

STAR WARS[®]

LOST TRIBE OF THE SITH

PURGATORY

JOHN JACKSON MILLER

STAR WARS

Lost Tribe of the Sith #5

PURGATORY

By John Jackson Miller

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Chapter One

3960 BBY

Their afternoon began as it always had. The rake fell, gouging orderly grooves into the black mud. Lifting it for another pass, the wielder brought it down again, neatly bisecting the furrows.

Ori Kitai watched from across the hedge. The young farmer went so slowly. The rake, an insubstantial marriage of hejarbo shoots and flinty rocks, nonetheless parted the rich soil with ease. But Jelph of Marisota seemed to be in no hurry—at this, or anything else.

How monotonous it must be, Ori thought. All day, every day, the man in the straw-brimmed hat tended his duties, with no place to go or friends to see. His homestead sat alone at a bend of the Marisota River, far from most centers of Sith culture on Kesh. Nothing existed upstream but volcanoes and jungle; nothing downriver but the ghost towns of the Ragnos Lakes. It was no life for a human.

“Lady Orielle,” Jelph said, doffing the hat. Sandy hair hung in a long braid outside the collar of his soaked blouse.

“Just Ori,” she said. “I’ve told you a dozen times.”

“And that means a dozen visits,” he said in that strange accent of his. “I’m honored.”

The slender, auburn-haired woman strolled along the hedge, casting sidelong glances at the workman. She didn’t have any reason to hide why she still came here—not with her family’s future about to be assured. Ori could do what she wanted. And yet, as she stepped through the opening onto the gravel path, she felt meek and fifteen again. Not a Sith Saber of the Tribe, a decade older.

Her brown eyes trained on the ground, she chuckled to herself. There was no reason for modesty. Ori wore the black uniform of her office. Jelph wore rags. She’d passed the tests of apprenticeship on the grounds of the palace, along the glorious promenade walked by Grand Lord Korsin more than a millennium earlier. Jelph’s home was a hovel, his holding less a farm than a depot for the fertilized soils he provided the gardeners of the cities.

And yet the man had something she’d never encountered in another human: He had nothing to prove. No one ever looked directly at her in Tahv. Not really. People always had one eye on what the conversation could mean for them, on how her mother could help them. Jelph had no thoughts of advancement.

What good would such thoughts be to a slave?

Setting down the rake, Jelph stepped from the mud and pulled a towel from his belt. “I know why you’re here,” he said, wiping his hands, “but not why you’re here *today*. What’s the big occasion this time?”

“Donellan’s Day.”

Jelph looked blankly at her. “That one of your Sith holidays?”

Ori tilted her head as she followed him around the hut. “You were Sith once, too, you know.”

“That’s what they tell me,” he said, pitching the

towel away. It landed in a bucket on the ground, out of his sight. “I’m afraid we don’t cultivate much ancestral memory out in the hinterlands.”

Ori smiled. He was so learned, for a lesser. Jelph cultivated plenty, out of sight of the trail where she’d left her uvak to graze until she was ready to fly again. Behind the house, past the small mountains of river clay he traded with the Keshiri, he kept six trellises of the most beautiful dalsa flowers she’d ever seen. Like the hut and rake, the trellises were made from lashed-together hejarbo shoots—and yet they made for a display that rivaled the horticultural wonders of the High Seat. Here, behind a slave’s quarters in the middle of nowhere.

Taking the crystal blade she offered, the hazel-eyed farmer started cutting the specimens she selected. As usual, they’d decorate the urns on her mother’s balcony at the revels.

“So your event. What is it?” Pausing, he looked down at her. “If you want to tell me, that is.”

“Nida Korsin’s firstborn was born a thousand years ago tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Jelph said, trimming. “Did he become Grand Lord or something?”

She smirked. “Oh, no.” The reign of Nida Korsin had initiated a robust, glorious age for the Sith, she explained. Donellan knew that his father, the Lord Consort, would be put to death on Nida’s passing. That was in Yaru Korsin’s will. But he’d waited too long to make his move. Nida’s only son had died an old man, waiting for his chance to rise to power. It was the end of a dynastic system; following his passing, heirless Nida had instituted succession based on merit.

“So this guy failed, and he has his own day?”

The Sith liked the message of Donellan’s story, she told him. Many Sith were patient about engineering

their ascensions, but it was possible to be too patient. “Donellan’s Day is also called the Day of the Dispossessed. And think about it,” she said, admiring his muscled arms through the slit sleeves. “Has the Tribe ever really *needed* a cause for a celebration?”

He laughed once, a throaty chuckle that made Ori smile. “No, I guess not,” he said. “At least it keeps people in my line of work busy.”

The seven High Lords were always trying to outdo one another in decorating their boxes at the games. Taking the design of her mother’s booth into her own hands eight months earlier, Ori had learned about Jelph and his secret garden from one of the Keshiri florists of Tahv—if indirectly. Sensing a lie when the Keshiri claimed that the flowers were his own, Ori followed him on her uvak one day. The flying beasts still forbidden to the Keshiri, the florist had traveled on foot to meet a caravan of carts bringing fertilizer from the Marisota. She found Jelph—and had found him again many times since, except when he was away on his raft, up in the jungle.

The jungle. Ori looked over the trellis to the green hills, climbing away to the smoldering peaks of the east. Even the Tribe didn’t go up into that tangle of underbrush and overhanging foliage. “No sane person *should* go there,” Jelph had said. But what he brought back on his little barge was the secret to his horticultural success—and the successes of all his customers along the line. “By the time the runoff comes downstream,” he’d explained once, digging his hands into a mound of soil, “a lot of the nutrients are gone.” Ori had lain awake nights imagining the man waist-deep in a dark mountain stream, shoveling muck into his flatboat.

Silliness. A hedonistic excess. But she was Sith, wasn’t she? Who else should she please?

Kneeling, he arranged the cuttings neatly upon a cloth draped across the ground. Large, dirt-stained hands worked with surprising gentleness, prying away the buds that had come to nothing. Jelph looked at her keenly. “You know, I can give you the names of my customers closer to Tahv. They’re growing their plants in the same dirt.”

“Yours are better,” she said. That much was true. Perhaps the flowers simply grew better in air closer to their native soil. Maybe it was the workmanship of a human, rather than a Keshiri.

Or maybe it was *this* human. When she’d met him, she’d imagined Jelph had only recently become a slave. No laborer she’d met, human or Keshiri, had his vocabulary. He must have *been* someone before, back in the Sith cities. But he’d answered without hesitation: “I’m nobody. I never *knew* anybody, before you.” He’d been born into slavery, and there he’d stay. He, and whatever children he might ever have.

The human slave class had developed soon after the Korsin line ended. While many of *Omen’s* descendants were Force-sensitive, those who weren’t had formed their own layer of society beneath those who served the Grand Lord. Free members of the Tribe, this yeomanry helped to keep the Keshiri, who stood at the very bottom, productive. But when any Sith citizen stood condemned by a Lord, birthright could be lost forever. Jelph of Marisota had no surname because his father had none to give. He was better than a Keshiri—she’d *never* let one of the purple-skinned serfs call her by her first name—but only because he was human, not because he was Sith. Jelph owed fealty and service to the Sith, should they want it, but only Ori had ever prevailed upon him directly for anything.

Such a waste, she thought, admiring both worker and workmanship. “You know, my mother’s a High Lord.”

“You’ve mentioned it.”

“She’s powerful, but the traditions are so strong,” she said. “It’s a shame there isn’t some kind of path for you to get back in.”

“I never *was* in,” he said. “And what would I do in Tahv? I’d hardly fit with your beautiful people.” Looking up at her, he winked. In the sunlight, she could see the long, ruddy scar running from his right cheek down his neck. She’d sometimes imagined it as being from some great battle, rather than some farm accident, years ago. But he was right. Even if he had his name, his disfigurement would make him an ill fit for the Tribe.

Jelph stood abruptly.

“You *are* going to roll those up,” she said, eyes darting between him and the flowers.

“Actually, I have something for you,” he said, pointing a thumb behind him. “In honor of your Day of Dispossession.”

“That’s ‘Dispossessed.’”

“Begging your pardon.” He led her farther into the farm than she’d been before, past the mounds to a structure she’d seen only from the sky. Situated near the riverbank, the hut was larger than his dwelling and twice the height.

Ori blanched. “What’s back there? It stinks!”

“Manure usually does. Uvak are pretty rank,” he said, approaching the barred door. Once a stable for a previous occupant who could own uvak, now it provided him a wind-free place to store the loads of dung he needed for mixing his soil. “You don’t want to be around when I have that stuff carted in.” He opened the door.

“Surely *this* isn’t your gift to me,” she said, squinting and covering her nose.

“Surely not.” He reached inside the doorway to

retrieve a strange-looking yoke. "It's something I was working on. I lengthened some waterskins and attached them to part of an uvak harness." Balancing the center straps on his hands, he showed her how the long pouches hung to either side. "You've always had to fly the dalsas back in a moist cloth. With these, you can carry them straight—and you won't be soaked when you get home."

Ori opened her eyes wide, even as he shut the door to the rancid place. "You made that for me?"

Jelph looked around. "Hmm. I don't see the Grand Lord here today, so . . . sure. I guess it's for you."

They walked back along the riverside, past the little flatboat tied at the bank. Returning from its grazing, Shyn, Ori's uvak, flew in from above and settled in a clearing. Jelph strode assuredly toward the animal and lifted the yoke over its leathery frame. A perfect fit. Shyn, who took to no one, nodded passively.

This is why I come here, Ori thought. Life at court was cutthroat—this month, more than most times. But so many were motivated not by lust for power, but by fear of losing what power they had. This man had nothing and feared nothing.

Her mother had given it a name: the Confidence of the Dead End.

Jelph partially filled the skins with water and then deposited the clippings inside. Shyn looked like a parade animal now, festooned with flowers. That might be an idea for sometime, Ori thought—but not for tomorrow. She watched as he fastened the tops to protect the blossoms.

"There. Fit for the Grand Lord." He helped her aboard the uvak.

"Jelph," she said, looking down. "With what you can do, you really ought to be teaching the Keshiri how to grow things. Not selling them dirt."

“Careful,” he said, gesturing toward the composting barn. “My life’s in that dirt.” He patted Shyn’s long face and turned toward his flatboat, bobbing in the water. “And I may not be of the Tribe, but at least *I’ve* got a ship.” He laughed. “Such as it is!”

Chapter Two

The Sith *did* have a ship, Ori knew, but she'd never seen it. No one alive had. One of Yaru Korsin's last acts was to remove everyone from the lofty retreat to Tahv, where the newcomers could expand their numbers and reach. Aerial sentries perpetually protected the holy and forbidden Temple from violators, Sith and otherwise. But the mountain was always visible over Tahv's now-useless protective walls, a reminder of their stellar origins.

Ori could see the peak clearly from her mother's new luxury compartment in the Korsinata. Multiple stadium decks rose over a pentagonal playing field, with the Grand Lord's section highest of all. Just that morning, Ori's mother had been awarded a coveted section in the stadium near the Grand Lord, whose balcony always faced the Temple.

"Closer to the stars," Ori said under her breath. *We're moving up.*

She studied the horizon. There, kilometers away, *Omen* sat in its protective building, waiting for the day when the Sith came for their lost tribe. But no one had come, and few explanations for why were attractive. The legendary Sith Lord Naga Sadow would have found them by now, had he won his war. If the Sith

and Jedi had wiped each other out, no one might ever come.

And what if the Jedi had won? As she had on the farm, Ori blanched just to think of it. She knew what Jedi were only from her teachers, who'd kept the story alive. Ori knew enough to hate the Jedi and everything they stood for. Weakness. Pity. Self-denial. Discovery by Jedi would be a cruel fate, indeed.

But the worst thing about the passage of time had been the realization that, in their attempts to get off-world, those same pioneers of legend from a millennium earlier had squandered most of the resources that could have helped the Tribe now. Plenty of Lignan crystals from *Omen's* hold circulated, but they were good for lightsabers and little else. And any understanding of how *Omen* worked had faded; it was now the province of scholars who no longer had access to the vessel. Only the Grand Lord could reverse Korsin's ban and return the Tribe's eyes to space.

It wouldn't be *this* Grand Lord, the biggest nothing ever to hold the position. Ori seethed as she looked across to the withered crone in her ornately decorated stall. Lillia Venn rocked in her throne, her palsied hand moving completely out of time with the tempo of the musicians playing below. Grand Lord Venn had been a compromise candidate a year earlier, when the other six High Lords had been unable to agree on a new leader. The oldest High Lord by twenty years, Venn was past fearing; no one had imagined she would last. The rival political parties, distinguished by the red and gold sashes they wore, swore fealty to the woman while continuing to plot their next steps. This Grand Lord was a corpse-in-waiting.

"Don't forget to salute, darling."

Ori looked back into the dark eyes of Candra Kitai. Vibrant for her fifty years, the newest High Lord approached the railing, turned primly toward the royal

booth, and bowed. When the Grand Lord did not respond, Candra's face drew so tight Ori feared it might crack wide open.

"Easy, Mom," Ori said. "Like you told me, it's our big day." Months earlier, Ori's mother had taken Venn's place among the seven High Lords, instantly becoming the second most important person in the Tribe. By keeping her preferences regarding the rival factions private, Candra had become the tiebreaker: the one ultimately to select the aged leader's successor.

Recognizing Candra's new importance, Venn had given her the section nearby, in range of even her feeble eyes. If treated well, Candra could keep the other High Lords stalemated indefinitely, fending off all challenges.

And then? *Who knows*, Ori thought. *By next Donellan's Day, we might be in the royal box.*

Her own rivals among the Saber leadership, the Luzo brothers, flanked the Grand Lord. The barrel-chested pair glared back at Ori, barely concealing their disdain. Probably annoyed, she thought, because this was the one moment when they wouldn't be able to sabotage her. They'd been watching her for months, eager to profit from any slip. With any luck, the end of Venn would be the end of the Luzos, too.

"Easy, dear," Candra prompted, catching her thought. "We're all friends today." The newest High Lord turned and nodded to the leaders of the two rival factions, seated in their customary red and gold boxes. High Lords Dernas and Pallima were as important to her as the Grand Lord was—and she, to them.

"Friends. Right." Ori rolled her eyes.

"But our booth looks lovely. A fine job, again."

Reminded, Ori turned her gaze to something more pleasing—the dalsa flowers, fresh and vibrant on the balcony. Jelph of Marisota might never appear here, but at least some part of him had made the trip.

Thunder came from below. Ori looked down to see the riders, wearing the ancient garb of Nida Korsin's Skyborn Rangers, entering the field with their crippled uvak. Harshest of all bloodsports on Kesh, rake-riding even began with gore. The wing muscles of uvak hatchlings were cut, permanently grounding them while preserving some range of movement. With glass prongs screwed into their tough wing edges, the fully grown creatures stalked around, their flopping wings transformed into dangerous weapons.

Squinting, Ori tried to identify the riders. Dernas and his Reds had their favorites out there, as did Pallima and the Golds. Venn had two entries, promoted by the Luzo brothers. The last to enter the field, however, was the one Ori cared about: Champion Dey, uvak wrangler from the southlands that Candra represented. Dey saluted Ori and her mother.

"He'll do well, I think," Ori commented.

"He'll die," Candra said.

Ori looked back, surprised. Candra settled into her comfortable chair, indifferent to the drums beating below. Searching her mother's face, Ori realized the truth. These sporting events were always succession struggles by proxy. The rival factions might try to win Candra's favor by allowing her entry to win, but the newest High Lord wasn't going to agitate Grand Lord Venn. Not today.

"We're going to have to win sometime," Ori grumbled.

"Not today," Candra said. Champion Dey was as good as dead.

The shell-horn sounding, the field dissolved immediately into a cloud of dust and blood. There was no strategy to rake-riding, no posturing. The riders had their lightsabers, but anyone with sense minded the reins and nothing else. Like any Saber, Ori loved a

good fight—but this was nothing more than a brawl with animals: titans, lurching about, ripping into one another.

And her family's entry was simply there to dress the place, no better than the flowers in the—

“*Look!*”

All eyes turned to Champion Dey, whose uvak reared back suddenly on its clawed feet. It charged ahead, razor-tipped wings outstretched. But instead of goring the opponent stumbling haplessly before it, the creature leapt. . .

. . . and *flew*. Wings that shouldn't work pumped mightily, allowing uvak and rider to bound from the melee toward the grandstands.

Dey, standing in his saddle, raised his red lightsaber and screamed something Ori couldn't hear. He was in control, all right. Lighting her own weapon, Ori leapt atop the railing, ready to pounce if he came near. But the lumbering behemoth passed to the left, awkwardly clawing its way upward through the panicked crowd toward the Grand Lord's luxury compartment, above.

Ori saw Lillia Venn stand, unflinching, as the attacker scaled the stone bleachers toward her. Raising her shaking hands, the Grand Lord unleashed a torrent of dark side energy. Blue fire crackling all along its wingspan, the surprised animal fell backward onto the lower seating, throwing its rider free. The Luzos leapt from the royal box, their own weapons red blurs as they plunged toward the would-be assassin.

“Mother, get back!” Ori yelled.

Across the way, a Keshiri aide closed the shutters to the Grand Lord's compartment. Ori now did the same, knocking over large vases of Jelph's flowers in the process. She turned back to see her mother, staggering, paralyzed before the spectacle.

“What happened, Mother?” They'd known Champion

Dey for years, supporting his training. What could have caused his mad act?

Candra simply shook her head, blood draining from a face that had looked youthful only moments before. “You . . . you’d better go, Ori.”

“The other Sabers are dealing with Dey,” Ori said, guarding the entrance to the compartment.

“That’s not what I mean.”

Ori looked at her mother, stunned. “We didn’t do this. We don’t have anything to worry about. Do we?” She took the older woman’s arm. “Mother, *do we?*”

Summoning some unseen reserve of calm, Candra straightened. “I don’t know what just happened. But I *will* know, one way or another.” She stepped past her daughter and opened the door. Outside, Sith and Keshiri dashed madly down the Korsinata’s exterior ramps.

“Mother!”

Candra looked back with sad eyes. “I can’t talk now, Ori. Just get to the estate and make sure the slaves know I won’t be coming home tonight.” She disappeared into the crowd.

A star fell harmlessly from the sky. Landing on a hill, it provided light through the night, causing the gardens of Kesh to flourish as never before.

Until it rose again, setting everything afire. The stones of Ori’s home fell to dust before the hot wind, exposing her to the inferno. Charred and dying, she’d chased the star into the jungle to ask why it had destroyed her world. It answered: “Because you thought me a friend.”

Ori had experienced the Force vision during her second day as a Tyro, the lowest level in the Tribe’s hierarchy. It had never meant anything to her. But arriving at Starfall, her mother’s country estate south of Tahv,

she'd had occasion to remember it. A procession of Keshiri laborers was exiting the marbled mansion, carrying belongings to a pyre on the lawn.

Her laborers. Her belongings.

Leaving Shyn by the columns lining the front walk, Ori ran toward the bonfire. Drawing her lightsaber, she charged the frail purple figure directing the work: her mother's caretaker.

"What's going on?" Ori grabbed the man. "Who told you to do this?"

Recognizing his mistress's daughter, the Keshiri looked furtively to either side before touching Ori's wrist. He spoke in a low whisper. "This was ordered by the Grand Lord herself, milady. Just a couple of hours ago."

A couple of hours ago? Ori shook her head. The assassination attempt had only been two hours earlier. How was any of this possible?

The caretaker gestured to the main entrance. There, two apprentices of the Luzo brothers stood in the grand doorway, watching the furniture-laden workers pass. They hadn't noticed her yet, Ori saw—but she'd change that. Ori took a step toward the house.

Clutching at her arm, the old man yanked Ori back. "There are more of them inside," he said, pulling her behind the fire and out of their view. "They're taking your mother's things, too."

"Is she still a High Lord?" Ori asked.

The caretaker looked down.

Another thought struck her. "Am I still a Saber?"

Suddenly sickened, Ori staggered closer to the flames and tried to remember what she'd heard and seen on the way out of the Korsinata. There had been so much chaos. With Champion Dey killed seconds after his failed attack, rumors were attributing his act everywhere. The Red faction claimed her mother had made

a dire pact with the Golds, and vice versa. Some claimed Venn had died in her box, succumbing to her exertions and the excitement; others reported seeing the executions of High Lords Dernas and Pallima, right in their boxes at the arena. None of it made sense.

The only thing all agreed on was who brought the assassin into the stadium to begin with: the Kitai family.

She had to get back to Tahv and speak to her loyal apprentices with access to the High Seat. Defenders of her family's interests, they would know what was going on now. It was important not to succumb to anger over the bonfire, an obvious attempt by the Grand Lord's camp to provoke a reaction and reveal disloyalty.

Looking toward the mansion, she smirked. Candra Kitai's political skills were unparalleled. By now, she'd have successfully deflected blame and figured out who the victors were. By the time Ori reached Tahv, Candra would likely be sitting at the right hand of whoever had won out. Now was no time to fall into a clumsy trap set by the Luzos.

"This will be straightened out," she told the caretaker, turning toward her uvak.

"Good-bye, Ori."

Climbing atop Shyn, Ori took the reins in hand. Suddenly she stopped, calling after the retreating Keshiri elder. "Wait. You called me *Ori*."

The Keshiri looked down and wandered away.

By the dark side, she thought. Anything but that.

Jelph tipped the wobbly cart backward, allowing another pile of soil to spill into the trough. As summer went on, the mounds would dry out, becoming more acidic; an alkaline wash tended to refortify the stockpiles. His Keshiri customers didn't know about hydrogen ions, but they were particular nonetheless.

Hearing a sound, Jelph dropped his trowel and stepped around the hut. There, in the waning rays of evening, stood his visitor from the day before, facing her uvak and gripping the bridle.

“I’m surprised to see you,” Jelph said, approaching her from behind. “Nothing wrong with the dalsas, I hope?”

Turning, she released the harness. The brilliant brown eyes were full of hurt and anger.

“I’ve been condemned,” Ori of Tahv said. “I’m a slave.”

Chapter Three

Jelph poured more of the gritty mixture into her bowl. A Keshiri pauper's dish, the tasteless cereal became something else in his hands, seasoned with spices from his garden and the tiniest morsels of salted meat. Ori didn't know what animal it came from, but now she devoured the meal hungrily. Two days of prideful restraint had been enough.

It was still so strange to see him, here, outside the fields. Each of the past two mornings, he had risen before sunrise, beginning his chores early to have more time for her. He washed in the river before she rose. When it was her turn, he retreated to the corner of the hut that served as his kitchen to preserve her modesty. Ori didn't think she had any, but again, that strange meekness crept in. He was no Keshiri plaything, but a human, even if he was a slave.

As she was.

For some reason, she hadn't told him anything that first night. There was so little he could do, and it was all so far beyond his frame of reference. She'd sat in silence in the doorway of the hut, watching for nothing until she collapsed. She'd awakened the next morning inside, on the bed of straw he used himself. She had no idea where he'd slept that night, if he'd slept at all.

The second evening, after an untouched dinner, she'd let it all spill out: everything she'd learned in her trip to Tahv. The leaders of the two factions that could never agree on a Grand Lord had indeed fallen to their elderly compromise candidate. The event had given her minions cause to decapitate—literally—the leaderships of the Red and Gold factions.

Ori's mother still lived, her sources assured her, though in the clutches of the vengeful Venn. It was too late for Candra to save her career, but she might yet save her life, if she said the right things about the right people. Like Donellan, Candra had waited too long to choose a side and to put herself forward as a successor. A year had seemed like so little time to be a High Lord. But for Venn, whose every breath was a miracle, the need to outlive her rivals was paramount.

On learning that she'd been condemned to slavery, Ori had dashed to her hidden uvak and flown immediately to the only safe place she knew. After a long moment's hesitation, Jelph had welcomed her—although he'd been less sure of what to do with Shyn. As slaves, neither of them could own an uvak. Remembering the composting barn that had once served as a stable, Ori had urged him to hide the creature there, behind the stalls storing manure. Initially uncertain, Jelph had relented under her pressure. Already feeling sick, she'd heaved as soon as the door to the vile place was opened. She did it again the second night, after relating the full tale of her tiny but important family's downfall.

Jelph had been caring and helpful those times, with his cool river water and washrags handy. Now, in the twilight of the third evening, she was *really* testing the limits of his hospitality. Feeling better, she'd spent the entire day stamping around the farm, going over the events in her mind and plotting her family's return to power,

even if the family now was just her. At supper, she'd tested both his knowledge and his patience.

"I don't understand," Jelph said, scraping the bottom of the orojo-shell bowl. "I thought the Tribe expected people to want each other's jobs."

"Yes, yes," Ori said, cross-legged on the floor. "But we don't kill to take them. We kill to keep them."

"There's a distinction?"

Ori dropped her empty bowl to the floor of the hut. *Some dining table*, she thought. "You really *don't* know anything about your people, do you? The Tribe is a meritocracy. Whoever's best at a job can have it—provided that a public challenge is made. Dernas never made a public challenge to the Grand Lord. Neither did Pallima."

"Nor did your mother," he offered, kneeling to retrieve her bowl. He looked slightly startled when she used the Force to levitate it into his hand. "Thanks."

"Look, it's really simple," she said, standing and making a futile effort to brush the dirt from her uniform. "If you get to your rivals before they're ready, you can do anything you want—including assassination."

His brow furrowed as he looked up at her. "It sounds like a bloodbath."

"Normally we keep it low-key, for order's sake. Poisonings. A *shikkar* blade in the gut."

"For order's sake."

She stood in the doorway and glared. "Are you going to criticize, or are you going to help me?"

"I'm sorry," Jelph said, rising. "I didn't mean to upset you." He shook his head. "It's just that the thought of having rules for this sort of thing seems, well, odd. There are rules for breaking the rules."

Ori walked to the bank and looked west. The sun appeared to be sinking into the river itself, setting the

water ablaze with orange. It *was* a beautiful place, and she'd fantasized about stolen nights here before. But this wasn't what she had imagined at all. She wasn't going to be able to plot her return from this place. And she'd need more help than a strapping farmhand.

"I have to go back," she said. "My mother was framed. Whoever did this to us will pay—and I'll have my name back." She looked back at him, gnawing on a stalk of something he'd pulled from the ground. "I have to go back!"

"I wouldn't do that," he said, joining her at the river-side. "I suspect your Grand Lord did all of this herself."

Ori looked at him, amazed. "What would you know about it?"

"Not much, I'll grant you," Jelph said, chewing. "But if your mother was the key to selecting Venn's replacement, I could see the old woman wanting her out of the way."

Incredulous, Ori looked into the growing shadows. "Stick to fertilizer, Jelph."

"Look at it this way," he said, edging into her field of view. "If Venn didn't stage the assassination and really suspected your mother, you wouldn't have been condemned. You'd be dead. But the Grand Lord doesn't *have* to kill you, because she knows you didn't do anything. You're more useful as an example." He tossed the stick into the river. "By making slaves out of a High Lord and her family, she's got living, breathing deterrents in front of people for as long as you live."

Ori looked at him, stunned. It made sense. Dernas and Pallima had died out of public view. The bonfire at the estate had attracted the attentions of humans and Keshiri alike. If she had stayed in Tahy, she might already be at work, doing hard labor in full public view.

"So what do I do?"

He smiled, softly, his scar invisible now. "Well, I

don't know. But it strikes me that, as long as you still don't sense your mother suffering through your Force, the way to thwart Venn is . . . *not to be an example.*"

He didn't say the rest, but she heard it. *The way not to be an example is not to be there.* She looked up into his eyes, reflecting the starlight hitting the water. "How does a farmer know about these things?"

"You've seen my job," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I deal with a lot of things that stink."

She laughed, despite herself, for the first time since she arrived. As she took a step away from the river in the darkness, her footing faltered in the soft ground.

He caught her. She let him.

Standing in the doorway of the hut after midnight, Jelp looked in at her sleeping form on the straw bed. It had been wrong to let Ori stay this long, he thought—and certainly wrong to let things go as far as they had in the last nine days. But then, it had been wrong to encourage her visits to begin with.

Stepping outside, he tightened his tattered robe. After so many sultry days, there was an unseasonable chill in the air tonight. It matched his mood. Ori's presence put everything in jeopardy, in ways she could never imagine. So much more was at stake than the fortunes of one Sith family.

And yet, he'd taken her in. It was a different Ori Kitai that had come to see him, one he couldn't resist. She'd seemed so proud on her earlier visits—full of the noxious entitlement of her people, certain of both her status and herself. With the loss of one, the other had gone. He'd seen the person underneath: tentative and unsure. As angry as she still was over what had happened, she was also sad over the loss of a vision she had once had of herself. And lately, sadness had been winning out, her days limited to walks from his hut to the garden.

Humility in a Sith. It was an amazing thing to witness, an impossibility. Her armor melted down, the impurities seemed to boil away. Was it possible that not every Sith on Kesh was born venal? Her anger over being dispossessed seemed . . . no more than normal. No more than how he would feel, and had felt, in similar situations. It wasn't the kind of fury that destroyed civilizations for sport. It wasn't Sith.

It struck him as wrong that the greatest misfortune in Ori's life had only made her more attractive to him. The reserve he'd worked to develop had fallen away after that night on the riverbank. She had needed him, and it had been so long since anyone had. There wasn't much market for nonentities, in the wilds or anywhere else. But the risk was always there, accompanying the happiness.

He looked to the north. A faint streak of light nestled between the clouds and the hills. The aurora was beginning again. In a couple of nights, the northern sky would be afire. It would soon be time.

Casting a glance to the storehouse, he calculated how long he'd have to be away from the farm. It wasn't safe to have her wandering around in his absence. She would have to go.

But he couldn't let her leave.

Chapter Four

He had left at daybreak, long hejarbo pole in hand to push his craft upriver. Her tranquillity broken, Ori had issued a stream of protests. What did it matter what his customers needed for the autumn growing season? What did he owe those people? All he got for his work was a few items that he couldn't coax out of the ground.

But Jelph had kept looking to the jungle highlands, and to the sky. He'd claimed he had more responsibilities than she knew. Ori had scoffed, longer and louder than she'd intended. That worried her, now, bringing back two of the snares he'd set for the rodents at the edge of the forest. Jelph hadn't gone away mad, but he had gone away, despite her entreaties.

She didn't like it. He'd been the balm she needed, making all of the heartache go away. She'd been dependent on her mother's office for so much in life that it had been seductively easy to put her existence in his hands. But his leaving had reminded her that he could refuse her. She had power over no one.

And she couldn't live without him. Without Jelph, there was no one else at all.

No one but Shyn. Up ahead, Ori spied the rear door to the composting barn, cracked open to permit circulation. Not even an uvak should have to live in that place, even

if the stench came from its kind. Taking a deep breath, she approached. It had taken her most of the day to check and clear the traps, yielding a few of the varmints that Jelph used to supplement his diet. *Wretched*. At least seeing the uvak reminded her that she still had some freedom, some chance to—

Ori's eyes narrowed. Something in the Force had changed. Dropping the traps, she ran to the barn and threw open the rickety door.

Shyn was dead.

The great beast lay bleeding on the dirt floor, deep gashes burned into its long golden neck. Immediately recognizing the wounds, Ori ignited her lightsaber and scanned the building. "Jelph! Jelph, are you here?" Except for a few tools lining the wall, nothing was in here, save the giant mound of filth near the front.

"I told you we'd find her here" came a young male voice from outside. "Just follow the stench."

Ori emerged, weapon held high. The Luzo brothers, her nemeses in the Saber corps, stood out in front before uvak mounts of their own. Flen, the elder, smirked. "Stench of failure, you mean."

"You looking to die, Luzo?" She stepped forward, unafraid.

The pair didn't move. Sawj, the younger brother, sneered. "We've killed two High Lords this week. I don't think we're going to dirty our hands with a slave."

"You killed my uvak!"

"That's different," Sawj said. "You may not know this, but we Sabers are charged with keeping order. A slave can't keep an uvak!"

Filled with hate, Ori stepped forward, ready to charge—only to see Flen Luzo turn toward his uvak.

"Traders told us you liked to come here," he said, opening his saddlebag. "We're here to make a trade." He tossed two scrolls to her feet.

Kneeling, Ori looked at the wax on the parchment. There was her mother's marking, a design known only to her and immediate members of her family. Such a thing was reserved for validating a final testament. Unfurling the scroll, she saw that, in a sense, this was. "This says she plotted with Dernas and the Reds to kill the Grand Lord!"

"And the other says she plotted with Pallima and his people," Flen said, grinning. "She signed both confessions, as you see."

"You could have gotten anything under duress!"

"Yes," Flen said.

Ori scanned the document. Candra Kitai now pledged her eternal loyalty to Grand Lord Venn, who would keep her alive as her personal—very visible—slave. Venn would now be naming three replacement High Lords of her own, Flen said, effectively blocking any moves by what remained of her rivals' camps. Ori could guess from the sound of Flen's voice that the brothers might find themselves suddenly elevated, for their loyalty.

"As I said," Flen added, "we came for a trade. Your lightsaber, please."

Ori threw the scrolls to the dirt. "You'll have to take it!"

He simply crossed his arms. "Your mother told us that you would cooperate. I'm sure you wouldn't want to be the cause of her suffering."

"She's suffering already!" She took another step toward them.

"And then our Sabers will come down here in force and raze this little farm. *And* that farmer boy of yours," he said, eyes glinting evilly. "They already have orders to do so, if I don't bring back your lightsaber."

Ori froze. Suddenly reminded, she looked frantically toward the river. He would be floating home soon.

Flen spoke in a knowing voice. "We don't care what a slave does, or who she does it with. But you're not a slave

until we have that weapon.” The brothers ignited their lightsabers in unison. “So what’s it going to be?”

Ori closed her eyes. She didn’t deserve what had happened to her, but he didn’t deserve any of it. And he was all she had.

Pressing the button, she deactivated the lightsaber and threw it to the ground.

“Right call,” Sawj Luzo said, deactivating his lightsaber and taking hers. Both brothers stepped back to their mounts and climbed aboard.

“Oh,” Flen said, reaching for something strapped to his uvak’s harness. “We did have a gift from the Grand Lord—to start your new career.” He threw the long object, which landed at Ori’s feet with a thump.

It was a shovel.

Its metal blade made it truly a treasure: she could see it was forged from one of the few bits of debris from *Omen’s* landing. That material had been worked and reworked over the centuries, as Kesh’s paucity of surface iron had become known. A final reward for her former life. Shovel in her hands, she heard the Luzos laughing as they soared away to the north.

Ori looked around at what she had left. The hut. The barn. Mound after mound of the man’s mud. And the trellises, home to the dalsas that had brought her here to begin with . . .

“NO!”

Anger boiling inside her, she lashed out, striking the frail structures with the shovel. One mighty swing tore the frame apart, sending the flowers crashing to the ground. The hejarbo-shoot wreckage exploded, blown to splinters by the force of her mind.

Infuriated, she charged through the farm, hacking Jelp’s wobbly cart to pieces. So much anger, so little to destroy. Turning, she saw the symbol for her dispossession: the composting barn. Swinging, she smashed the

door from its hinges and charged inside. Raging through the Force, she yanked at the sorry tools on the walls, sending them flying in a whirlwind of hate. And there was that mound of manure, large and noxious. Twirling, she brought the blade of the shovel down onto it . . .

Clang! Striking something beneath the surface of the dung, the shovel ripped free from her hands, causing her to lose her footing in the muck.

Calming as she got to her feet, Ori looked in amazement at the pile. There, beneath the stinking mess, was a soiled cloth covering protecting something large.

Something metal.

Recovering the shovel, she began to dig.

He had felt terrible, leaving Ori with a job that would take her all day. But he had his own trap to check, here under the lush canopy. Jelph hadn't caught anything in months, but his best chances always seemed to coincide with the auroras.

Approaching the secluded knoll, he found his treasure, hidden beneath the giant fronds. He breathed faster in anticipation. All through the recent days of turbulence and tranquillity, he'd felt somehow that something was about to happen. This might be the day he'd been waiting for, after so much time . . .

Jelph stopped. Something was happening, but it wasn't here. Looking through the foliage to the west, he had that gut feeling again. Something *was* happening, and it was happening now.

He ran for the boat.

Ori found the strange thing sitting beneath the manure-covered tarp. There actually wasn't that much of the foul stuff piled over it; just enough to give the appearance that what lay beneath was something other than it was.

And what it was, was big—easily the length of two

uvak. A great metal knife, painted red and silver, with a strange black bubble sitting atop its rear. Protrusions swept back, winglike, in a chevron, each tipped with two long spears that reminded her of lightsabers.

She'd forgotten the smell, now, breathing faster as she ran her hand across the surface of the metal mystery. It was cold and imperfect, with dents and burn marks all along its length. But the true surprise yet awaited her. Reaching the rounded section in back, she pressed her face against what seemed like black glass. Inside, tucked into an amazingly small space, she saw a chair. An engraved plate sat just behind the headrest, bearing characters looking similar to the ones she'd been taught by her mentors:

Aurek-class Tactical Strikefighter
Republic Fleet Systems
Model X4A—Production Run 35-C

Ori's eyes widened. She saw it for what it was. *A way back in.*

All his life, Jelph Marrian had feared the Sith. The Great Sith War had concluded before he was born, but the devastation done to his homeworld of Toprawa was so complete that he had devoted his life to preventing their return.

He had gone too far, alienating the conservative leaders who ran the Jedi Order. Expelled, he had sought to continue his vigil, working with an underground movement of Jedi Knights devoted to preventing the return of the Sith. For four years, he'd worked in the shadows of the galaxy, making sure the masters of evil were indeed a memory.

Things had gone wrong again. On assignment in a remote region three years earlier, he'd learned of the col-

lapse of the Jedi Covenant. Fearful of returning, he'd headed for the uncharted regions, sure that nothing could ever restore his name and place with the Order.

On Kesh, he had found something that might—wrapped up in his worst nightmare come true. He'd been caught in one of Kesh's colossal meteor showers, crashing in the remote jungle as just one more falling star. Unable to raise help through Kesh's bizarre magnetic field, he'd ventured down toward the lights he'd seen on the horizon.

The light of a civilization, steeped in darkness.

Still meters from the bank, he leapt from the boat. "Ori! Ori, I'm back! Are you—"

Jelph stopped when he saw the trellises, cut down. Taking in the damage, he dashed toward the barn.

The door was open. There, exposed in the evening twilight, sat the damaged starfighter he'd painstakingly floated down from the jungle, a piece at a time. He found something else, beside it: a metal shovel, discarded. "Ori?"

Stepping into the shadows of the barn, he saw the corpse of the uvak, food for the small carrion birds. Behind the building, he found the traps he'd sent her to check, abandoned on the ground. She had been here—and gone.

In front of the hut, he found other tracks. Wide Sith boots and more uvak prints. Ori's smaller prints were here, too, heading past the hedge up the cart path that led to Tahv.

Jelph reached inside his vest for the bundle he always carried on trips. Blue light flashed in his hand. He was a lone Jedi on an entire planet full of Sith. His existence threatened them—but their existence threatened everything. He had to stop her.

No matter what.

He dashed up the path into the darkness.

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

by Troy Denning

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BEYOND THE FORWARD VIEWPORT HUNG THE GOSSAMER VEIL of Ashteri's Cloud, a vast drift of ionized tuderium gas floating along one edge of the Kessel Sector. Speckled with the blue halos of a thousand distant suns, its milky filaments were a sure sign that the *Rockhound* had finally escaped the sunless gloom of the Deep Maw. And, after the jaw-clenching horror of jumping blind through a labyrinth of uncharted hyperspace lanes and hungry black holes, even that pale light was a welcome relief to Jaina Solo.

Or, rather, it *would* have been, had the cloud been in the right place.

The *Rockhound* was bound for Coruscant, not Kessel, and *that* meant Ashteri's Cloud should have been forty degrees to port as they exited the Maw. It *should* have been a barely discernible smudge of light, shifted so far into the red that it looked like a tiny flicker of flame. Jaina could not quite grasp how they had gone astray.

She glanced over at the pilot's station—a mobile levchair surrounded by brass control panels and drop-down display screens—but found no answers in Lando Calrissian's furrowed brow. Dressed immaculately in a white shimmersilk tunic and lavender trousers, he was

perched on the edge of his huge nerf-leather seat, with his chin propped on his knuckles and his gaze fixed on the alabaster radiance outside.

In the three decades Jaina had known Lando, it was one of the rare moments when his life of long-odds gambles and all-or-nothing stakes actually seemed to have taken a toll on his con-artist good looks. It was also a testament to the strain and fear of the past few days—and, perhaps, to the hectic pace. Lando was as impeccably groomed as always, but even he had not found time to touch up the dye that kept his mustache and curly hair their usual deep, rich black.

After a few moments, Lando finally sighed and leaned back into his chair. “Go ahead, say it.”

“Say what?” Jaina asked, wondering exactly what Lando expected her to say. After all, *he* was the one who had made the bad jump. “It’s not my fault?”

A glimmer of irritation shot through Lando’s weary eyes, but then he seemed to realize Jaina was only trying to lighten the mood. He chuckled and flashed her one of his nova-bright grins. “You’re as bad as your old man. Can’t you see this is no time to joke?”

Jaina cocked a brow. “So you *didn’t* decide to swing past Kessel to say hello to the wife and son?”

“Good idea,” Lando said, shaking his head. “But . . . *no.*”

“Well, then . . .” Jaina activated the auxiliary pilot’s station and waited as the long-range sensors spooled up. An old asteroid tug designed to be controlled by a single operator and a huge robotic crew, the *Rockhound* had no true copilot’s station, and *that* meant the wait was going to be longer than Jaina would have liked. “What are we doing here?”

Lando’s expression grew serious. “Good question.” He turned toward the back of the *Rockhound*’s spacious flight deck, where the vessel’s ancient bridge-droid

stood in front of an equally ancient navigation computer. A Cybot Galactica model RN8, the droid had a transparent head globe, currently filled with the floating twinkles of a central processing unit running at high speed. Also inside the globe were three sapphire-blue photoreceptors, spaced at even intervals to give her full-perimeter vision. Her bronze body-casing was etched with constellations, comets, and other celestial artwork worthy of her nickname. “I *know* I told Ornate to set a course for Coruscant.”

RN8’s head globe spun just enough to fix one of her photoreceptors on Lando’s face. “Yes, you did.” Her voice was silky, deep, and chiding. “And then you countermanded that order with one directing us to our current destination.”

Lando scowled. “You need to do a better job maintaining your auditory systems,” he said. “You’re hearing things.”

The twinkles inside RN8’s head globe dimmed as she redirected power to her diagnostic systems. Jaina turned her own attention back to the auxiliary display and saw that the long-range sensors had finally come on line. Unfortunately, they were no help. The only thing that had changed inside its bronze frame was the color of the screen and a single symbol denoting the *Rockhound*’s own location in the exact center.

RN8’s silky voice sounded from the back of the flight deck. “My auditory sensors are in optimal condition, Captain—as are my data storage and retrieval systems.” Her words began to roll across the deck in a very familiar male baritone. “Redirect to *destination* Ash-teri’s Cloud, arrival time *seventeen hours fifteen, Galactic Standard.*”

Lando’s jaw dropped, and he sputtered, “Tha . . . that’s not *me!*”

“Not quite,” Jaina agreed. The emphasis was placed

on the wrong syllable in several words; otherwise, the voice was identical. “But it’s close enough to fool a droid.”

Lando’s eyes clouded with confusion. “Are you telling me what I *think* you’re telling me?”

“Yes,” Jaina said, glancing at her blank sensor display. “I don’t quite know how, but someone impersonated you.”

“Through the Force?”

Jaina shrugged and shot a meaningful glance toward a dark corner. While she knew of a half-dozen Force powers that could have been used to defeat Ornate’s voice-recognition software, not one of those techniques had a range measured in light-years. She carefully began to expand her Force-awareness, concentrating on the remote corners of the huge ship, and, thirty seconds later, was astonished to find nothing unusual. There were no lurking beings, no blank zones that might suggest an artificial void in the Force, not even any small vermin that might be a Force-wielder disguising his presence.

After a moment, she turned back to Lando. “They *must* be using the Force. There’s no one aboard but us and the droids.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” Lando paused for a moment, then asked, “Luke’s friends?”

“I hate to jump to conclusions, but . . . who else?” Jaina replied. “First, Lost Tribe or not, they’re *Sith*. Second, they already tried to double-cross us once.”

“Which makes them as crazy as a rancor on the dancing deck,” Lando said. “Abeloth was locked in a *black hole prison* for twenty-five thousand years. What kind of maniacs would think it was a good idea to bust her out?”

“They’re *Sith*,” Jaina reminded him. “All that matters to them is power, and Abeloth had power like a nova has light—until Luke killed her.”

Lando frowned in thought. “And if they’re crazy enough to think they could take Abeloth home with them, they’re probably crazy enough to think they could take the guy who killed her.”

“Exactly,” Jaina said. “Until a few weeks ago, no one even knew the Lost Tribe *existed*. That’s changed, but they’ll still want to keep what they can secret.”

“So they’ll try to take out Luke and Ben,” Lando agreed. “And us, too. Contain the leak.”

“That’s my guess,” Jaina said. “Sith like secrecy, and secrecy means stopping us *now*. Once we’re out of the Maw, they’ll expect us to access the HoloNet and report.”

Lando looked up and exhaled in frustration. “I *told* Luke he couldn’t trust anyone who puts *High Lord* before his name.” He had been even more forceful than Jaina in trying to argue Luke out of a second bargain with the Lost Tribe—a bargain that had left the Skywalkers and three Sith behind to explore Abeloth’s savage homeworld together. “Maybe we should go back.”

Jaina thought for only an instant, then shook her head. “No, Luke knew the bargain wouldn’t last when he agreed to it,” she said. “Sarasu Taalon has already betrayed his word once.”

Lando scowled. “That doesn’t mean Luke and Ben are safe.”

“No,” Jaina agreed. “But it *does* mean he’s risking their lives to increase *our* chances of reporting to the Jedi Council. *That’s* our mission.”

“Technically, Luke doesn’t get to assign missions right now,” Lando pressed. “You wouldn’t be violating orders if we—”

“Luke Skywalker is still the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy. I think we should assume he has a plan,” Jaina said. A sudden tingle of danger sense raced down her spine, prompting her to hit the quick-release on her

crash harness. “Besides, we need to start worrying about saving our own skins.”

Lando began to look worried. “What are you saying?” he asked. “That you’re sensing something?”

Jaina shook her head. “Not yet.” She rose. “But I *will* be. Why do you suppose they sent us someplace easy to find?”

Lando scowled. “Oh . . .” He glanced up at a display, tapped some keys—no doubt trying to call up a tactical report—then slammed his fist against the edge of the brass console. “Are they jamming us?”

“That’s difficult to know with the ship’s sensor systems offline for degaussing,” RN8 replied.

“*Offline?*” Lando shrieked. “Who authorized *that?*”

“*You* did, ninety-seven seconds ago,” RN8 replied. “Would you like me to play it back?”

“No! Countermand it and bring all systems back up.” Lando turned to Jaina and asked, “Any feel for how long we have until the shooting starts?”

Jaina closed her eyes and opened herself to the Force. A shiver of danger sense raced down her spine, and then she felt a mass of belligerent presences approaching from the direction of the Maw. She turned to RN8.

“How long until the sensor systems reboot?”

“Approximately three minutes and fifty-seven seconds,” the droid reported. “I’m afraid Captain Calrissian also ordered a complete data consolidation.”

Jaina winced and turned back to Lando. “In that case, I’d say we have less than three minutes and fifty-two seconds. There’s someone hostile coming up behind us.” She started toward the hatchway at the back of the cavernous bridge, her boots ringing on the old durasteel deck. “Why don’t you see if you can put a stop to those false orders?”

“Sure, I’ll just tell my crew to stop listening to me.” Lando’s voice was sarcastic. “Being droids, they’ll know what I mean.”

“You might try activating their standard verification routines,” Jaina suggested.

“I *might*, if droid crews this old *had* standard verification routines.” Lando turned and scowled at Jaina as she continued across the deck. “And you’re going *where?*”

“You know where,” Jaina said.

“To your StealthX?” Lando replied. “The one with only three engines? The one that lost its targeting array?”

“Yeah, that one,” Jaina confirmed. “We need a set of eyes out there—and someone to fly cover.”

“No way,” Lando said. “If I let you go out to fight Sith in that thing, your dad will be feeding pieces of me to Amelia’s nexu for the next ten years.”

Jaina stopped and turned toward him, propping one hand on her hip. “Lando, did you just say ‘*let?*’ Did you really say ‘*no way*’ to me?”

Lando rolled his eyes, unintimidated. “You know I didn’t mean it like that. But have you gone spacesick? With only three engines, that starfighter is going to be about as maneuverable as an escape pod!”

“Maybe, but it still beats sitting around like a blind bantha in this thing. Thanks for worrying, though.” She shot Lando a sour smile. “It’s so sweet when you old guys do that.”

“*Old?*” Lando cried. After a moment, he seemed to recognize the mocking tone in Jaina’s voice, and his chin dropped. “I deserved that, didn’t I?”

“You *think?*” Jaina laughed to show there were no hard feelings, then added, “And you know what Tendra would do to *me* if I came back without Chance’s father. So let’s *both* be careful.”

“Okay, deal.” Lando waved her toward the hatchway. “Go. Blow things up. Have fun.”

“Thanks.” Jaina’s tone grew more serious, and she

added, “And I mean for *everything*, Lando. You didn’t have to be here, and I’m grateful for the risks you’re taking to help us. It means a lot to me—and to the whole Order.”

Lando’s Force-aura grew cold, and he looked away in sudden discomfort. “Jaina, is there something you’re not telling me?”

“About this situation?” Jaina asked, frowning at his strange reaction. “I don’t think so. Why?”

Lando exhaled in relief. “Jaina, my dear, perhaps no one has mentioned this to you before . . .” His voice grew more solemn. “But when a Jedi starts talking about how much you mean to her, the future begins to look *very* scary.”

“Oh . . . sorry.” Jaina’s cheeks warmed with embarrassment. “I didn’t mean anything like *that*. Really. I was just trying to—”

“It’s okay.” Lando’s voice was still a little shaky. “And if you *did* mean something—”

“I *didn’t*,” Jaina interrupted.

“I know,” Lando said, raising a hand to stop her. “But if things start to go bad out there, just get back to Coruscant and report. I can take care of myself. Understand?”

“Sure, Lando, I understand.” Jaina started toward the hatchway, silently adding, *But no way am I leaving you behind.*

“Good. Try to stick close. We won’t be hanging around long.” A low whir sounded from Lando’s chair as he turned it to face RN8. “Ornate, prepare an emergency jump to our last coordinates.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible, Captain Calrissian,” the droid replied. “You gave standing orders to empty the navicomputer’s memory after each jump.”

“*What?*” Lando’s anger was edging toward panic now. “How many other orders—no, forget it. Just countermand my previous commands.”

“*All* of them?”

“Yes!” Lando snapped. “No, wait . . .”

Jaina reached the hatchway and, not waiting to hear the rest of Lando’s order, raced down the rivet-studded corridor beyond. She still had no idea what the Sith were planning, but she *was* going to stop them—and not only because the Jedi Council needed to know everything she and Lando could tell them about the Lost Tribe of Sith. Over the years, Lando had been as loyal a friend to the Jedi Order as he had to her parents, time after time risking his life, fortune, and freedom to help them resolve whatever crisis happened to be threatening the peace of the galaxy at the moment. He always claimed he was just repaying a favor, or protecting an investment, or maintaining a good business environment, but Jaina knew better. He was looking out for his friends, doing everything he could to help them survive—no matter what mess they had gotten themselves into.

Jaina reached the forward hangar bay. As the hatch opened in front of her, she was surprised to find a bank of floodlights already illuminating her battered StealthX. At first, she assumed Lando had ordered the hangar droid to ready the *Rockhound’s* fighter complement for launch.

Then she saw what was missing from her starfighter.

There were no weapon barrels extending from the wingtips. In fact—on the side facing her, at least—the cannons themselves were gone. She was so shocked that she found herself waiting for the rest of the hangar lights to activate, having forgotten for the moment that the *Rockhound* did not have automatic illumination. The whir of a pneumatic wrench sounded from the far side of the StealthX, and beneath the starfighter’s belly, she noticed a cluster of telescoping droid legs straddling the actuator housing of a Taim & Bak KX12 laser cannon.

“What the . . .”

Jaina snapped the lightsaber off her belt, then crossed twenty meters of tarnished deck in three quick Force-bounds and sprang onto the fuselage of her StealthX. She could hardly believe what she saw. At the far end of the wing stood a spider-shaped BY2B maintenance droid, her thick cargo pedipalps clamped around the starfighter’s last laser-cannon while her delicate tool arms released the mounting clips.

“ByTwoBee!” Jaina yelled. “What *are* you doing?”

The pneumatic wrench whined to a stop, and three of the droid’s photoreceptors swiveled toward Jaina’s face.

“I’m sorry, Jedi Solo. I thought you would know.” Like all droids aboard the *Rockhound*, BY2B’s voice was female and sultry. “I’m removing this laser cannon.”

“I can see that,” Jaina replied. “Why?”

“So I can take it to the maintenance shop,” BY2B replied. “Captain Calrissian requested it. Since your starfighter is unflyable anyway, he thought it would be a good time to rebuild the weapon systems.”

Jaina’s heart sank, but she wasted no time trying to convince BY2B she had been fooled. “When Lando issued this order, did you actually *see* him?”

“Oh, I rarely *see* the captain. I’m not one of his favorites.” BY2B swung her photoreceptors toward the hangar entrance, and a trio of red beams shot out to illuminate a grimy speaker hanging next to the hatchway. “The order came over the intercom.”

“Of course it did.” Jaina pointed her lightsaber at the nearly dismantled laser cannon. “Any chance you can reattach that and get it working in the next minute-and-a-half?”

“No chance at all, Jedi Solo. Reattaching the power-feeds alone would take ten times that long.”

“How’d I know you were going to say that?” Jaina

growled. She turned away and hopped down onto the deck. “All right—finish removing it and prep the craft for launch.”

“I’m sorry, that’s impossible,” BY2B replied. “Even if we had the necessary parts, I’m not qualified to make repairs. The specifications for this craft weren’t included in my last service update.”

“I flew it *in* here, didn’t I?” Jaina retorted. “Just tell me you haven’t been mucking around with the torpedo launchers, too.”

“This craft has *torpedo launchers*?” BY2B asked.

Jaina rolled her eyes, wondering exactly when the droid’s last service update had been, then rushed over to a small locker area at the edge of the hangar. She activated the lighting, flipped the toggle switch on the ancient intercom unit in the wall, and stepped into the StealthX flightsuit she had left hanging at launch-ready.

A moment later, Lando’s voice crackled out of the tiny speaker. “Yes, *Jaina*? What can *I* do for *you*?”

Jaina frowned. The voice certainly *sounded* like Lando’s. “How about a status report?” she asked, pushing her arms through the suit sleeves. “My StealthX is really messed up. No use taking it out.”

“*My*, that is *too* bad,” Lando’s voice said. “But don’t be *concerned*. Ar-en-eight has *nearly* sorted out the *system* problems.”

“Great.” Jaina sealed the flightsuit’s front closure and stepped into her boots. “I’ll head aft and check out the hyperdrive.”

“Oh.” Lando’s voice seemed surprised. “That won’t be *necessary*. Ar-en-eight is running *diagnostics* now. I’m sure the Em-Nine-O and his crew can *handle* any *necessary repairs*.”

And *his* crew. If there had been any doubt before, now Jaina *knew* she was talking to an imposter. Not long ago, Lando had confided to Jaina that the only

way he had survived all those solitary prospecting trips early in his career was to close his eyes whenever one of the *Rockhound* droids spoke and imagine she was a beautiful woman. He would never have referred to M9EO as a male.

Jaina grabbed her helmet and gloves out of the locker, then said, “Okay. If you’ve got everything under control, I’m going to stop by my bunk and grab some shut-eye before my shift comes up.”

“Yes, why don’t *you* do that?” The voice sounded almost relieved. “I’ll *wake* you if anything comes *up*.”

“Sounds good. See you in four hours.”

Jaina flicked off the intercom switch, then started back toward her StealthX, securing her helmet and glove seals as she walked. Gullible, no Force-presence, and a terrible liar—the Voice definitely belonged to a stowaway droid, probably one sent by the Sith. That made enough sense that Jaina felt vaguely guilty for not anticipating the tactic in time to prevent the sabotage. The only thing she *didn’t* understand was why the Sith hadn’t just rigged the fusion core to blow. A *living* stowaway they might have valued enough to work out an escape plan—but a *droid*? She could not imagine that any Sith deserving of the name would give a second thought to sacrificing a droid.

Jaina reached her StealthX and found BY2B standing behind the far wing, holding the last laser-cannon in her heavy cargo arms. Jaina did a quick visual inspection of the bedraggled starfighter, then asked, “Is she ready to fly?”

“*Ready* would be an overstatement,” BY2B answered. “But the craft is capable of launching. I *do* hope you checked your flightsuit for vacuum hardness.”

“No need—it’s not *me* that will be going EV.” Jaina ascended the short access ladder and climbed into the

cockpit. As she buckled herself in, she asked, “By-TwoBee, have you seen any new droids around here lately?”

“No,” the droid said. “Not since departing Klatooine.”

“*Klatooine?*” Jaina’s stomach began to grow cold and heavy. “Then you *did* see a new droid before we left for the Maw?”

“Indeed, I did,” BY2B replied. “A Rebaxan MSE-6.”

“A *mouse* droid?” Jaina gasped. “And you didn’t report it?”

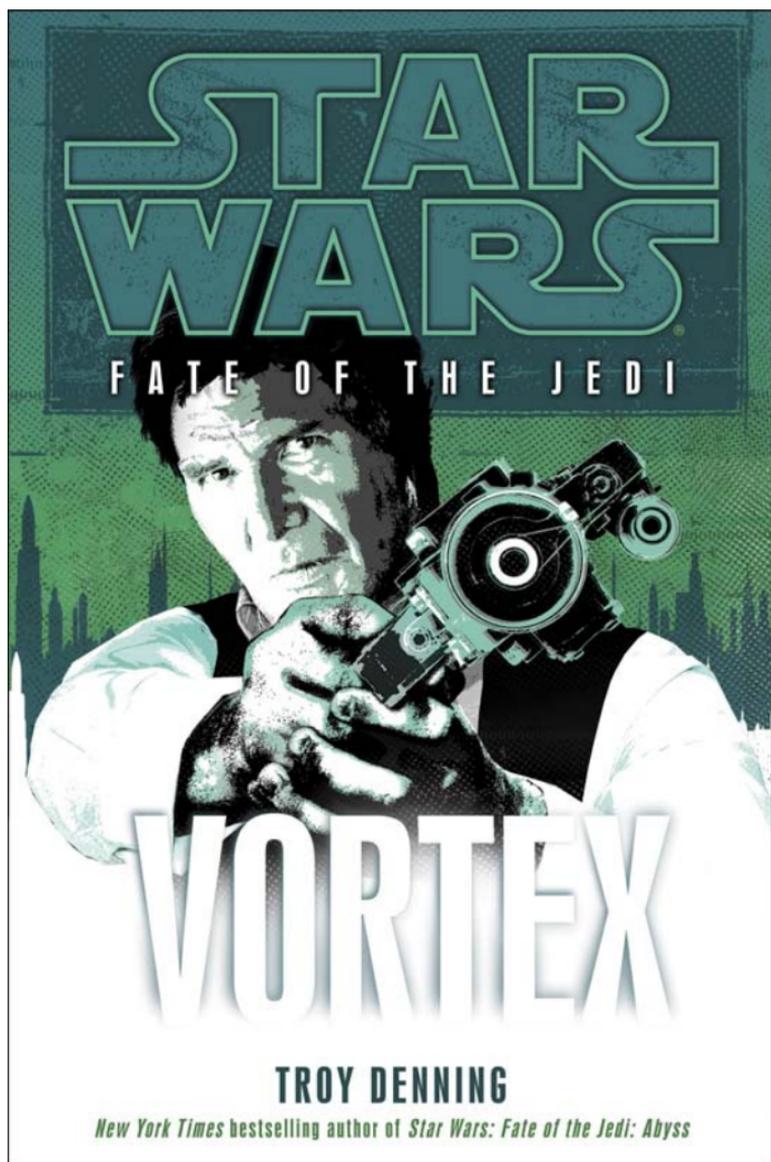
“Of course not,” BY2B said. “Captain Calrissian had warned me just a few minutes earlier to expect a courier shuttle delivering a new utility droid.”

Jaina groaned and hit the pre-ignition engine heaters, then asked, “And I suppose he told you this over your internal comlink?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” BY2B replied. “How did you know?”

“Because that *wasn’t* Lando you heard,” Jaina said, speaking through clenched teeth. “It was a sabotage droid programmed with an impersonation protocol.”

“*Sabotage?*”



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