reserved. Used Under Authorization.

Excerpt from *Star Wars®: Fate of the Jedi: Ascension* copyright © 2011 by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or ™ where indicated. All Rights Reserved. Used Under Authorization.

Published in the United States by Del Rey, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

DEL REY is a registered trademark and the Del Rey colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

This book contains an excerpt from the forthcoming book *Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi: Ascension* by Christie Golden. This excerpt has been set for this edition only and may not reflect the final content of the forthcoming edition.

ISBN 978-0-345-51944-3

www.starwars.com
www.delreybooks.com

Chapter One

3000 BBY

Time is a lover, the old saying went: a Sith lover. She tempts you with forever—and then cuts you and leaves you for dead.

Staring into the reflecting pool, Varner Hilts studied the latest scar from time, his one and only long-term relationship. No, he couldn't blame this on a trick of the light, or the polluted water. It was real. A fresh crack ran straight from his left eye to his temple. Turning his head and looking more closely, he swore. Why wasn't there at least a matching wrinkle on the other side? Time wasn't big on symmetry.

Hilts was well on his way to becoming the most worthless construct in all creation: an elder in a Sith society. It was the great irony of the Tribe on Kesh. A man without enemies lived long, but had no future. By virtue of his unique calling, Hilts had managed to survive decades of tumult—but for what? So he could spend thirty more years walking past the same basin, observing his decline every day on his way to work?

Well, traditions are important, Hilts thought. Kneeling over the reflection, he brought his hand to his face and squinted. Slowly, his finger traced the new crevasse . . .

CRACK!

Ancient stone shattered. Startled, Hilts looked up. High above, a section of Tahv's suspended aqueduct heaved and gave way, shearing loose from its towering support.

"Caretaker!"

Before Hilts could fully stand, a purple blur appeared from the alley. The Keshiri male dived headlong into Hilts's paunch, knocking the human backward. Giant slabs of stonework smashed to the street, pulverizing the rim of the basin where Hilts had knelt moments before.

Flat on his back on the pavement, Hilts reached through the Force and deflected chunks of debris from himself and his rescuer. But no power could stop the crush of brackish water cascading down from the shattered sluice. The Keshiri shielded Hilts as best he could until the shower of water and rocks subsided.

Coughing, Hilts recognized his savior. "Trying to score points with the boss, Jaye?" As he spoke, he rose, shaking grimy water from his sparse silvery hair.

"I—I'm sorry for pushing you, Master Hilts," the Keshiri stammered. "I was passing this way—"

"Calm down." Hilts knew it was a useless instruction, even though Jaye was officially his to command. The moon-faced native had no more chance of relaxing than Hilts had of becoming Grand Lord. "Just a normal day in 'the Crown of Kesh.'"

"It's the *conjunction*," Jaye said, wiping his superior's cape. Nervous black eyes scanned the now-broken skyline of the capital city. "The omen I've been telling you about!"

"And telling me. And telling me." Hilts spied a crowd of humans quarreling near the fallen aqueduct section. Pinning blame, it seemed, was Tahv's only growth industry. He pulled his aide's sleeve. "Let's get to the office before someone decides *we* brought it down by breathing heavily!"

* * *

In an earlier day, Sith on Kesh bided their time to achieve power, temporarily following others in order to one day claim the prize. For most in that simpler era, Yaru Korsin's power structure of High Lords, Lords, and Sabers worked as a means to an end. The hierarchy survived because it served the purposes of enough people—people with the power to defend the system against those who would destroy it. For more than a thousand years after the founder's death, the Tribe had thrived.

But the Second Millennium brought unrelenting tribulations. Grand Lord Lillia Venn had vanished more than nine hundred years earlier on what the Keshiri locals remembered, rather ineloquently, as the Night of the Upside-Down Meteor. It had certainly presaged doom for *Omen's* grandchildren. Learning of her disappearance, Venn's rivals attacked her supporters first—and then one another. Defeated combatants quit the capital city and took to the hinterlands, where many found common cause with disenfranchised human slaves. Increasing numbers of Sith pressed peace-loving Keshiri into their forces. For centuries, factions united long enough to conquer Tahv and slay the ruling Grand Lord—only to immediately begin fighting among themselves. One rebel force became two, which became twenty. Power in the Tribe poisoned whoever tasted it.

A quarter century earlier, Hilts had famously coined the term for the age, but it hadn't required much imagination. "The Time of the Rot" was visible everywhere. Under successive sieges, the rich streets of Tahv decayed. Left untended, towering aqueducts clogged and overflowed; the morning's calamity was an all-too-familiar occurrence. Far to the south, the Sessal Spire raged as it never had in Keshiri memory, unleashing an

explosion so thunderous that one face of the great arena, the Korsinata, collapsed. It was as if the planet itself were fighting back against its émigrés from beyond.

But nestled in a small corner of the eroding marble of the capital building, one place had remained free of neglect: the office of the Caretaker. Amid all the battles between Grand Lords and Antilords, only it had remained untouched.

It wasn't because the Sith had any fear of sacrilege. Varner Hilts's office, outside the traditional power structure, had been established in Nida Korsin's time to provide the Tribe with accurate timekeeping and a historical archive. It was a lifetime appointment, in part because so few candidates were interested. No one desired the Caretaker's lot; his only followers were a roomful of Keshiri clerks, unsuited for service in anyone's army. Not that Hilts was ever actually in demand. A historical polymath, he had been told early on that with his lightsaber skills, he need never worry about a treacherous ally. No one would dare stand near him, for fear of accidental dismemberment.

Stepping from the anteroom into the beaders' hall, Hilts again heard the clickety-clack that had greeted him for half his life. Seated on their knees in a semicircle, brown-clad Keshiri worked at handheld counting frames constructed from seashells and young hejarbo shoots. Hilts discarded his dripping cape and strode through the room, barely wondering what they were working on today. Jaye kept the figurers busy, most of the time, calculating dates to go along with the bits of trivia Hilts scraped from the archives. He'd often marveled at their precision. For a species that lacked basic mathematics when *Omen* crashed, the Keshiri had embraced calculation as vigorously as they had all their other arts.

Grabbing an abacus from a co-worker, Jaye followed Hilts into the sunlit atrium. Centuries before, the first Grand Lord, Yaru Korsin, had watched his nephew Jariad dueling here—knowing even then, Hilts suspected, that Jariad was planning to betray him. Now the Sandpipes dominated the room. Silently tended by watchful tan-clad Keshiri girls, the towering network of powder-filled glass vials kept time for the Tribe. *As if time could be bottled up*, Hilts thought, scratching the side of his face.

“I want to be able to see my reflection in those pipes,” he ordered. “I don’t have to tell you what a big day we have coming up.”

He didn’t. The workers shined the massive device more urgently, careful not to interfere with its functioning. For the first time in their young lives, visitors were coming to their place of work. No Grand Lord or pretender had lived in the palace for six hundred years; Korsin’s architects had designed for beauty, not defense. Testament Day was the only time the building saw visitors.

Every twenty-five years, on the anniversary of Korsin’s death, listeners heard his final testament again. Fifty years earlier, Hilts had been a boy, not allowed into the palace—but the idea of communing with the past had captured his imagination. Through study and toil, he had made certain that, when the next Testament Day arrived, he would be the one to manage the event.

Now, like a comet, the day had come around yet again. But the palace today was a much shabbier place, beyond his resources to repair. Glancing at the cracks in the smoked-glass windows in the ceiling, Hilts just couldn’t get excited.

Jaye didn’t have that problem. “They’ve confirmed it, Caretaker!” the Keshiri squeaked, abacus shaking in his hand. “My calculations about the Sandpipes—”

“—Aren’t important right now,” Hilts said, “unless you intend to grab a cloth and help clean them.” He regarded the young women at their work. At least some parts of the room would look good. “We’ve got twelve days. We’ll be ready.”

The clerk bit his lip. “Can we really be ready? This . . . this is a mystical convergence. No—a *holy* one.”

Hilts rolled his eyes. Jaye didn’t just love his numbers; he feared them, too. This year *was* a first for the Tribe. Testament Day wasn’t the only such memorial—and Yaru wasn’t the only Korsin. Daughter Nida had reigned for a record seventy-nine years after her father, and her elevation to Grand Lord was commemorated with a monthlong festival on the grounds outside the palace every seventy-nine years. Even Hilts hadn’t been around for the last one.

“Don’t you see, Caretaker?” Abacus shells rattled as Jaye worked another calculation. “It’s been one thousand nine hundred seventy-five years since Grand Lord Korsin transcended this existence and Nida succeeded him—and that’s seventy-nine times twenty-five! This is the first time Testament Day and Nida’s Rise have ever fallen in the same year!” Eyes darting to the side, he lowered his voice to a whisper. “The first time, *ever*.”

“*Ever!*” Hilts clutched his pale purple companion by the shoulders in mock seriousness, causing Jaye to drop his counting frame to the stone floor. “So what you’re telling me—is that we’ll save on wine this time!” Hilts released Jaye and slapped his cheek lightly. “We don’t need any more omens, Jaye. We’ve got one, up on the mountain, remember? And no one’s allowed inside that.”

Hilts walked toward his private office, leaving his aide to stare blankly at the abacus.

“But, Caretaker—”

“Overreacting, Jaye.”

“But what about what I learned about the Sandpipes?”

“Don’t start *that* again!” Hilts stepped into his office and looked with relief at his chair. Yes, that was the answer. After a morning like this, it would be a relief to sit in silence and drink some—

Voices rose outside in the atrium. Slamming his half-filled glass down to the desk in disgust, Hilts yelled over his shoulder at the commotion. “Jaye, I told you to quiet down!”

“That’s funny,” responded a husky female voice. “I just told him the same thing.” Hilts turned to see a black-clad woman in her late twenties, holding a gleaming red lightsaber just beneath Jaye’s neck. Golden eyes alive with dark intelligence, she spoke. “We have to talk, Caretaker—and I hate being interrupted.”

She stood a full two meters, easily taller than Hilts. Bright red hair, neatly coiffed; flawless pink skin. She would have fared well in Seelah Korsin’s inspections, centuries before, Hilts thought. And that was the whole point.

The intruder led Hilts back to the atrium, where he saw half a dozen similarly clad women, all perfect specimens of humanity themselves, threatening the huddled workers with lightsabers. She spoke again. “Of course, you know me.”

“Only by reputation,” he said, throat sandy. He’d never gotten to taste his drink. “I don’t get out much.”

“I can see that.” The woman smiled primly and deactivated her lightsaber. “Iliana Merko. And these are my fellow Sisters of Seelah.”

“I don’t think Seelah Korsin had any sisters,” Hilts said, regarding the beauties guarding his Keshiri.

“Sisters in spirit.” Iliana strode confidently ahead,

crushing Jaye's abacus underfoot as she did. The mathematician was with the others, now, prone on the floor but safe. Boot heels clacking against the marble, Ilianasurveyed the glass statues lining the atrium. All depicted either Yaru or Nida Korsin. Iliana didn't look pleased.

"Sorry," Hilts said. "They took out the Seelah statues after—after what happened, years ago." He assumed she knew about the failed coup Seelah had plotted with Jariad against her husband, Yaru. To members of Iliana's faction, it was like yesterday. "I don't think they kept any Seelah pieces at all."

"I'm not surprised. No one gave our lady the respect she deserved. *She* founded the Tribe, you know—not these traitors." Glaring at a glass representation of Yaru Korsin, Iliana's expression melted to puzzlement. "Did he really look like *that*?"

"Back then, the Keshiri sculptors were still figuring out how to get human eyes right." Hilts cautiously stepped toward her. The woman didn't seem to be in any hurry, and he chose to think that boded well for his survival. But then, it wasn't as if she was going to be interrupted. *Who ever came here?*

"You know why I'm here," she said, facing him.

"The Testament won't be read for twelve days yet. Why are you here *now*?"

She stepped briskly toward him. "We have to talk about what Korsin's Testament says," she said. "Before the others arrive."

Hilts couldn't help but laugh. "You *know* what the Testament says. Everyone does. It's been transcribed so many times—"

Iliana charged forward, igniting her lightsaber and waving the tip just under the caretaker's hairy chin. "Of course we know! But this is different. This Testament Day, this reading—somehow, it's become a *conclave*."

His eyes narrowed. “*The Pantheon’s Peace.*”
“Exactly.”

It suddenly made sense to Hilts. For centuries, Testament Day and the reading had been the one time that the Tribe’s entire hierarchy met peaceably under one roof—that of the palace atrium—to hear their late founder’s words spoken. Even after the Sith splintered, deference to the great leaders of the past had been enough to bring the various faction leaders together at one time. No one dared make the meeting an opportunity for mayhem; some now regarded Korsin almost as a magical being, able to influence events from beyond the grave. Their forebears had walked in the stars.

“All my rivals will be here,” Iliana said, still threatening with the lightsaber. “Some believe that in the Testament, they’ll hear support for their cause—an endorsement from a dead man.” She looked back up at the statue and sneered. “Well, we all know what it *is*—a boring old speech rewarding his allies for helping him thwart Seelah.”

Hilts swallowed. No, Iliana and her allies wouldn’t find much to like in Korsin’s dying speech. The leader had only mentioned Seelah to banish her. Some of the other groups might find some support for their own claims to power in Korsin’s words—but the Sisters wouldn’t.

“That’s why, old man, I want you to *change* what’s in the Testament.” Iliana closed the remaining few footsteps between them and looked down on the caretaker. She smiled. “Change it—to favor *us*.”

He held her gaze for a moment. “You’re serious.”

“Deadly.” Twirling, she stepped away, dousing her lightsaber again. “I know about you, Wilts—”

“That’s *Hilts*.”

“—you and your little workers here exist to dig up worthless trivia. Well,” she said, turning, “you’re going

to reveal that you've discovered the *true* Testament—one declaring that Seelah and those who follow her teachings today are the legitimate heirs to power on Kesh.”

One of Iliana's comrades produced a scroll and shoved it at Hilts. Unspooling it, he goggled. “I don't think this will work.”

“Oh, it will,” Iliana said. “The others are superstitious—all invoking one figure from our history or another. They're in awe of our ancestors born on high—and they're right to be. But they don't respect the one they should.” She gestured to the parchment in Hilts's hands. “That'll change when you read *that* instead of the Korsin Testament. The simpler-minded will believe it, and follow me. That should be enough.”

Hilts exhaled, barely stifling a laugh. He regarded the woman, so full of energy and cleverness—all spent to no avail whatsoever.

No, of course she wouldn't know, he thought. *She's too young.*

Iliana stared at him. “What?”

“I'm sorry,” Hilts said, gesturing to the scroll. “I admire your initiative, Iliana Merko. But there's a reason no one's tried this before. You wouldn't know, unless you'd been here for a Testament reading—or spoken with someone who was.”

“What in blazes are you talking about?”

Slowly so as not to cause alarm, Hilts stepped to the right of the Sandpipes and approached a covered pedestal. “You see, I don't read Korsin's Testament. The Caretakers never do.”

Iliana watched, puzzled, as he returned with something wrapped in rich fabric. “Then who reads it?”

“*Yaru Korsin* does.” Hilts pulled back the cloth, revealing a small pyramid-shaped object. A *device*—in a city that had none . . .

Chapter Two

“This . . . is *amazing*.”

“It’s not good, Caretaker.”

“I didn’t say it was,” Hilts responded to his aide.
“But it’s still amazing.”

As Kesh’s sun cast its first rays onto the city, Hilts and Jaye looked down upon the palace grounds from the balcony. They’d never seen the city so alive. A writhing carpet of humans and Keshiri blanketed what had once been the Circle Eternal, with people setting up portable shelters for protection against volcanic rain.

Celebrants began gathering the day after Iliana and her warriors had entered the palace, all staking locations in preparation for the Festival of Nida’s Rise. None of the regular citizens would be allowed in for the Testament reading, but it didn’t seem to matter. “This is a planet that needs a party,” Hilts said.

“They want a leader,” Jaye responded. Dark eyes looked up at the Caretaker. “That’s what I heard Iliana saying. All the humans hope some guidance will come from the Grand Lord’s words.”

Hilts chortled. “Well, at least they’ll be *his* words.” He shot a glance back into the palace, where Iliana and her companions stared in stupefaction at the ornate

pyramid. “They’ll never even figure out how to turn it on.” That much was true, Hilts remembered; he had barely gotten the thing working during the last Testament Day, twenty-five years earlier. His predecessor had described it as a recording device, and had passed to him the ancient secret for activating it—but it had taken four tries for Hilts to get it right on the appointed day. He wondered if something was wrong with it. Would it play this year?

No matter. *He* had played the last four days pretty well, Hilts thought. To buy time, he’d lied to Iliana that the device only activated on Testament Day. That hadn’t stopped the arrogant woman from fiddling with it, to no avail—but the ploy had brought the relief he’d hoped for. Along with the revelers, Iliana’s rivals had entered Tahv far ahead of schedule, evidently attracted by their spies’ reports that the Sisters of Seelah had taken the palace. Now, out there in the encampments flew the banners of the Korsinites, the Golden Destiny, Force 57, and countless other factions. Seelah’s vanguard had taken station outside the palace entrance, but it wasn’t clear how long they could bar entry with their opponents’ numbers growing. With eight days remaining before Testament Day, the blood enemies had held off on violence, instead using the mass public gathering as a chance to proselytize. Nida’s Rise had become a festival of blather.

“Looking for a leader in this bunch,” Hilts said. “May the dark side help us all.”

“The conjunction,” Jaye said. Hilts was afraid he was about to hear another round about Jaye’s theory, and what today really was, when the Keshiri sighed and looked directly at him. “Caretaker, I’ll never understand why *you* never challenged to rule the Tribe. You’re wiser in the ways of the ancient Protectors than anyone.”

“*Too* wise,” Hilts said, amused. “These are the days of the Flagrant Fool, my friend. Knowledgeable men like us can’t get far.”

“But the Tribe teaches that every free man or woman can grow up to become Grand Lord.”

“Which is a fine thing for *me* to believe,” Hilts said. “But if *you* believe it, it isn’t as fine. And if those fools out there believe it as well,” he continued, gesturing to the crowd, “it becomes a horrible thing. Your opportunity lies in my failure.” He smirked. “And what’s this ‘Tribe teaches’? No one agrees on what the Tribe is even *about* anymore.” The schooling system had been just another victim of the upheaval. Under Korsin and his successors, people had worked together. But as individuals increasingly sought shortcuts to sole power, Sith society—if it could be called that—had fallen apart. Hilts clapped his hand on the young aide’s shoulder. “No, it’s too late. Like Donellan, time has passed me by.”

“I don’t agree—”

“Listen, Jaye. When a man of advancing years tells you something is true, either believe him, or nod politely,” Hilts said, stepping away from the railing. “The last thing you want to do is shake his faith in his omniscience.”

“Even if he’s wrong?”

“*Especially* if he’s wrong.” He turned to step back inside the palace. “And speaking of fools . . .”

Inside, Iliana continued to paw at the little pyramid. Only two of her companions remained, the rest having departed to guard the entrance.

“If it’s some kind of recording device,” Iliana said, “it must have a power source. Perhaps a Lignan crystal.”

“If you find out how it works,” Hilts said, “you’ll be one for the historical records yourself.” He crossed to

an unthreatening position near the Sandpipes. After locking his workers in another room, Iliana had kept the caretaker and his assistant in the immediate area, ready to answer questions. Hilts wasn't going anywhere, anyway. The whole thing had become an amusing spectacle—and the players, fun to watch.

He'd found Iliana a fetching woman, if completely venal and untrustworthy. Hilts had never taken a mate, partially because of his dead-end station, but also because he knew that Sith didn't know how to share. He'd seen it in the histories time and again: all that envy and plotting, even within families. No wonder Yaru Korsin had decreed that the consorts of expired Grand Lords needed to be put to death. Poison had no place in the bedchamber.

Not that Iliana knew it. Now, as she had once the day before, Iliana stepped toward him and looked into his eyes with sudden warmth. "Caretaker, are you *sure* there's no way to see the recording now—to alter it?" Her gloved hand brushed gently against his arm.

"Gloyd's blood, girl! I'm twice your age, at least," Hilts said. He looked at her with incredulity. "You *are* a Sister of Seelah."

Glaring, she shrank back. "And you're a festering old wart!"

"*That's* more like it. Can we get down to facts now? Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't be able to doctor the message on here. And I don't want to!" He turned away from her and gestured to the paintings on the atrium walls, depicting the arrival of the travelers from the skies. "This gadget is our only functioning link to that past, to how we came to be. I wouldn't tamper with it if my life depended on it."

"How about someone else's?"

Hilts heard the sharp hiss of Iliana's lightsaber being activated. Turning cautiously, he saw that her compan-

ions had taken Jaye by the arms. “Now, there’s no need for that.”

“I think there is. Start taking apart the device, Caretaker. And while you do,” Iliana said, “we’re going to take this Keshiri apart. There might be something of him left, if you work fast enough.”

Hilts’s eyes alternated between his writhing, panicked assistant and the gleaming widget. He didn’t even know where to begin, but he had to do something. Reluctantly, he took the small pyramid in hand—

—and nearly dropped it when several figures crashed through the glass windows above, plummeting into the atrium. Dressed in the ancient uvak-leather garb of the Skyborn Rangers, the new arrivals hit the marble surface behind Jaye’s captors and ignited their lightsabers. At the same time, several of Iliana’s warriors from outside entered, retreating from the charge of a grisly-looking mob of misanthropes. Her weapon already drawn, Iliana sprang to her allies’ defense, releasing Jaye, who dived for the floor near Hilts’s feet.

“Now, boy!” Holding his aide’s tunic in one hand and the recorder in the other, Hilts tumbled toward the Sandpipes, away from the fray. Behind them, crimson energy crackled, tearing into Sith flesh. There were *two* groups of assailants after Iliana, he realized.

Recognizing who they were, Hilts realized what he had to do.

“Human trash!” Iliana screamed with fury as she locked lightsabers with a scarred behemoth of a woman. “Traitorous wench!” yelled a bald mountain of male anger, one of the leather-armored arrivals from above. Clashing, the combatants seemed as interested in insulting their enemies as striking them. So much so that in between blows, they chanced to hear—

“Hey! Up here!”

Heads turned to the glass contraption towering near

the north wall. The rumpled Hilts clung to the maintenance ladder by the Sandpipes, with a terrified Jaye on the rungs just beneath. Holding the recording device in one hand, the Caretaker swallowed hard and spoke.

“Factions of Kesh—*invited guests*—welcome. Um . . . you’re all early.”

Chapter Three

They just had to knock out the windows, Hilts thought. Thirty years he'd spent trying to keep his portion of the capital building from falling apart. The warring oafs had just set him and his staff back another thirty years—provided he survived the afternoon.

“I have to say I'm surprised to see you all here,” Hilts said, stepping over shards to the center of the room. The warriors had stepped back from one another but still held their lightsabers before them, leaving a wedge of space in between for him and Jaye. “It's eight days until Testament Day. But this *is* a palace. I guess we have some extra rooms here for you—”

“Shut up, old man!” The beefy black-haired woman with all the scars took a step forward and pointed at Iliana. “We want to know why *she's* here!”

Hilts looked to see Iliana and her companions, some bloodied from the battle, backed up against the Sandpipes, ready for their last stand. Iliana's face flashed with defiance. “Don't answer that cretin, Hilts!”

“Don't *you* raise your voice in this place, woman!” The hulking bald man with a black mustache stepped forth from his leather-clad coterie and made an unkind gesture to Iliana. “The house of Korsin was no place for Seelah—and no place for you!”

Seeing the line of warriors behind Iliana poised to move, Hilts quickly stepped between them and the giant. “You—you’re Korsinite League, right?”

“I am Korsin Bentado,” the shiny-headed man said, his deep voice thundering in the chamber. He gestured to either side. “This is Korsin Vandoz, and you know Korsin Immera from the last Testament reading. We’ve come, Caretaker, to celebrate the lives of Yaru and Nida Korsin at this grand and celestial time. We hope that all is ready—”

“Well, it will—”

“—and we hope that you can show the *mised* among us the truth of the Testament. That the leader came from beyond, that the Tribe is the body of the leader, and that those who would imperil the body deserve neither mercy nor life,” Bentado said. He gazed reverentially at the statue Iliana had once mocked and bowed his head. “One becomes all, and all one. Korsin now, Korsin forever.”

“Whatever you say,” Hilts said. Turning, he shot a surreptitious look at Jaye and shook his head. Hilts knew these people well. A former slave had founded the Korsinite League a century earlier, taking *Korsin* as a title for himself, separate from the hierarchy of Lords. Emancipated, he patterned his life after those led by the first Grand Lord and his successor daughter; as he declared, any worthy could aspire to Korsin-ness, just as he had. His followers took it to heart—and, being Sith, decided *they* could just as easily adopt the title for themselves. Which they all did, over the movement founder’s complaints—and, eventually, his dead body. Now there were hundreds of self-named Korsins of either sex running about, chanting mantras and declaring their empires of one to the crowd at large. To strike up a conversation with a Korsinite was to risk death by cognitive dissonance.

“I still want to know why that—that *woman* has been allowed in here!” The scar-faced female slapped a bare hand on Hilts’s shoulder and twirled him around. Hilts realized with a start that the hand had only three webbed fingers.

“You’re Force Fifty-seven, I take it.”

“Obviously!” Her companions jostled behind her, growling ferally. The woman Neera was in fact the least gruesome of the bunch, Hilts saw. No one knew much about the original 57; Seelah Korsin had evidently taken steps to erase that faction’s existence from memory. But the Keshiri tales spoke of those early *Omen* crew members as deformed in some way, the opposite of Seelah’s perfect human specimens.

The modern Force 57 was far more than fifty-seven in number; looking at Neera’s allies, Hilts wondered if every misshapen human living on Kesh had found his or her way into the ranks. They were easy to pick out when they ventured near the capital; even those least blemished by birth had dozens of self-inflicted scars. Fifty-seven, Hilts imagined, although he had never had the opportunity or desire to count.

“Seelah banished our kind, so she could have her blissful perfection,” Neera yelled, gesturing to the walls. “This place is disgusting! You see who’s missing from these paintings, don’t you? Where’s Ravilan, the leader of the Different Ones? Why, they don’t even bother to show Gloyd—the one the Korsins let live, like a pet!” She spat on the marble. “Your precious Pantheon is missing members!”

“You are, too!” Iliana shot back. “Seelah was right to purge the defectives! And we’re going to do it again!” The Sisters surged forward—only to be blocked by Hilts.

“People, people!” Looking back, Hilts saw that his triangle of neutral ground had shrunk. “This isn’t the place for this!”

“You’re absolutely right, Caretaker,” Korsin Bentado said, tightening the fasteners on his lightsaber hand’s glove. “The defilers must pay the penalty. We will finish this battle here and now—and then outside, where the other factions are gathered. The blood will sanctify this place. The Korsinite League will be triumphant—and in eight days, we alone will hear Yaru Korsin’s blessings.”

Cowering near his master, Jaye squeaked. “But there are thousands of people out there!”

“If that’s how it has to be.”

“It doesn’t *have* to be this way!” Hilts yelled. Remembering the recording device, he raised it into the air. “You’re here for the reading. We could do it now!”

Iliana glared at him. “You said it only activated on Testament Day!”

Hilts looked back at her and shrugged. “I’m Sith. I lied.”

“The League will not accept a reading of the Testament on any day besides the anniversary,” Bentado said, golden eyes glaring under bushy black brows. “Would you be branded a heretic, Caretaker, like these others?” The line began to move again behind him. “We’ll hear the founder in eight days—*alone!*”

Seeing the combatants surge forward, Hilts felt Jaye clinging tightly to him. In a flash he made a connection.

Eight days.

“Jaye! Your calculations!” Pulling the Keshiri’s head from his chest, Hilts yelled urgently. “Your calculations about the Sandpipes!”

The aide looked up, tears of panic flowing freely. “Now? But you said no one would be interested in—”

“Now, Jaye!” he rasped. “*Tell them!*”

Quaking in terror, the little Keshiri released his master and addressed the assemblage. “Begging your Lordships’ pardons— ”

“We’re not all Lords, Keshiri!”

Jaye nearly fell over at Neera’s response. His humongous black eyes darted back to Hilts, who mouthed urgently: *Say it!*

“Begging your pardons, but when the Protectors landed, they brought their Standard Calendar, which we Keshiri adopted, regardless of our different length of day and year—”

Another lightsaber ignited in the crowd.

“—and we calibrated our Sandpipes to your magical chrono, aboard *Omen*. When the mountain temple was sealed and *Omen* abandoned, bearers brought the Sandpipes here, still keeping time—”

Two more lightsabers, and more movement.

“—but we found years ago that the sand didn’t flow through the pipes at the same speed on the mainland as up on the mountain.” Red energy shining in his face, Jaye swallowed. “It runs slower.”

Bentado raised his weapon—and an eyebrow. “How much slower?”

“One second slower,” Jaye said, voice creaking. “Your Standard Day is really a second shorter than what we’ve been using all this time.”

Neera and the 57s rumbled with impatience. “What the blazes difference does that make?”

Hilts clenched his fists and looked at Jaye. “*Tell them!*”

“Over two thousand years? It makes *eight days’ difference*. Which means—”

“Which means,” Hilts said, stepping beside his quivering aide, “that by our founders’ true timekeeping, Testament Day is *today*. And the Festival of Nida’s Rise really begins today, as well.” He looked to Iliana and lowered his voice. “But Yaru’s day is the important one.”

Bentado stomped toward the pair and raged. “This is

preposterous!” He grabbed Jaye by the wrist. “You’re telling me this Keshiri fool counted all the seconds since practically when *Omen* landed? That must be ten million—”

“The word in your language is *billion*,” Jaye croaked. “And it’s more than sixty.”

Iliana stepped forward—and lowered her lightsaber. “He’s telling the truth,” she said. “I don’t see any deception in him. Nor much of anything else.”

Bentado looked back to his allies, who nodded in silence. Even the wretched 57s had paused.

Hilts looked at the Keshiri and marveled. *Well done. Now shut up!*

“The reading is on,” Hilts said. “I declare the Pantheon’s Peace.” Holding the recording device aloft, he looked from one of the faction leaders to another. “Deactivate your weapons—and call in any of your rival leaders from outside,” he said. “I can’t tell you people how to run your affairs. Maybe Yaru Korsin can.”

Chapter Four

“ . . . when we landed, we were few. Our survival was not guaranteed. The Tribe—what we have become—was the necessary mechanism. Once we knew Kesh held no dangers for us, the only threat came from ourselves . . . ”

The starship captain sat in his command chair, facing death—and, unbeknownst to him, several of his remote descendants, separated by time. The image of Yaru Korsin flickered in midair, casting eerie shadows through the darkened atrium. It was neither the robust Korsin of the later paintings nor the bug-eyed deity of the Keshiri sculpture who appeared; it was simply a man. A spent warrior-king, clutching his chest and speaking his last.

“ . . . and just as I had you trained in secret, Nida, there are secrets you must always keep. The true power is behind the throne. Should disaster befall—remember that . . . ”

Platitudes passed from a ruler to his child, both long dead. Hilts had studied the words for so many years, they had lost their magic for him. True, that first sight long ago of Yaru Korsin, animated, had excited his imagination. But this time was different. Standing behind the device and its projection, he found himself

looking not at the ancient figure, but through him, at the gathered listeners. The atrium had been cleared of dead bodies and living warriors that afternoon; now, as darkness fell, only the faction leaders remained, including a dozen-plus brought in from outside. Hilts searched from face to face. Some had that same look of wonder he'd once had; humility was a new concept for most Sith. Others seemed untouched.

Hilts focused again on Korsin. He'd been dying when he recorded this; bleeding in the seat that had once been the captain's chair from *Omen*, he'd hurriedly recorded a message to his daughter, who was busy finishing off the rebels elsewhere on the mountain. Between coughs, the spectral Korsin spoke of the Tribe's hierarchy, and how the structure should be managed to prevent uprisings like the one that ultimately killed him. He'd just spoken the segment about killing dead Grand Lord's spouses and banishing Seelah; Hilts could still feel the rage coming from Iliana.

“. . . that should hold the Tribe for the long term, but you'll want to begin bringing your own people in at the Lord level. I have a few suggestions, depending on who survives . . .”

“This is the boring part,” Iliana snapped. Hilts looked to his shoes. She was right. For all the regard placed on the document, he knew it included a lot of logistical detail. Several of the leaders paid rapt attention, listening to Korsin speak of their adopted intellectual forebears, but for the others it was tedium.

Looking at the restive members, Hilts wondered about his next move. He was alone now; Jaye had been kicked outside along with his fellow workers before the reading began. That was good for them, for the moment. But the Pantheon's Peace would conclude when the recording did—and it didn't look like the words were leading any toward a settlement. How

could he stay alive—much less protect his staff and position—if this solved nothing? *Never mind the Tribe's future*, Hilts thought. *What about mine?*

After several minutes, Korsin's speech slowed. The mortal wound taking its toll, the words turned personal. Hilts looked up again, newly fascinated by the momentary connection with a man two thousand years old.

“. . . Nida, my daughter, you're more than the only good thing to come from Seelah. You're the future of the Sith on this planet. It wasn't . . . our choice to live here. But it is . . . our choice not to die here. That choice . . . will be made by you . . .”

Korsin slumped in his chair. The image froze.

“Is that *all?*” Iliana said.

Hilts looked at her, unsurprised that she'd won the race to speak first. “That's all.” He stepped to the recording device.

“It's enough,” Korsin Bentado said reverently. “You've just heard a great leader say it. There can only be one power structure—the one *he* invented. The one my people will represent. No compromise.”

“You're wrong” came another voice. Hilts saw it belonged to the leader of the Golden Destiny, a group obsessed with the stellar aspects of the Tribe's origin. “I heard a great conqueror describe a powerful people. We didn't even intend to come here—yet we subdued this world instantly. Every human in the galaxy likely has his own planetary kingdom! We must stop fighting, reopen the temple, and return to the stars!”

Hilts shook his head as the quarrels began anew. There were no lightsabers, yet; the leaders were too busy telling one another what they had just all heard. But it was only a matter of time. He absently fiddled with the recorder. He'd gotten it started more easily this time, but for some reason it wasn't deactivating properly.

Static appeared—and then something else. Fleeting images, interlaced with the scene of the expired Grand Lord.

“There’s something here,” Hilts said, adjusting the device. “Underneath.”

A *palimpsest*. He’d heard Keshiri artists speak of the concept. Occasionally, a second work was painted over an earlier version, using the same canvas. The concept had no meaning in sculpture—and wasn’t the projected image a living sculpture? But still, *something* was there. Maybe when Korsin used the device to record his message, there had already been another one on it!

He rattled the few controls he understood again . . .

. . . and a monster appeared.

“*This is your liege, Naga Sadow, speaking to the captain Yaru Korsin!*”

The leaders turned instantly from their arguments on hearing the gravelly voice. It belonged to something not entirely human, clad in the robes of a Sith ruler. Sadow’s face had a reddish cast, terminating in two pointed tentacles that writhed when he spoke. Veins bulged from his bald cranium like mountain ranges.

And as he spoke, he gestured with hands—such hands!—tipped with talons an uvak might have.

Neera of Force 57 spoke first. “What—is that *thing*?”

“*Alongside Saes and the Harbinger, you are decreed to deliver the mining team belonging to your sibling, Devore, to Phaegon. You will obtain Lignan crystals for my cause and return to Kirrek.*”

Hilts had to rub his eyes. The language was theirs, if heavily accented. But what was speaking it? Aside from the Keshiri, there was no record of there being any other sentient species in the universe.

And certainly not one that gave orders to humans.

“*For this mission, I dispatch to you one you have*

worked with before, Ravilan Wroth, and his Massassi warriors.”

The image changed—and if the visage of Naga Sadow startled the viewers, the appearance of the one called Ravilan and his escort evoked audible gasps. His skin fully crimson, Ravilan looked even less human than Sadow, with protruding eyebrow stalks to go along with even longer facial tendrils. And the lumbering blood-colored monstrosities standing behind Ravilan were grotesque beyond description.

The image flickered, and Naga Sadow reappeared.

“I have sent for your brother, Devore, to inform him that you will be in charge. But remember that you are all subject to my law and whim. You may have more freedom of action than other Sith allow their slaves— but the greatest thing your kind can aspire to is competence in my service. And that is what I demand of you. Your work will create my glory. Begin your preparations. Succeed in my name. Fail me—and die.”

The image vanished, leaving the atrium in near-darkness. Starlight filtered in through the broken windows above.

Finally, Iliana spoke. “What was *that*?”

“A message,” Hilts said, cautiously fingering the device. “An earlier message. I think that Korsin recorded over it—that we weren’t supposed to see it.” The gadget had been testy in recent activations. Maybe it had finally failed to do what Korsin intended. He exhaled and looked up to the skylights. “I think that was, as he said, Naga Sadow.”

The crowd erupted in disbelief, voiced loudest by Korsin Bentado. “Naga Sadow is just a name from folktales—‘Korsin’s celestial ally.’ That—that *thing* acted like it owned the *Omen*. And the crew!”

“They weren’t conquerors,” Iliana said acidly. “They

were diggers in the dirt. And the great Yaru Korsin was just a delivery boy!”

The gruesome outcasts of Force 57 seemed the most horrified of all, having seen the true face of Ravilan and his outcasts. “This—this is not Sith,” Neera said, almost in a whisper. “This is *madness*.”

Hilts was speechless. All the little mysteries from their history and all the redacted sections of texts suddenly made sense, if this could be called sense. Yaru Korsin and the entire founding pantheon had been slaves—to that *thing*?

“No wonder Seelah Korsin wanted us all to be pure specimens,” Iliana said, standing before the others. “She was *sanctifying* the race.”

Korsin Bentada was pacing. “No, it can’t be. It can’t be.” He glared at Hilts. “You! Caretaker! The Sisters got to you earlier. Did you tamper with that?”

“I wouldn’t know where to begin,” Hilts said. He lifted the projector from the floor and placed it back on its pedestal.

“Then . . . what does this mean?”

“It means we’re not just the Tribe,” Hilts said. “We’re a *Lost* Tribe.” He nearly spat the adjective. It was nothing to be proud of. “We’re missing. We didn’t come on our own; we were sent, and not sent here. But once we crashed, Korsin stayed—because he didn’t want to go back and face *that*.”

The murmurs grew louder. Who would blame Korsin? But that made them all something terrible indeed.

Runaway slaves.

In a flash, Iliana ignited her lightsaber and lunged. Hilts stumbled, certain she was coming for him. Instead, her weapon found its home in the recording device, bisecting it and the pedestal it sat upon.

Hilts fumbled toward the sparking halves of the gadget. “What did you do *that* for?”

“We can’t let anyone know,” Iliana said to the others, her voice grave. “They never wanted us to know. Seelah must have forbidden any records of what Ravilan’s people really were. It’s why Korsin recorded over the message. We have to keep this secret.”

Hilts looked up at her. “I don’t see how—”

“We can’t ever let the Keshiri know!” Korsin Bentado said, the stoic giant now Jaye’s equal for nervousness. “If they find out their Protectors could be ruled by creatures like that—”

“They won’t,” Neera hissed. “I’ll kill them all first.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Iliana said, grinding the fragments of the recorder with her boot. “It’s done.”

Hilts looked at the remains. It was.

It had gone predictably wrong. Twenty Sith couldn’t share a secret, not even for their own protection. Someone had told the tale. Perhaps one of the attendees, anguished and full of drink, had revealed all about the Lost Tribe’s origins. Certainly, many of the leaders’ comrades would have been anxious for news about what had transpired during the reading. And there, camped outside, were humans from all over Kesh, celebrating the Festival of Nida’s Rise. Humans with uvak, ready to fly and deliver the dire news.

They weren’t special.

The result was swiftly seen. The cities of Kesh had been crumbling. Now they burned. All of them, from what little word had come in from the rest of the continent. Today was the regularly scheduled Testament Day. It had only taken eight days for the cancerous truth to reach every place humans lived.

They weren’t anything.

Hilts peered out onto the nighttime streets from Jaye’s hejarbo-shoot hut. The dwelling had survived the first firestorm, but the arsonists were in motion

again, and it likely wouldn't be around for long. Everywhere, Keshiri watched from hiding, both fearing for their lives and fascinated by the convulsions their masters were putting themselves through. Anger flowed freely as an entire race tried to commit suicide.

They didn't deserve to be anything.

"This is the end of times, Master Hilts," Jaye said, huddling beside him in the doorway. The frightened Keshiri looked up at the cloud of crazed uvak, circling the flames.

Hilts simply nodded. He'd told his aide about the contents of the recording. It didn't really matter, now. The human population of Kesh was already down to a few thousand from all the infighting. How many could be left? He hadn't seen any of the faction leaders since the riots broke out—not even Iliana, who'd seemed confident the danger was past. How wrong she was. It wouldn't be long now.

And yet . . .

. . . Korsin had said something else. "*The true power is behind the throne,*" he had said. It was a strange statement. Hilts had heard of a Keshiri idiom where that referred to the contributions of a spouse. But the husband of Seelah couldn't mean that. He'd met Iliana, her spiritual descendant. Hilts wouldn't have trusted her not to rob his corpse. No Sith trusted a lover—least of all one like Seelah.

Hilts stood in the doorway.

"Caretaker, the rioters will see you!"

The gray-haired human paid no mind, looking, instead, up toward the palace. They'd evacuated when the mob turned ugly. But it wasn't what was there that was on his mind now. It was what had never been there.

A throne.

Cape billowing behind him, Hilts bolted into the street. Alarmed, Jaye followed, careful not to step on—

or look at—any of his dead neighbors. “Caretaker, what is it?”

“It’s the throne, Jaye. The throne!”

The Keshiri knew the term. Elders in the Neshtovar used to fashion them for themselves. “But Korsin had no throne.”

“Not in the palace, my boy. Look!” Grabbing his aide’s shoulders, he pointed the Keshiri to the west—and the cloud-enshrouded peaks of the Takara Mountains. Suddenly rejuvenated, Hilts recited the lines he’d memorized decades earlier. “*There are secrets you must always keep. The true power is behind the throne. Should disaster befall—remember that!*” Squinting through the smoke, he looked at the forbidden place. “Korsin’s throne was his seat from *Omen*—and that’s up there!”

“I—I don’t understand,” Jaye stammered.

“We weren’t meant to see the message from Sadow—but that’s not Yaru Korsin’s legacy. There’s something else—something he mentioned in the Testament. Something that might save the Tribe from itself!”

Hilts breathed deeply, as excited as he had been in years. For his entire life, he thought he’d known all the history there was, all that Korsin had to say. Could he really have left . . . a *postscript*?

“There’s only one thing to do,” Hilts said, cinching up his cape and walking confidently into the chaos. “We’re going to unseal the temple. We’re going aboard *Omen!*”

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

by Christie Golden

Published by Del Rey Books

Council Chambers of the Circle, Capital City of Tahv, Kesh

The sun beating down upon the stained-glass dome of the Circle Chambers painted the forms of all those assembled in a riot of colors. Yet it was not hot in this large room; regulating the temperature was child's play for such masterful users of the Force as the Sith assembled here.

It was an emergency meeting. Even so, formalities were strictly observed; the Sith were nothing if not meticulous. Grand Lord Darish Vol, the leader of the Lost Tribe, had summoned the meeting less than a standard hour earlier. He now sat upon a dais in the very center of the room, elevated above all others, enthroned on his traditional metal-and-glass seat. While there had been sufficient time to don his colorful formal robes, he had not had time to sit and permit his attendants to paint his gaunt, aged face with the vor'shandi swirls and decorations appropriate to the meeting. Vol shifted slightly in his throne, displeased by that knowledge, displeased with the entire situation that had necessitated the meeting in the first place.

His staff of office was stretched over his lap. His claw-like hands closed about it as his aged but still-

sharp eyes flitted about the room, noting who was here and who was not, and observing and anticipating the responses of each.

Seated on either side of the Grand Lord were the High Lords. Nine members of the traditional thirteen were here today, a mixture of male and female, Keshiri and human. One, High Lord Sarasu Taalon, would never again be among that number. Taalon was dead, and his death was one of the reasons Vol had called the assembly. Seated in a ring around the dais were the Lords, ranked below the High Lords, and standing behind them were the Sabers.

Several of their number were missing, too. Many were dead. Some . . . well, their status remained to be seen.

Vol could feel the tension in the room; even a non-Force-sensitive could have read the body language. Anger, worry, anticipation, and apprehension were galloping through the Chambers today, even though most present hid it well. Vol drew upon the Force as naturally as breathing in order to regulate his heart rate and the stress-created chemicals that coursed through his body. *This* was how the mind remained clear, even though the heart was, as ever, open to emotions and passion. If it were closed, or unmoved by such things, it would no longer be the heart of a true Sith.

“I tell you, she is a savior!” Lady Sashal was saying. She was petite, her long white hair perfectly coiffed, and her purple skin the most pleasing tone of lavender; her mellifluous voice rang through the room. “Ship obeys her, and was not Ship the—” She stumbled on the choice of words for a moment, then recovered. “—The Sith-created construct who liberated us from the chains of our isolation and ignorance of the galaxy? Ship was the tool we used to further our destiny—to conquer the stars. We are well on our way to doing so!”

“Yes, Lady Sashal, we are,” countered High Lord Ivaar Workan. “But it is *we* who shall rule this galaxy, not this stranger.”

Although the attractive, graying human male had been a Lord for many years, he was new to his rank of High Lord. Taalon’s untimely demise had paved the way for Workan’s promotion. Vol had enjoyed watching Workan step into the role as if he had been born to it. While Sith truly trusted no one but themselves and the Force, Vol nonetheless regarded Workan among those who fell on the side of less likely to betray him.

“She is very strong with the dark side,” High Lord Takaris Yur offered. “Stronger than anyone we have ever heard of.” That was quite a statement, coming from the Master of the Sith Temple. Few on Kesh had as extensive a knowledge of the Sith’s past—and now their present as they expanded across the stars—as this deceptively mild, dark-skinned, middle-aged human. Yur had ambition, but, oddly for a Sith, it was largely not personal. His ambitions were for his students. He was content to teach them as best he could, then set them loose on an unsuspecting world, turning his attention to the next generation of Tyros. Yur spoke seldom, but when he did, all listened, if they were wise.

“Stronger than I?” said Vol mildly, his face pleasant, as if he were engaged in idle chitchat on a lovely summer’s day.

Yur was unruffled as he turned toward the Grand Lord, bowing as he replied.

“She is an ancient being,” he said. “It seems to me foolish not to learn what we can from her.” Vol smiled a little; Yur had not actually answered the question.

“One may learn much about a rukaro by standing in its path,” Vol continued. “But one might not survive to benefit from that knowledge.”

“True,” Yur agreed. “Nonetheless, she is useful. Let

us suck her dry before discarding the husk. Reports indicate that she still has much knowledge and skill in manipulating the Force to teach us and future generations of the Lost Tribe.”

“She is not Sith,” said Workan. The scorn in his melodious voice indicated that that single, damning observation should be the end of the debate.

“She is!” Sashal protested.

“Not the way *we* are Sith,” Workan continued. “And our way—our culture, our values, our heritage—must be the *only* way if our destiny is to remain pure and unsullied. We risk dooming ourselves by becoming overly reliant on someone not of the Tribe—no matter how powerful she might be.”

“Sith take what we want,” said Sashal, stepping toward Workan. Vol watched both of them closely, idly wondering if Sashal was issuing a challenge to her superior. It would be foolish. She was nowhere near as powerful as Workan. But sometimes ambition and wisdom did not go hand in hand.

Her full diminutive height was drawn up, and she projected great confidence in the Force. “We will take her, and use her, and discard her when we are done. But for love of the dark side, let us take her first! Listen to High Lord Yur! Think what we can learn! From all that we have heard, she has powers we cannot imagine!”

“From all that we have heard, she is unpredictable and dangerous,” countered Workan. “Only a fool rides the uvak he cannot control. I’ve no desire to continue to sacrifice Sith Sabers and Lords on the altar of aiding Abeloth and furthering her agenda—whatever it might be. Or have you failed to realize that we don’t even truly know what that is?”

Vol detected a slight sense of worry and urgency from the figure currently approaching the Circle

Chambers. It was Saber Yasvan, her attractive features drawn in a frown of concern.

“Only a fool throws away a weapon that still has use,” countered Yur. “Something so ancient—we should string her along and unlock her secrets.”

“Our numbers are finite, Lord Yur,” Workan said. “At the rate Sith are dying interacting with her, we won’t be around to learn very much.”

Vol listened as Yasvan whispered in his ear, then nodded and, with a liver-spotted hand, dismissed the Saber.

“Entertaining as this debate has been,” he said, “it is time for it to conclude. I have just learned that Ship has made contact with our planetary defenses. Abeloth and the Sith I have sent to accompany her will not be far behind.”

They had all known to expect her; it was, indeed, the reason the meeting had been called. All eyes turned to him expectantly. What would their Grand Lord decide?

He let them stew. He was old, and few things amused him these days, so he permitted himself to enjoy the moment. At last, he said, “I have heard the arguments for continuing to work closely with her, and the arguments to sever ties. While I confess I am not overly fond of the former, and have made little secret of my opinion, neither do I think it is time for the latter. The best way to win is to cover all angles of the situation. And so Kesh and the Circle of Lords will invite Abeloth to our world. We shall give her a grand welcome, with feasting, and arts, and displays of our proud and powerful culture. And,” he added, eyeing them all intently, “we will watch, and learn, and listen. And then we will make our decision as to what is best for the Lost Tribe of Kesh.”

Sith Saber Gavar Khai sat in the captain’s chair on the bridge of the *Black Wave*, the ChaseMaster frigate that

had once belonged to Sarasu Taalon. Filling the viewscreen was the spherical shape of his homeworld—green and brown and blue and lavender. Khai regarded the lush planet with heavy-lidded eyes. For so many years, Kesh had been isolated from the events of the galaxy, and Khai found he had decidedly mixed feelings about returning.

Part of him was glad to be home. As was the case with every member of the Lost Tribe, he had spent his entire life here until a scant two years ago. Deeply embedded in him were love for its beautiful glass sculptures and purple sands, its music and culture, its casual brutality and its orderliness. For more than five thousand standard years, the Tribe had dwelled here, and with no other option, had—as was the Sith way—made the best of it. The ancient vessel *Omen* had crash-landed, and the survivors had set about not merely to exist in this world, but to dominate it. And so they had. They had managed to both embrace the Keshiri, the beautiful native beings of Kesh, and subjugate them. Those who were deserving—strong in the Force and able to adapt to the Sith way of thinking and being—could, with enough will, carve out a place for themselves in this society.

Those who were not Force-users had no such opportunities. They were at the mercy of the ones who ruled. And sometimes, as was the case with Gavar Khai and his wife, there was mercy. Even love.

But most often, there was neither.

Too, those who gambled to increase their standing and power and lost seldom lived long enough to make a second attempt. It was a very controlled society, with precise roles. Everyone knew what was expected of him or her, and knew that in order to change their lot, they would need to be bold, clever, and lucky.

Gavar Khai had been all of those things.

His life on Kesh had been good. While, of course, he had his eye on eventually becoming a Lord—perhaps even a High Lord, if opportunities presented themselves or could be manipulated—he was not discontent with where he was. His wife, though not a Force-user, supported him utterly. She had been faithful and devoted and raised their tremendously promising daughter, Vestara, very well.

And Vestara had been the most precious of all the things that had belonged to Gavar Khai.

Discipline was something every Sith child tasted almost upon emerging from the womb. It was the duty of the parents to mold their children well, otherwise they would be unprepared to claim their proper roles in society. Beatings were the norm, but they were seldom motivated by anger. They were part of the way that Sith parents guided and taught their children. Khai had not looked forward to such aspects of discipline, preferring to explore other methods such as meditation, sparring till exhaustion, and withholding approval.

He had found, to his pleasure, that he had never needed to lay a hand on Vestara in reprimand. She was seemingly born to excel, and had her own drive and ambition such that she did not need his to “encourage” her. Khai, of course, had goals and ambitions for himself.

He had greater ones for his daughter. Or at least, he’d had.

His reverie was broken by the sound of the comm beeping, indicating a message from the surface.

“Message from Grand Lord Vol, Saber Khai,” said his second in command, Tola Annax, adding quietly under her breath, “Very prompt, very prompt indeed.”

“I expected as much, once he received my message,” Khai said. “I will speak with him.”

A hologram of the wizened Grand Lord appeared. It

had been some time since Khai had seen the leader of the Lost Tribe. Had Vol always seemed so fragile, so . . . old? Age was to be respected, for to live to an old age meant a Sith had done something very right indeed. But there was such a thing as *too* old, and those who were too old needed to be put down. Idly, keeping his thoughts well shielded, Khai wondered if the renowned Grand Lord was getting to that point. He saw his white-haired Keshiri second in command staring openly at the hologram; doubtless Annax, with her near-obsession for determining weakness, was thinking the same thing.

“Saber Gavar Khai,” said Vol, and his voice certainly sounded strong. “I had expected to speak to Abeloth herself.”

“She is on Ship at the moment. Do not worry, you will see her when she arrives on Kesh,” Khai said smoothly. “She is anxious to create a good first impression.”

“I take it that since you are the one speaking to me, she has selected you to replace the late High Lord Taalon in our . . . interactions with her.”

“It has not been said specifically, no, but yes, Abeloth has turned to me since Lord Taalon’s death.”

“Good, good. Please then assure Abeloth that as she is anxious to create a good first impression, after our people have worked so closely and sacrificed so much for her, we are also desirous that our first meeting go well. To that end, we will need time to prepare for such an august visitor. Say, three days. A parade, showcasing the glory that is the Lost Tribe, and then a masquerade.”

Khai knew a trap when he saw one. As did Annax, who quickly busied herself with her controls so as not to look too obvious as she listened in, and the rest of his crew. As traps went, this was blatant. Vol was testing Khai’s loyalties. To force Abeloth to wait three full

days before being received was to tell her her place. To keep her waiting, as one might a Tyro summoned for interrogation about his studies. Yet Vol would deny such, simply saying that he wanted to make sure everything was just right for their esteemed guest. And with the Sith's love of ceremony and showcasing, the statement had the dubious merit of perhaps even being true.

Vol was waiting for Khai's reaction. He was trying to figure out where the Saber's loyalties lay.

And Khai himself suddenly realized, with a sickly jolt, that he himself didn't know.

Abeloth had doubtless sensed the conversation and was monitoring Khai's presence in the Force. For all he knew about Ship, she also had the ability to monitor the conversation itself. He addressed himself calmly to the man who ostensibly ruled the Lost Tribe of the Sith.

"Abeloth will be disappointed to hear that preparations will take so long," he said, keeping his voice modulated. "She might even see it as an insult." Out of Vol's line of sight, Annax was nodding.

"Well, we wouldn't want that, would we?" said Vol. "As a fine example of a Sith Saber, you will simply have to assure her that this is done out of respect. I trust you will be able to do so."

Slowly, Khai nodded. "I will do so."

"Excellent. You have always done well by me and the Circle, Khai. I knew you would not fail me now. Give my best to Abeloth. I look forward very much to our meeting. I heard certain rumors, and am anxious to hear from you how Vestara is performing on our behalf."

The hologram disappeared. Khai leaned back in his chair, rubbing his chin and thinking. He heard the soft chime that indicated an incoming message and was instantly alert.

"Saber Khai," said Annax, "Abeloth wishes to speak

with you privately.” Her bright eyes were on him, her quick mind doubtless racing two steps ahead, wondering about the outcome of this particular conversation.

Khai nodded. He had expected this, too. “I will receive her in my quarters, then.”

A few moments later, he was in the austere captain’s quarters of the *Black Wave*. He took a moment and steadied himself for the interview. Settling down at a small desk, he said aloud, “Transmit.”

“Patching her through, sir,” Annax replied promptly. Idly, he wondered if the Keshiri was eavesdropping. He had expected a holographic appearance, but Ableoth chose to communicate through audio only.

“Saber Khai,” she said. Her voice sounded better than it had when they’d made their agreement to work together; stronger, more in command. Less . . . wounded. Khai slammed down that line of thinking at once.

“Abeloth,” he said. “I have heard from Lord Vol.”

“I know,” she said, confirming what he had suspected—that she had sensed the conversation already. “It did not go as well as you had expected.”

“Say rather it did not go as well as one could have hoped,” Khai corrected.

“I do hope that he is not denying me the chance to visit your world after all,” said Abeloth.

“Quite the contrary. He has insisted that Kesh, and primarily Tahv, be granted three days to prepare for your arrival, that the Sith may welcome you as the honored guest you are.”

“You suspect he is lying?”

It was a very dangerous game Gavar Khai was playing. Above all else, he wanted to ensure his own personal success—nay, simple survival, if it came to that. He had always been fiercely loyal to his people, but his experiences with Abeloth had also opened his eyes to

the vast power she could wield. Ideally, he could bring the two together, but he had to always be aware that conflict could again erupt between Abeloth and the Lost Sith Tribe.

And if that did happen, he needed to make sure he was on the side of the victor.

While lies were useful, sometimes the truth could be even more so. So he told the truth. "I do not think he is lying. It is a cultural tradition to have great celebrations for momentous occasions. There are always parades and parties and so on. And certainly, Lord Vol is very well aware that choosing to ally with you is an extremely important moment for the Sith."

"But three days seems like a long time to ask so apparently honored a guest to wait." There was irritation in her voice, and he could feel it, cold and affronted, in the Force.

"Such preparations do take time," he said. "I do not know what he plans."

And that much, at least, was as true as the sun rising, although Tola Annax probably could give him a list of possible ideas.

"Very well. We shall give Lord Vol his three days. I must admit, I think I will enjoy seeing so elaborate a celebration. It is good to be honored and respected."

"Indeed. It will be a joyous occasion. I have been told that there will be a parade and afterward a masquerade."

A moment, then a chuckle. "A masquerade. How fitting. Yes, I will definitely enjoy this."

"I can safely say it will be unlike anything you have seen before."

"Of course. I am sure so isolated a world must have developed unique traditions." The way she said *isolated* made it sound like *backward*. Khai forced down any hint of resentment at her condescension.

“This is your world, Saber Khai,” she continued. “I know you have other family besides your daughter. You will be visiting before the celebration?”

“I am the leader of this flotilla,” Khai said. “I had not planned to, no.”

“Do,” said Abeloth. It was couched as a suggestion. Khai knew it was not. “And any others you think would appreciate the chance to visit should do so, as well. I do not think that I will be tarrying overlong.”

“As you wish,” said Gavar Khai, wondering, for the hundred thousandth time, just what she meant.