



STAR WARS[®]

LOST TRIBE OF THE SITH

SAVIOR



JOHN JACKSON MILLER

STAR WARS

Lost Tribe of the Sith #4

SAVIOR

Also by John Jackson Miller

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Chapter One

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“Children of Kesh, your Protectors have come home to you. *Again!*”

Korsin waited for the clamor from the crowd to die down. It didn't. Commander Yaru Korsin, Grand Lord of the Tribe of Sith on Kesh, stood atop the marbled platform and looked across the churning sea of ecstatic purple faces. Behind him rose the columns and domes of his new home. Once a native village, Tahv was now a Sith capital.

The buildings had been raised quickly on the site of the old Circle Eternal for this day, exactly a quarter century in standard years after the Sith arrival on Kesh. Korsin had been determined to make that anniversary one to celebrate, rather than lament. With today's dedication, Korsin signaled his people's intent to live among the Keshiri for good.

Now, years after the crash, it was clear that nothing more could be done to repair *Omen*. There was no reason to live in their lofty temple at the crash site when such beauty existed below. Korsin cast his gaze upward, toward the cloudy peak on the western horizon. A skeleton team of Sith and Keshiri workers was

there, wrapping up affairs on the mountain. Sealed safely in its shrine, *Omen* would be there if they needed it.

Korsin knew they wouldn't. It was a charade. No one was coming for them; he'd known that as soon as he saw the transmitter's melted guts. The planet Kesh was nowhere near anywhere, or Naga Sadow would have found them by now. Them, and his precious Lignan crystals.

He wondered about Captain Saes and the *Harbinger*. Had they survived the collision that had sent *Omen* astray? Had the fallen Jedi won the glory that should have belonged to the Sith, after a victory at Primus Goluud? Or had Naga Sadow slain him for his incompetence?

Does Sadow even live?

Idle thoughts, Korsin knew. But he had to keep these questions alive in his people, so long as any remembered where they came from. Stability demanded it.

It had required an elegant balancing act. Sith facing a future *only* on Kesh would forever fight for status—meaning more days like the one, years before, when he and Devore had dueled. He looked at the Sith standing at attention on either side of the wide slate stairs leading down the platform. So many people, so many ambitions to manage. It was why Korsin had allowed them to think that he had indeed activated the emergency beacon once, before it failed. The prospect of departure had the power to unite; so did the specter of the arrival of a punishing superior power.

But he also had to make sure any hoped-for escape always ran second to their *real* job: reshaping Kesh as a Sith world. What had happened to Ravilan's people was partially due to Korsin's failure at managing that, though he didn't mind the result. Unlike his wife, he had nothing against the crimson-skinned Sith, but factions threatened order. A homogeneous Sith people was easier to rule.

His wife. Marrying Seelah had been another nod to stability, a bridge between *Omen's* crew and its mining-team passengers. There she was, across the dais, greeting the dignitaries the Keshiri were allowed to have. Greeting, that is, without actually *touching* any of them. Korsin never touched her anymore, either. It was a shame: she *was* gorgeous now, black hair cascading in ringlets around flawless dusky skin. He didn't know what dark sorceries her team of experts had wrought, but she looked scarcely a day over thirty-five.

This move was her idea. She'd hated the sterility of the mountain retreat; their new home was warmer, both in temperature and in appearance. The Keshiri artisans and Sith designers had learned much from one another. There was stone, yes, but thorned dalsa flowers scaled the exterior walls. Gardens appeared here and there, beside gurgling aqueduct-fed pools. It was a place for life.

Not all Keshiri cities had been places for life, Korsin thought as he acknowledged the elders hobbling past. He could've lost the people entirely, years before. The mass deaths at the lake towns had been effectively ascribed to the residents' lack of faith in the Tribe's divinity. They'd even made a show for the doubters: a known Keshiri dissenter was trotted onto the Circle Eternal to proclaim against the "so-called Protectors," only to fall, seemingly choking to death on his own words. Korsin himself was able to appear benevolent and shocked—but the message was clear. Plague and pestilence awaited the defiant.

Gloyd had thought up that little stunt. Good old Gloyd. More old, now, than good. The stern Houk stood behind, lightsaber drawn, as Korsin's ceremonial bodyguard—but the onetime gunner now looked like *he* needed the protecting. He was the last nonhuman left from the original crew. An age would pass with him.

“The Daughter of the Skyborn, Adari Vaal,” Gloyd announced. Korsin immediately forgot all about architecture and clever Houks. Adari, their native rescuer of old, stepped mildly before them and bowed.

Korsin watched her cold welcome from Seelah. If they weren’t in front of half of Kesh, it would be colder still. He always marveled when he watched the two together. There wasn’t any comparison. Seelah was attractive, but she knew it—and never let anyone forget it. She found the Keshiri ugly: more proof her judgment was never to be trusted.

As a Keshiri, Adari was so much less than Seelah—and yet so much more. She wasn’t touched by the Force, but she had a nimble mind, grappling with things far beyond her people’s obvious limitations. And she had the will of a Sith, if not the beliefs. Only twice had he seen her strength fail her—most important, the first time, when she had agreed to keep Devore’s death a secret. That had made so many things possible—for both of them.

Stepping before him, Adari regarded Korsin with her dark, probing eyes, full of mystery and intelligence. He took her hand and smiled. *Forget Seelah.*

Twenty-five years. He’d saved his people.

This was a good day.

You can read my mind. Don’t you know how uncomfortable this is for me? Don’t you care?

Adari pulled her hand free from Korsin’s and managed a smile. Seelah’s “greeting” had only given her a mild shiver. But Yaru Korsin always looked at her like a cart he was about to buy at half price.

She tried to step back and continue down the receiving line, but Korsin pulled at her arm. “This is your day, too, Adari. Stand with us.”

Marvelous, she thought. She tried to avoid Seelah’s

gaze, unsure if Korsin's body would be enough to block it. But at least this was a discomfort she'd learned to cope with on a daily basis. Public spectacles, like this one, she'd never get used to.

And they had all gone so well for her, whatever her age or status. Right here on this site, she had stood accused as a heretic. And then, days later, she'd stood fêted as a hero—no matter that she had just brought a plague upon her people in the form of the Sith.

Now that the old plaza was buried under this new edifice, she was here again, looking out across a sea of ignorance. The Keshiri blithely celebrated their own enslavement, ignoring their countless brothers and sisters who had died since the Sith arrival. Many had perished in the lake-town disaster—but many more lives had been lost at hard labor, attempting to please their guests from above. The Sith had twisted the Keshiri faith so none of that mattered. Every vain hope the masses ever had was invested in the Sith.

Even Adari wasn't immune. She thought back to her poor son Finn—bloodied and smashed. He'd insisted on joining the work crews on reaching his teen years. No child of the Daughter of the Skyborn needed to work, but Zhari Vaal's youngest had rebelled exactly on schedule, haring off to a work crew.

A scaffold, hurriedly erected, had given way. Adari had failed that day, too, flying her broken child to the temple and Korsin's feet. Korsin had immediately come to Finn's side, working his Sith magic; for a moment, Adari had found herself hoping that Korsin could actually return life to her son. But of course, he couldn't.

She already knew they weren't gods.

Korsin had earned a fight with Seelah that day—healing was *her* domain—but Adari hadn't given a thought to consulting her medics. The Sith doctors had been interested in the Keshiri only long enough to learn

that their diseases posed them no threat—and that they could bear the Sith no children. Maybe that was why Seelah tolerated Adari's companionship with Korsin.

But that friendship was never the same after that day. Adari had enjoyed learning from Korsin, but Finn's death had woken her conscience. She'd meant one thing to her people. Thereafter, she'd mean something else—as the leader of the Keshiri underground resistance movement, made up of others who had come to their senses.

And now, after a dozen years, they were finally ready to act.

From the south, a thunderous rumble sounded. The Sessal Spire had been feeling its volcanic youth lately. Safely remote, it nonetheless disrupted the perfect formation of uvak-fliers hovering over the procession.

Adari looked up at them—and then hard at Korsin, hair now slate gray. She'd learned to hide her thoughts from him by maintaining a steady, emotionless manner. She needed that now, more than ever.

She managed a smile. Korsin had called to her for deliverance, years before. Soon, she would deliver her own kind.

I'm not the bargain you think I am. Neither is Kesh.

Seelah watched as the flight of uvak landed on the clearing below. Theirs had been a sloppy approach; not enough to ruin the day, but enough to call attention where it didn't belong.

It principally did *not* belong on the lead rider, now dismounting and stepping toward the staircase. For her twentieth birthday, Yaru Korsin had made his whelp of a daughter head of something that didn't exist: the Skyborn Rangers. It was little more than a club of Sith hobby riders, useful only for public displays like this. Nida Korsin had just shown it wasn't even much good at that.

That Nida was also *her* daughter was a detail of genealogy. The child's outfit was an abomination against fashion. Seelah imagined the uvak-leather vest and chaps were supposed to make her look rugged and active, but stepping up to the receiving line, little Nida simply looked comical. Seelah recognized her own eyes and cheekbones in the girl, though not much else; short-cropped hair and colored face paints made waste of whatever natural beauty Nida may have inherited. The girl would never have made it through one of Seelah's infamous inspections.

"She's the child of the Grand Lord," Seelah rasped to Korsin as their daughter stepped past. "What must the *Keshiri* think?"

"Since when do you care about *that*?"

Nida shuffled off the stage with barely a nod from Korsin. It was time for the real show.

Shrieks came from the crowd—first of surprise, then of joy. From locations within the multitude, two dozen costumed merrymakers in ceremonial *Keshiri* masks leapt high into the air, tearing their cloaks free as they did. Landing on ground cleared of bystanders by firm Force pushes, the black-clad acrobats stood revealed as the Sabers, the Tribe's new honor detail. Crimson lightsabers danced as they performed intricate exercises. The final flourish resulted in an explosion of delight from the *Keshiri*, followed by an announcement from Gloyd: "High Lord Jariad, of the line of Korsin!"

The lead Saber strode robustly up the central staircase to the dais, stealing *Keshiri* breaths with every resolute step. Ebon hair and beard perfectly coiffed, Jariad made every pause a pose for history. The wild child of Devore Korsin and Seelah had come of age.

Lightsaber still ignited, Jariad stood before Yaru Korsin. Nephew and stepson, Jariad was nearly a third of a meter taller—a fact not lost on anyone watching.

An icy look passed between them. Suddenly Jariad knelt, holding the lightsaber centimeters above the back of his own tanned neck. “I live and die at your command, Grand Lord Korsin.”

“Rise, High Lord Korsin.”

Seelah watched with relief as her son rose to a warm embrace. The crowd cooed. For all his title and family connection, Jariad was not Yaru Korsin’s heir to power any more than Seelah was; Korsin had long kept his succession plans private. The seven High Lords he had appointed were mere advisers. But if Jariad was a public favorite, Seelah knew, Sith and Keshiri alike would recognize his claim—one way or another. She was pleased: Jariad had acted just as she had advised. Yaru Korsin’s moment was due, but this was no place for it.

Jariad greeted the others, giving special attention to Adari. The Keshiri woman backed away immediately and looked down. It wasn’t modesty, Seelah knew—though the insufferable bore had much to be modest about. Ever since her son grew into his late father’s looks, Seelah had always caught stray thoughts from Adari whenever Jariad was around. She’d wondered about it for a long time. Had Korsin bragged to his strumpet about killing Devore? Would that be enough to cause such a strong reaction?

Eventually, Seelah found the answer, deep in her own thoughts. She had rifled through Adari’s mind years earlier when they had first met in darkness on the mountain. Then, Seelah had been searching for any hint of rescue. But on contemplation, Seelah had realized that the sea of stones and purple faces in the witless alien’s mind included something else. Something half seen, but shocking to Adari—and, at that time, recent: a body, thrown from the precipice into the raging sea.

Adari Vaal had seen Yaru murder Devore Korsin.

And so, at last, had Seelah.

Jariad returned to his mother's side and gave her a knowing glance. "Soon," she whispered.

It required care. Korsin had friends, most from *Omen's* permanent crew. But many Devore Korsin partisans remained. Whispered tales of the commander withholding information about their marooned situation won other allies. She'd see that everyone was in the right place at the right time.

The crowd roared again as Korsin took her hand and turned toward the steps leading up into their new home. Seelah smiled.

Twenty-five years. She'd saved all her hate.

The end was coming.

Chapter Two

Korsin recognized the sound immediately. Lightsabers clashed in the gallery of the capital, right outside the hallway to his office.

Whirling across the glossy floor, Jariad charged at three attackers clad in Saber black. Their blades weren't tracing harmless circuits in the air this time. Jariad's assailants lunged at him, only to be driven back by his angry riposte.

One by one, Jariad bested his opponents—driving one underneath a falling statue, hurling another through a brand-new pane of smoked glass. The third saw his lightsaber skitter down a hallway when Jariad separated his gloved hand from his wrist.

Korsin stepped from the hall, lightsaber—and severed hand—in hand. “Are you sure you want to call this group of yours the Sabers? They seem to be without.”

Jariad deactivated his weapon and exhaled. “This is what I wanted to show you, Grand Lord. They were too quickly disarmed.”

“You shouldn't take that word so literally, son,” Korsin said, tossing the hand to its wincing owner on the floor. “We don't exactly have a modern medlab here.”

“There’s no quarter for incompetence!”

“It was an exercise, Jariad, not the Great Schism. Take a breath and come outside.” Korsin sighed. Despite his feelings about his late half brother, he had tried to provide guidance for Jariad. It just wasn’t taking. Jariad had too many of the same self-absorbed traits that had ruined Devore. Either he did nothing—or he overdid it. *It was a good thing there weren’t any narcotics on Kesh*, Korsin thought; *Jariad might have picked up where his father left off.*

Korsin stepped out into the failing sun. The volcano had ruined a lot of nice days lately. A Keshiri servant materialized, bearing refreshments.

“Things are no good here,” Jariad said, emerging. “There are too many distractions here in this city.”

“They are distracting,” Korsin said, casting an eye into the courtyard. Adari Vaal had arrived.

Jariad ignored her. “Grand Lord, I request permission to remove the Sabers to the Northern Reaches for a training mission. There, they can concentrate.”

“Hmm?” Korsin looked back at his nephew. “Oh, certainly.” He took the second cup from the tray. “Excuse me.”

Korsin had thought Adari was looking up at him. Joining her in the garden, he found she was actually staring at a relief sculpture being carved into a triangular pediment on the building above. “What—what is *that*?” she asked.

Korsin squinted. “If I’m not mistaken, that’s a depiction of my own birth.” He took a drink. “I’m not sure how the sun and the stars are involved.” Everywhere he’d looked in this palace, the Keshiri had plastered something depicting his divinity. He chuckled to himself. *We’ve really done a sales job.* “I wasn’t expecting you today.”

“We’re neighbors now,” she said, idly taking the glass.

“With a place this size, we’re neighbors with half of Kesh.”

“And the other half’s inside the house, cleaning the floor—” Adari stopped abruptly and looked him in the eyes. Every so often, she’d flirted with crossing the line. Korsin laughed heartily. She always made him laugh.

But when leathery wings swooped overhead, Korsin saw the real reason for Adari’s visit. Tona, her surviving son, rushed from an ornate exterior structure to catch the bridle of a landing uvak. Nida Korsin had returned from her morning ride.

Korsin had named Tona the traveling stable master for Nida’s group just after its founding. The young man seemed amiable enough, if not particularly sharp. And Nida seemed fond of him. Adari took her son aside and exchanged quiet words.

Adari turned back to Korsin. “I’m sorry, but I have business in town.”

“Will I see you again?”

“What, today?”

“No, I meant, *ever*?” Korsin laughed again. *She’s uneasy*, he thought. He wondered why. “Of course, today. We’re in the same city now, aren’t we?”

Adari rolled her eyes at the colossal building behind them. “That’s a lot of effort just to have me around more.” She managed a smile.

“Well, just know that I *won’t* be here tomorrow,” Korsin said. “Seelah’s medcenter is moving here from the temple. I’ll head up in the morning to inspect the whole place before we close everything down. It’s only for a day.”

Absorbing his words, Adari touched his hand. “I should be going.”

As she stepped away, Korsin looked again at his daughter, across the yard. Nida had paused to watch

Jariad and his humbled combatants marching deliberately to their own mounts.

And Tona, he saw, was watching her.

“Your son should be careful, Adari,” Korsin said. “He’s been spending a lot of time with Nida.” He smirked. “It’s that Korsin charm that keeps you Vaals around.”

“Well, not today, Your Grand Lordship,” Adari said, gesturing to her approaching son. “Tona’s coming with me. Family business.”

“I understand,” Korsin said. *Family business.* Watching Jariad fly off to the north, he wished he had less of it himself.

Years before, Izri Dazh had been her tormentor. Inquisitor for the Neshtovar, Dazh had branded Adari Vaal a heretic for not hewing to the legends about Kesh’s creation—and the role in it of their gods from above, the Skyborn.

Dazh was long dead. But now his sons and grandsons sat silently across from Adari in Dazh’s candlelit drawing room. Adari’s resistance movement had met in various places over the years, from beneath an aqueduct to the back of an uvak stable Tona ran in Tahv. But seldom had they met in such luxury—or what had been considered luxury, before Adari brought people claiming to be the Skyborn into their midst to reshape the Keshiri’s standards. Now, in the dwelling that had once temporarily housed Grand Lord Korsin himself, Neshtovar and heretic together decided the fate of the Keshiri people.

“This will work,” she said. “What you’ve taught me about uvak—what we’ve arranged for your people to do. This will work.”

“It had better,” rumbled the eldest male. “We’re giving up a lot.”

“You’ve *already* given up a lot. This is the only way back.”

Adari knew she’d taken a chance by bringing members of the Neshtovar into her circle. But it had to be done, while the older Neshtovar still remembered what had been taken from them by the Sith. The memory of the benefits her old society had unfairly heaped on the uvak-riders had gained their cooperation now.

Adari had recently realized that the uvak were the key. The Sith were powerful; one, acting alone, could keep scores of Keshiri at bay, perhaps even an entire village. But they had to *reach* the village first. And here, Kesh, with its sprawling landmass, worked against them.

The Sith numbered nearly six hundred now, almost double what they had arrived with. But the villages of Kesh were more numerous still. Maintaining order required the Sith to make frequent uvak-flights to the hinterlands. Neshtovar fliers of another era had united the continent by surmounting the many natural barriers. Now the Sith used the same strategy, dispatching circuit riders to make appearances and consult with local bureaucracies, mostly staffed by onetime members of the Neshtovar.

But while they were the Sith’s lieutenants on the ground, the Neshtovar were now also *grounded*. Though the Sith had taken the strongest uvak for themselves soon after their arrival, that still left teeming thousands of domesticated beasts to the Keshiri. Most had been employed as animal labor, but the Neshtovar were still allowed to fly uvak on visits to the Sith mountain retreat, among other administrative chores.

That had ended after the disaster at the lakes. Uvak-riders were the Keshiri’s traditional news bearers, but the Sith wanted no word spread but theirs. Former riders not reduced to police work were now keeping the

stables, nurturing creatures they would never be allowed to ride. Their uvak belonged to Sith probably still in the crèche. Adari had been allowed to keep Nink so that she could continue to visit Korsin, but she was the only one.

“Korsin is going to the mountain temple tomorrow,” she said. “Seelah is there—and Jariad has left for the north.”

The Neshtovar men nodded to one another. “Very good,” the eldest said. “We have adequate numbers in place everywhere, if your head count is right.”

“It is.” Her movement included Keshiri aides to many of the major Sith. Tilden Kaah had been counting heads among Seelah’s retinue; she had other people close to Korsin and Jariad. Her son was even keeping track of Nida’s flying performers. “Noon tomorrow. *This will work.*”

She thought about Korsin as she stepped into the torchlit alleyway behind the dwelling. Summoned—by Seelah?—Korsin wouldn’t go alone to the temple, no matter how mundane the matter. She double-checked the figures she’d marked on her hand. Yes, she’d have enough people there, just among the stable hands closing up shop.

Tona appeared from the darkness. “I’ve been waiting.”

“Sorry,” Adari said, looking up. “They wanted to go over everything again.”

She could see her son’s flickering disappointment as he stepped into the light. She’d always thought both her children favored their father; now, in his late twenties, Tona surprised her with how much he was looking like her.

“I should have been with you, Mother. I’m of the Neshtovar, too.”

“They’re just being careful, Tona. The fewer people who know the details, the better.”

"I want to ride with you tomorrow," Tona said.

"You've got your own job to do here," Adari said. "And you'll see me when you've succeeded." She touched his cheek. "You shouldn't be away from Nida and her people too long. Tomorrow will be busy. Get some sleep."

Adari watched as he turned into the night. Sweet, simple Tona. She hadn't told him everything—but then, how could she? Her late mother had never understood her heresy—or her canonization. How could her son accept her martyrdom?

The golden age had begun, Seelah thought as she surveyed her empty wardroom. And she was responsible.

They'd done good work here in the years she ran the Tribe's medical staff. All local maladies had been identified and controlled. With Keshiri aid, Seelah's biologists had scoured the countryside, indexing botanical remedies useful to humans. The Force-healing skills of her staff, far from atrophying, had increased. So had the survival rate of amputees.

The Tribe was a purer people, too—thanks to her attention to eugenics. Before too many generations, the blood of the Sith on Kesh would be fully human. She was sorry she wouldn't live to see it.

Or would she? A pleasant thought.

But the Sith were already more pleasing to *look* at. She'd instilled in the younglings a respect for their bodies, a lust for physical perfection. The Sith Lords they'd left behind were atrocious role models: most of them a barbarian jangle of baubles and war paint. Seelah's Tribe would have none of that. Tattoos were labels for slaves. A Sith of Kesh was already born a work of art.

And after the losses in the purge, the Tribe's numbers had begun to increase rapidly in the last few years. The prospect of a warm home near sea level was enough to

stir the most independent-minded Sith with thoughts of family. Out in the courtyard, Seelah saw the Tribe's leading hedonist, Orlenda, enormously pregnant. Wonders never ceased.

"That's everything," Orlenda said, propping herself against a rickety cart of supplies about to leave for Tahv. The younger woman looked down nervously; Korsin was to arrive any minute. "Do . . . do you want me here for this? I can't fly, but I can ride down on this cart with the breakables."

Seelah bit her lip. Seeing Orlenda at Seelah's side when he arrived would put Korsin at ease. But if something went wrong here, Orlenda could make sure Seelah's policies lived on. "Go," she said, sighing. "But hurry. They're arriving."

Orlenda rattled off behind Keshiri bearers. Besides uvak, they were Kesh's only beasts of burden.

It was time. Seelah hurried toward the plaza formed by the domiciles and *Omen's* shrine. Korsin's entourage landed at the far end. Right on schedule, for a change. Korsin and Gloyd's four bodyguards took their positions as Keshiri attendants walked the uvak away. Their stables would be the very last thing to close.

Korsin studied the plaza around him.

"Ah, Seelah. There you are." He stepped toward her. Out in the open.

"Yes. There you are." She closed her eyes and concentrated. *Now, Jariad!*

Chapter Three

It wasn't the rush of bodies that startled Korsin so much as where they came from. Black-clad Sith descended upon the plaza from the living quarters—doorways, upper windows, rooftops—and from the ramparts of *Omen's* multilevel temple. Korsin ignited his lightsaber and stood his ground as the invaders approached. They were Jariad's Sabers, the same team from the previous morning.

Korsin exchanged glances with Gloyd. Their bodyguards flanked them, forming a defensive huddle facing outward. *Four to one.* "Stick together."

Korsin watched as Jariad strode purposefully from the temple doorway, weapon lit. "This doesn't look like the Northern Reaches to me, Jariad."

His nephew said nothing. He had that wild look again. *Devore's look.*

"I agreed to your little group to give you something to do," Korsin yelled. He addressed Jariad's stern companions. "You should be ashamed. Get back to Tahv."

"I'm not like Nida," Jariad said, still approaching. "I don't need hobbies. Enough time has been wasted." He walked around his confederates, now forming a perimeter of glowing lightsabers around Korsin's group. "It's time to make your reckoning, *Commander*

Korsin. You told us yourself. A new age has dawned. It's time for military authority to end. This is about succession—about who should best lead the Tribe.”

“Who? *You?*” Korsin tried to act surprised—and chuckled. “Oh, Jariad—I really don't think so. Go home.”

Jariad froze, evidently aware of the watchful stares from his own forces. Gloyd, seeming to catch the idea, guffawed. “Commander, I wouldn't put this one in charge of mucking out the uvak stalls.”

“I'm the future!” Jariad boomed. “I'm the youngest of those born on high. All Sith after me are Kesh-born.” He raised his lightsaber. “The leader of the Sith should be special.”

Korsin glared—and growled. “You're not special. I've seen your like before.”

A woman's voice rang out. “*Tell him about it!*” Seelah. He'd forgotten about her. She stood at the end of the plaza, now joined by several of her loyal retainers. All armed. “Tell him about how you saw his father *die*, Yaru. Tell him how you killed him and threw his body onto the rocks, all to keep control of us!”

Korsin started to respond, only to see Jariad step backward. The Sabers closed in. Clearly, Jariad was going to let them take the first blows before entering for the kill. Korsin steeled himself—and looked to the clouds. *Noon.*

Suddenly shadowy figures sailed across the quad. Five, ten—dozens of creatures took to the skies, lifting from behind the temple. Uvak.

Theirs.

“What in blazes?” Jariad looked to his mother. Seelah appeared to have no more idea than he did.

An answer finally came from one of her aides, rushing breathlessly up the staircase to the plaza. “The stablehands—the Keshiri! *They're stealing our uvak!*”

Several of Jariad's Sabers looked up, stunned. Korsin saw his chance. He and Gloyd launched toward the black-suits on their side, sweeping a deadly path toward the nearest building. Their bodyguards closed in behind them, blocking pursuit as best they could.

Korsin and Gloyd dashed through the building, followed by a mob of Sabers. Korsin made for the staircase, beckoning for Gloyd to follow.

"Nice trick, Commander," Gloyd said. "But we could've used more than that!"

"It's not my trick," Korsin said, reaching a window. "And you're right!"

He looked urgently toward the skies and probed the Force in vain. He had been delivered from the mountain years before. But he could sense that his deliverer now was far away.

Her riding had improved since her first desperate flight, years before. Now Adari ably guided Nink as he soared, following the jagged coastline below. Behind her flew more than a hundred uvak—the entire population of the stables at the mountain temple, ridden by Keshiri stable hands, domestics, and laborers. All agents of Adari's movement, all carefully positioned there for this day. If any mounts had been left to the Sith in the temple, no one was using them to follow.

The flock approaching far from the east was one of hers. There'd be others. In villages across the continent, the same thing would be happening: Neshtovar conspirators merely tending their uvak would, instead, take to the air with them, leaving none behind.

There wouldn't be riders enough, but that didn't matter. While not natural herd animals, even unbroken uvak were strongly suggestible to the booming bleats of elder males—the exact sort the Neshtovar tended. Stories had been passed down of aerial roundups over

the centuries, with riders leading clouds of the reptiles through the sky. Adari's would be a rolling storm front, sweeping up all the animals in the countryside in vast, successive waves. They'd crafted their routes to funnel every uvak that wasn't tied down toward the Sessal Spire, looming ahead in its smoldering majesty.

Here, safely away from the crater, the lead riders would set their beasts down just long enough to dismount. Remaining aloft, Adari would order Nink to give a nesting cry: a powerful command compelling all uvak within earshot to immediately follow. At forty, pampered Nink was the oldest uvak in memory. All uvak would blindly heed his command—briefly. But long enough, Adari figured, for her to soar into the clouds high above the smoking crater—and disappear.

It wouldn't be suicide. It would be deliverance.

The Sith had traveled far on uvak-back, but the Neshtovar were the recipients of generations of knowledge of the air currents of Kesh. They knew the odd things the jet stream did when the Sessal Spire acted up. Riders flying high enough simply vanished, hurtling beyond the morning horizon, far over the great eastern sea. She would climb high—and the wind would claim her and any uvak that followed.

Despite her initial dislike of uvak, she winced at the thought of what would follow. The frantic flock would struggle against the vortex, but at such an elevation, Kesh was in command. Perhaps a similar phenomenon had disabled the Sith vessel; Adari didn't know. But by the time the winds weakened, she—and every uvak she could convince to follow—would be headed for a watery end. *Just like my husband*, she mused.

Her co-conspirators loved their uvak, but they hated the Sith more. They had often discussed what would happen next. The Sith leaders would descend on their service path, but it would take time—time during

which Adari's allies would strike at the major Sith sympathizers in each village. There would be no open resistance. It would be shikkar blades in the night. The Sith might be proud.

In truth, of course, the Sith would lash out. Tahv would surely feel their wrath. But the Sith would be running their pogrom on foot. Their transportation would be gone from the map—literally. And the Keshiri would find it easier to kill the remaining stray uvak than Sith.

The Sith now had young of their own to protect; they might simply stake out a chunk of territory for themselves and leave it at that. Or, better still, they might retire to their mountain refuge for good. Most Keshiri still idolized their Protectors—but as long as some of them were willing to poison their masters, they would forever be a danger.

Presuming poison killed the Sith at all. Adari had never really shared her confederates' enthusiasm about the aftermath. She knew what the Sith were capable of. It might take a thousand Keshiri to kill a single one. But even if it did? Right now, the odds still favored the Keshiri. They wouldn't later on. *Which is why this has to be today*, she thought.

Kesh teemed with life. That one of its species would pay a price for its usefulness was tragic. But the Keshiri had already paid a price for their own usefulness to the Sith. Both had to end.

Her group merging with the fliers from the east, Adari whipped Nink around and looked in the direction of Tahv. That would be the big wave.

When it arrived.

Where *were* they?

Seelah dashed across the rooftop of her old home. For half her life, she'd awakened to the same view of

the sea that had swallowed Devore. Now, looking down, she saw her forces closing in on the man who'd sent him there.

She hadn't seen how, but Korsin and Gloyd had gotten separated. The lumbering Houk was still alive, she knew—her loyal aides had chased him into another part of the complex. But Korsin was the key. He'd chosen his bodyguards well. Two remained alive, injured but effective in their misguided defense.

Jariad's team of Sabers, meanwhile, had proven lacking in formal training. He'd insisted on being their only mentor, but had only begun serious combat training in recent weeks, after Seelah made the decision to strike. Jariad reminded her more of his father every day. There was no corner Devore Korsin would not cut.

The uvak disappearance was an unexpected problem, but it cut equally, removing escape for all. The Keshiri had cleared all the animals out. Had Jariad made that preparation without telling her? Unlikely. But it seemed to have affected Korsin's hopes. There, down on the reinforced slope beside *Omen's* temple, he continued to look up. Seelah was certain he wasn't looking at her.

She relished the view. Jariad had Korsin now. Trained or not, his Sabers had the numbers. As his bodyguards lagged, Korsin backed toward the precipice, the same mark from which Devore had fallen. Jariad would like that. He seemed to be relishing every moment—slashing again and again at Korsin, his blade occasionally finding its mark. Korsin was hurt now—bleeding badly. Jariad pushed ever closer, driving his uncle backward.

And yet, Korsin kept looking up.

What was he expecting?

A crash from behind drew her attention. The limp form of one of her aides rocketed through a skylight and disappeared over the side. *So that's where Gloyd is.* He had to be contained, away from the action below.

Angered at being robbed of seeing Korsin die, she turned to the shattered skylight—

—only to lose her footing as beating wings soared across the crest of the rooftop. Seelah rolled sideways, avoiding the kicking, clawed feet. The uvak were back!

Tumbling through the gaping hole, Seelah hit the stone floor on all fours. Gloyd's battle was in the next room, but she scrambled for the window anyway. She had to see. Had the Keshiri returned with the uvak? Or was it someone she had never considered, never counted on?

Looking out, she saw.

Nida.

Chapter Four

Korsin had played his trump.

Nida's very existence, he knew, was part of Seelah's game to keep herself and Jariad close to the seat of power. Seelah had "caringly" found a series of Keshiri nursemaids and then tutors for the child, boarding her in one village after another. Officially, it was a gesture of Sith trust in the Keshiri; in truth, it reflected the hole he'd always known was in his wife's heart.

There was more. Seelah wasn't just getting Nida out of the way; Korsin knew she was preventing her daughter from receiving anything more than superficial training in Sith ways. Seelah kept the rolls of Sith on Kesh; she knew where all potential mentors were at any time.

But Korsin had several loyal crew members willing to serve him in any role. With Gloyd's help, Korsin had staged their deaths in remote areas of Kesh and sent them into hiding. All during the nights of Nida's seeming exile, the girl had secretly been learning the ways of the dark side—even as, during the days, she was winning Keshiri friends and building a network of informants. All in her seemingly meaningless—but very mobile—role as aerial ambassador for the Sith.

While Seelah was striving to portray herself as the model Sith on Kesh, Korsin was crafting a leader, some-

one with the talents to fight *and* to govern. An heir—and today, a savior.

The night before, one of Nida's Keshiri acquaintances had revealed the plot to steal the uvak while the principal Sith were atop the mountain. She'd spent the morning making sure whatever the Keshiri were doing went no further, before joining Korsin here—along with her Skyborn Rangers and several Korsin partisans. Not many, and not as soon as he'd hoped—but enough, and in time. He'd flushed out his enemies by coming here; their surprise was complete.

Nida leapt to the ground, lightsaber glowing, impaling one of Jariad's thugs as she landed. Two converged upon her position, only to be cut in half. She threw a third into the temple wall, just behind. There wasn't much fighting ground by the cliffside, but Nida was already dominating it. Jariad himself had backed away before the kill, joining his Sabers in their fight.

A muffled explosion came from the mansion farther up the hill. *Gloyd*, Korsin knew. Gritting his teeth, he dabbed at the gash on his chest. He wasn't coming back from this, he knew. The ground faltered beneath him. There wasn't much left.

But he looked up again at Nida.

So strong. His future for the Sith, battling Seelah's future. And winning.

Wincing in pain, Korsin crawled back from the precipice toward the fray. Jariad, injured and struggling to stall his sibling's advance, looked back in surprise.

"You're right, Jariad," Korsin said, choking back blood. "It's time for me to go—but not without my last official act. *And it's overdue.*"

Adari should have been more surprised. By nightfall, more than a thousand Keshiri had arrived near the foot of the Spire, leading five times that many riderless uvak. The

mob of beasts circling high above the smoking formation had given the appearance of a living, leathery halo. It was stirring, but disappointing: this many would barely have filled the uvak pens in the southern foothills.

Adari had given up scanning the horizon long before her compatriots did. At midnight, a lone rider from Tahv had arrived, breathless and terrified. His report confirmed her suspicion. Tona had fallen under Nida Korsin's spell and revealed all their plans.

It had been hopeless from the beginning; someone would have betrayed them. Tona was just the weakest. Adari had turned away before she heard whether Nida had rewarded Tona, or killed him. Nothing mattered anymore.

What *had* surprised Adari was what had happened next. She'd expected everyone to leave. To fly away, free their uvak, and melt back into Keshiri society before the Sith found them. Instead, when she'd somberly taken to the clouds on Nink and headed for the dark river of air, she'd found the entire entourage in her wake.

She'd fallen asleep, assuming Nink would surrender to gravity in the night. So many others had already fallen away. Her turn would come.

But she awoke to something else.

From above, the spit of land was no more than a seam between the waves, a chain of reefs adjoining a mucky surface barely larger than her old neighborhood. Nothing about it suggested a haven. But the jet stream had given out—and so had Nink. Of the riders who had begun, fewer than three hundred remained. It was this, or nothing.

And this is close to nothing, she thought as she padded across the salty grime of the beach. The mainland had provided everything the Keshiri needed to thrive. Here, bare necessities would have to be clawed for. Infrequent rains pooled fresh water on concave reefs. The uvak, use-

less in these doldrums, would have to be culled dramatically to give the scant vegetation a chance. Their flesh was barely edible; their carcasses yielded the only building materials.

To her intellectual pursuits, the island offered nothing at all. Just the same volcanic rubble from beach to hillcrest. Years in a purgatory of her own making weren't enough, it seemed: now she must be bored to death. All she'd found was an ancient Keshiri corpse—another lonely victim of the oceanic air currents.

Why couldn't the Sith have landed here?

She knew the answer. The Sith had been trapped in such a place. To save herself—from them, and from the elders—she had set them loose. Korsin had been right, those years ago. *We all do what we have to do.*

They were doing it now. Adari looked at Nink, dying of exhaustion, forked feet barely responding to the caresses of the surf. She couldn't simply bury him when the time came; he'd be needed, just like the rest. The uvak were integral to their survival—but disposable when necessary.

The Sith had looked upon the Keshiri in exactly the same way.

Adari studied her people, toiling mutely on the island. They expected they wouldn't survive the year. Worse, anyone who came looking for them would not be a savior.

Perhaps Korsin's Sith worried about the same thing, she thought. Perhaps the tales were true. Perhaps the real Skyborn, the *true* Protectors of legend, were out there somewhere, hunting for the Sith.

She didn't believe it.

But then, she never had.

Seelah awoke on a slab in her old sick ward. There wasn't any difference between the patient accommoda-

tions and the biers in the morgue; it was all cold marble, just as everything in the accursed temple was.

She was moving now—only her legs weren't. She remembered it all. Seconds after she saw Nida arrive, Gloyd brought the fight into her chamber. Gloyd had always bragged that whoever took him out wouldn't live to celebrate. Indeed, cornered by Seelah and her confederates, Gloyd had activated something he must have had literally up his sleeve since the crash: a proton detonator. The Houk's insurance policy had brought the room down on the entire party.

The Force had helped free Seelah from the rubble that pinned her from the knees down, but nothing could make her walk again. She didn't need her medical training to recognize that. She'd worked tirelessly to become a perfect specimen of humanity, something for the Tribe to aspire to. Now, sitting up and surveying her cuts and bruises, she knew she would never live up to her old example again.

"You're awake." came a soft female voice. "Good."

Seelah craned her neck to see her daughter in the doorway, wearing her outfit from Dedication Day. When Nida didn't move to enter, Seelah used her aching arms to turn herself.

"You're going to be doing a lot of that," Nida said, stepping inside and dipping a cup into a basin. She drank deeply and exhaled. "Oh, when you need it, the water's over here." She looked away.

Nida explained how she had learned from Tona Vaal of the plan to steal the Sith's uvak, timed just when as many important Sith as possible would be on the mountain. It had taken her more time than she expected, but she had foiled the plot in Tahv and hurried to her father's side. "I guess you can feel it—Father's gone."

Seelah licked her lips, tasting her own dried blood. "Yes. And Jariad?"

“Father tried to throw him over the side with the Force,” Nida said. “He tried . . . and when he failed, *I* did it.”

Seelah looked blankly at her daughter.

“I hated to use poor Tona like that,” Nida said, “but he thought he had something I wanted.” She took another sip and dropped the cup. “We had something in common, you know. Our mothers had no use for our fathers.”

Tona had revealed that the conspirators were taking the uvak to the Sessal Spire, but he knew nothing beyond that. “There’s no sign of them there,” Nida said. “Our guess is they plunged themselves into the lava pit. In spite—or fear. It doesn’t matter.” Sith or Keshiri, dissent was finished on Kesh. It had been a productive day.

“I came here because we just had the reading of Father’s final testament,” she said. It existed—in her care. “He commends his legacy to me—and the three surviving High Lords have ratified it. So you see? You *are* the mother of the new Grand Lord. Congratulations.” Nida beamed. At her age, she could expect to rule Kesh for decades to come. “Or until the Sith come to rescue us.”

Seelah sneered. “You *are* a child.” She slid from the slab, only to brace herself against it with her hands when her feet failed to respond. “No one’s coming for us. Your father knew that.”

“He told me. It doesn’t really matter to me, one way or the other.”

“It should,” Seelah said, struggling to straighten. “If I tell those people out there . . .”

Nida casually replaced the cup and stepped back toward the doorway. “There’s no one out there,” she said. “Perhaps you should hear the rest of Father’s final wishes.” Henceforth, she explained, on the death of the Grand Lord, that person’s spouse and household laborers, too, would be sacrificed. “Technically, to honor him

or her—but you and I know what it’s about.” She ran her gloved fingers through her hair. “I imagine it’s going to put a crimp in my social life, but I’ll cope.”

Seelah caught her breath. “You mean . . . ?”

“Relax,” Nida said. “*Henceforth*. No, I’ve ordered that all Sith remove themselves from this mountain, in honor of Father’s passing. While I live, none may return here. This is your new home—again.” And with that, she stepped out into the courtyard.

It took Seelah painful minutes to follow, dragging herself across the stonework. Nida was stepping onto the stirrup of her uvak, surrounded by hejarbo-shoot crates of fruits and vegetables. More would be dropped by regular uvak overflights, Nida said; the only creatures, wild or trained, to be allowed in the airspace above the temple. Elsewhere in the compound, access to *Omen’s* shelter had been cut off. Below, the path up the mountain was being barricaded, even now. It had been painstakingly carved, but it would now be blocked forever.

What remained, Seelah saw as she looked around, was the cold temple she had come to despise living in. A home fit only for a goddess on high—forever. Alone.

“Nida,” Seelah coughed as Nida began to take flight. “Nida, *you’re my child*.”

“Yes, that’s what they tell me. Good-bye.”

Read on for an excerpt from
Star Wars: **Fate of the Jedi: Allies**
by Christie Golden
Published by Del Rey Books

Aboard the *Jade Shadow*

Ben wondered if he'd be his father's age before things started going right for him on any basis other than what appeared to be happy accidents.

Then he wondered if he'd be older than his dad.

True, he'd had a couple of uneventful years after the war. But then his father got arrested and exiled for a decade. Jedi who had spent formative years on Shelter in the Maw—and yes, Ben was among that number, how reassuring was *that* little fact—started going crazy. Ben and Luke had learned about some creepily powerful being with dark slithery mental tendrils of *need* who was probably responsible for the crazy Jedi, and had been going to pay her a visit inside the Maw when they abducted a Sith. One that was definitely easy on the eyes, but who was nonetheless a Sith, from a whole planetload of them, no less. A Sith who was still with them right now, standing and smirking at them while nearly a dozen frigates crammed with her pals surrounded them.

Yeah. He would *definitely* be older than his dad.

Luke had followed the instructions given by the unnamed, unseen Sith commander of the *Black Wave*,

placing the *Shadow* in orbit around Dathomir. There was no other choice, not with eleven ChaseMaster frigates ready to open fire.

“A wise decision,” Vestara said. “I’m fond of my own life, so I’m glad you’re cooperating, but if you had attempted to flee they most certainly would have destroyed you.”

Luke eyed her thoughtfully. Clearly, he wasn’t so sure.

“So,” Ben continued, “what are they going to do with us? Are we going to be the main attraction at some kind of Sith ritual party?”

“I’ve no idea,” Vestara said. She might be lying through her teeth. She might be telling the truth. Ben simply couldn’t be sure.

“Your cooperation is appreciated, Master Skywalker,” came the voice that had first hailed them. Ben and Luke exchanged puzzled glances. Of course Vestara had told them who was holding her captive, but why the courtesy and respectful title?

“I am High Lord Sarasu Taalon, commander of this force,” the voice continued. “Your reputation precedes you. We have studied you, and your son, a great deal.”

“I wish I could say the same,” Luke said. “I know nothing about you and your people, High Lord Taalon.”

“No, you don’t. But I am prepared for that to change . . . somewhat. Your vessel carries a Z-95 Headhunter.”

“It does,” Luke said. “I presume you’re about to ask me to come over to your flagship and chat over a nice glass of something.”

“You and Vestara, yes,” Taalon said. “You will have to turn her back over to us, of course. But there is no reason we can’t be civilized about this.”

“No thanks,” Luke said. “Anything you have to say to me can be said at a distance. Vestara isn’t the worst

companion I've ever traveled with. I think I'll let her stay here with us for a while longer."

Ben looked again at the Sith girl. His father was right. She *wasn't* the worst companion he'd ever traveled with.

"Let us revisit that subject in a moment," came Taalon's reply. "As I'm sure you know by now, Apprentice Vestara Khai has done a commendable job of keeping us informed of what has transpired. We are aware that you are having . . . difficulty with certain Jedi who were fostered inside the Maw. We believe this is due to the intervention of a being known to us as Abeloth, whom Vestara encountered. Many of our own apprentices are displaying the same symptoms as your younger Jedi."

"Your younger Sith were in the Maw as well?"

"No. But such identical displays of aberrant behavior cannot be attributed to anything else."

Ben was skeptical. But there was so much they didn't know yet. His father's blue eyes met his and he shrugged slightly. It was possible.

"We are many. You are only two," Taalon continued. "We have a common cause."

"Are—are you proposing a formal alliance?" Luke was so surprised he didn't even bother to hide it. Ben, too, literally gaped for a moment. Vestara seemed more shocked than any of them, judging by her expression and her feeling in the Force.

"Precisely."

Luke started to laugh. "I'm sorry, but that doesn't sound like a very Sith thing to say."

The voice was cold when Taalon spoke again. "This creature, this . . . Abeloth . . . has the audacity to reach out and harm *our* apprentices. *Our* tyros. To toy with the Tribe—the Sith. The insult cannot be borne. It *will* not be borne. We are going into the Maw to teach her a lesson."

Ben glanced at his father. “That, however, *is* a very Sith thing to say.”

Luke nodded. To Taalon, he said, “It may be that we do not need to teach her a lesson, as it were. We may simply need to find out why she is doing this.”

“And ask her nicely to please stop?” Ben thought Han Solo could learn a thing or two from this Sith about infusing one’s voice with sarcasm.

“You just asked me nicely to help you out. Clearly you’re capable of good manners,” Luke replied, unruffled. “If it accomplishes the goal with fewer or perhaps no casualties, how is that not the best solution?”

There was silence. “It is possible she may not be amenable to . . . polite conversation. What then, Master Skywalker?”

“I will do whatever is necessary to free the ill Jedi from her control,” Luke said. “I assure you of that.” His voice was not harsh, but there was a tone in it Ben recognized. The deed was almost as good as done when Luke Skywalker spoke like that.

“You agree, then?” Taalon asked.

Luke didn’t answer at once. Ben knew what he was struggling with. And he was surprised that it was even a struggle for the Grand Master. Luke was a Jedi. These were Sith. There couldn’t possibly be an alliance. Everyone would constantly be watching one another’s backs.

But then again . . . He glanced at Vestara. She came from an entire culture of Sith. They couldn’t be backstabbing one another constantly—they’d have become extinct long ago. Somehow this flavor of Sith had learned how to cooperate. Vestara had proved it was possible. She had worked with Ben and his father before, on Dathomir, and that cooperation had saved Luke Skywalker’s life.

“We do have a common goal,” Luke said at last. “It

would be better to work toward it together rather than getting in each other's way. But don't think that I will not be expecting treachery at every turn. There are fewer enmities more ancient than that of Sith and Jedi."

A sigh. "This thing we both fight might be older than that," Taalon said. "Well, I did not expect this to be a particularly comradely union. Very well. You deliver Vestara Khai. Together, in an alliance not seen since this galaxy was new, Sith and Jedi will confront and defeat their mutual foe—one way or the other. And after that . . . well, let us see where we stand then, shall we?"

"Vestara stays here."

The Sith girl froze. There was a long silence.

"I cannot permit that."

"Then we have no alliance." Another long silence.

"She has information we require. She comes with us, or there is no deal."

"Information about how to reach and confront our mutual foe?" Luke said, turning Taalon's own flowery words back on him. "That, I do not object to permitting her to share. That *was* the information you were talking about, wasn't it?"

"She will come to no harm while entrusted in your . . . care," said Taalon. "None. Or we will attack and destroy you down to your marrow and obliterate your very cells."

"Provided you keep your bargain, she's perfectly safe. Jedi aren't in the habit of torturing children."

Vestara frowned at being referred to as a child. Ben started to smile a little, despite the situation, then realized that she was the same age as he was. He shot his dad a disappointed glance.

"Then I believe we have an agreement," Taalon said.

"Not just yet. We need to decide who is going to be in charge of this alliance first."

“I would suggest we command as a pair, you and I,” Taalon said. “No Sith will take orders solely from a Jedi. And I am sure you would bridle at being told what to do by a Sith High Lord.”

“I would indeed. And *I* would suggest we begin this joint command by sharing information. You first.”

“Ah, but Master Skywalker, you have *our* source of information right there with you. Start with her. We will be prepared to depart within a half hour.”

“So will we. I’ll be in touch. *Jade Shadow* out.”

“Dad,” Ben said the second the communication was terminated. “You just agreed to help the *Sith*.”

Luke shook his head. “No, son. I agreed to let the Sith help *us*.”

Ben regarded him, incredulity mixed with curiosity. “You trust them to keep their word?”

“I trust them to do what is best for them. And as long as what is best for them is best for us, then we’ll be fine.”

“And when it’s not?”

“Like Taalon said . . . we’ll see where we stand then. I’m prepared for that. There are two old sayings, Ben: ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend,’ and ‘Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.’”

Luke pointedly turned to Vestara, who stood straight with her hands clasped behind her back. “Now,” he said, “High Lord Taalon assures me you know everything they do.”

She lifted a small information chip. “Most of it’s here,” she said.

“And what’s not there?” Luke asked.

Vestara smiled slightly and tapped her temple. “And this is where it will stay until it is necessary. We have a card game on my world. It is called *Mahaa’i Shuur*, which means Ultimate Success in the tongue of the natives. The rules are complicated, but the goal is sim-

ple. The winner is the one who never, ever has to play his last card.”

Luke Skywalker watched Vestara Khai the way, long ago, a bartender named Wuher had watched him at the Mos Eisley cantina—coldly, expecting the unexpected, and looking for an excuse to cease being civil. Her back was to him, hands on her hips, her long brown hair hanging loose. She was looking out over the gathering of Sith vessels that were starting to fall into formation in preparation for departure, and he didn’t have to sense her in the Force to make a damn good guess as to what she might be thinking. As soon as he had the thought Luke amended it.

She was Sith. So were they. In Luke’s mind, that automatically meant they could not be trusted. Even if they were sincere in this desire to unite forces and approach the Maw with a lot more firepower than the *Jade Shadow* would have mustered alone, there had to be a trick, or a trap. They were Sith. Deception was a keystone of their culture.

Vestara Khai was Sith. But she was also a girl who seemed to have at least a few virtues along with her vices, something Luke found unexpected and disconcerting. No doubt she was contemplating treachery. But he was willing to admit that she also might just be missing her people. A soft sigh escaped her, as if confirming his thoughts.

He had assigned Ben the job of being the first to read through the information Vestara had given them, thinking the task would distract his son from the admittedly attractive female his own age who was going to be living in such close quarters with them. He was not worried for Ben’s state of mind regarding the Force. Ben had been through more things in his short life than most beings had in century-long ones. He wasn’t likely to be tempted by offers of power or greatness, the usual tools those who tried to corrupt Jedi liked to employ.

But it was, Luke realized, entirely possible that Ben might get a little confused now and then. Vestara was strikingly attractive, and had presumably been through things comparable to what Ben had undergone. And she was extremely, in fact exceptionally, strong in the Force. It was a combination that might make any father at least a little anxious for his Jedi son's well-being.

The *Shadow* was quiet, the air heavy with all the "not talking" that was taking place. The only sound was Vestara's single, almost inaudible sigh and the occasional sounds of Ben shifting position in his chair as he read and occasionally cross-referenced data.

The sudden noise alerting them to an incoming message therefore sounded especially loud. No one actually jumped, but a sense of surprise rippled through them all. Luke glanced at the screen and frowned slightly. Three words flashed.

VESTARA KHAI. PERSONAL.

As far as Luke was concerned, they might as well have been EMERGENCY. INCOMING ATTACK.

"Who's it from, Dad?"

"I don't know. But it's for our guest. Do you know who might want to contact you, Vestara?"

Vestara actually looked surprised. Luke felt the faintest flicker of worry, like an echo of a whisper, in the Force. "I've no idea," and it sounded genuine. "Is there a place where I can—"

"I can't let you receive a private message, especially from someone who won't identify him- or herself," Luke said matter-of-factly.

Vestara nodded. "Of course not. If I were in your position, I would take similar precautions."

Luke flipped a switch. "This is the *Jade Shadow* to the anonymous sender of the previous message directed at Vestara Khai. You must understand I cannot permit her to receive a private missive."

There was a long silence. Luke could feel young ears straining. Then another message appeared, addressed to LUKE SKYWALKER.

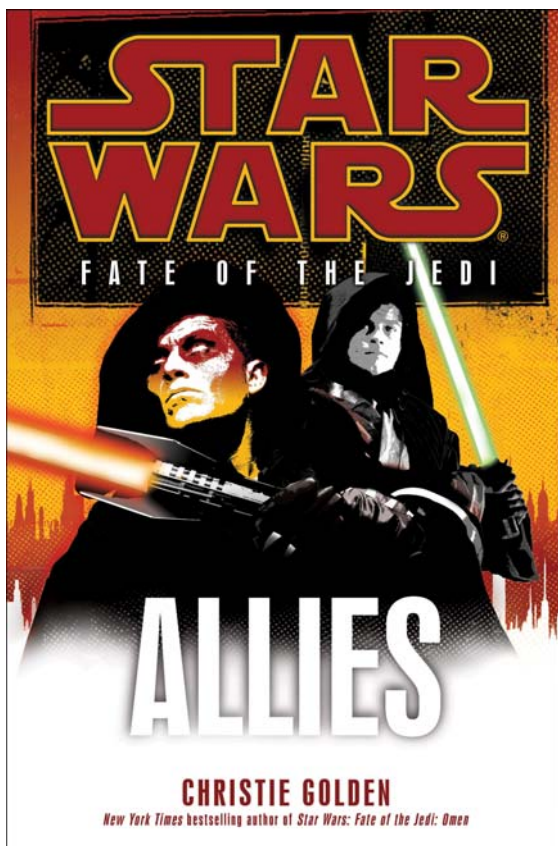
THE MESSAGE MAY BE PUBLICLY VIEWED.

“Well, a reasonable Sith, what next,” Luke muttered, and touched another button on the console.

A small holographic figure took shape. It was a human male, wearing the traditional Sith black robes. A lightsaber of antique-looking design was clipped to his belt. His long dark hair was pulled up in a topknot. His face was chiseled and handsome.

Vestara’s startled gasp revealed her feelings, but the Force did so even more prominently. There was a rush of warm, affectionate feelings, quickly clamped down, as if a lid had been put on a pot. Luke’s eyes flickered to the girl, then back to the hologram. Both images appeared to be trying hard not to smile, although Vestara often looked as though she were smiling when she wasn’t due to the little scar on her mouth.

“Daughter. You are well.”



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