



STAR WARS[®]

LOST TRIBE OF THE SITH SENTINEL

JOHN JACKSON MILLER

**STAR
WARS**

Lost Tribe of the Sith #6

SENTINEL

By John Jackson Miller

Star Wars: Knight Errant

STAR WARS: LOST TRIBE OF THE SITH

Sentinel

Purgatory

Savior

Skyborn

Precipice

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JOHN JACKSON MILLER



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Chapter One

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“I think . . . I might have ruined my life.”

“Sounds like you met a woman,” the purple-faced bartender said, pouring. “Do you want me to leave the bottle?”

Only if I can smash it over my head, Jelph Marrian thought. It was sweetwater, anyway—nothing that would help him forget. Sweat dripping from his matted blond hair, he drank deeply. The empty mug glistened, its shaped facets catching the firelight. Jelph twirled it in his hand, following the reflections. Since arriving on Kesh, he’d only drunk from orojo shells. But the Keshiri produced such wonderful glassware—even here, to serve guests in a pauper’s way station.

The bartender passed him a bowl of porridge. “Friend, you look like you’ve run all the way from South Talbus.”

“And more.” Jelph didn’t add that he’d been running practically without pause since the previous evening. Now, as the sun set again, he’d stopped, parched and ravenous, here in a hovel nestled in the lengthening shadows of the capital city’s walls. Jelph simply nodded to the pleasant old Keshiri and retreated to a corner

with his meal. The natives on Kesh always felt freer to be familiar with human slaves than they were with the Sith. *They must not have much trouble telling us apart*, he imagined; tonight, his soaked, tattered clothes were probably a tip-off that he wasn't born on high.

In fact, of course, Jelph was the only mortal on Kesh born "on high." He came from space, although he called no planet home. The three years the former Jedi Knight had spent in his little farmhouse on the Marisota River were the longest he'd lived in one place in years. He'd been fortunate to find it. Jelph had discovered the abandoned homestead just days after crashing his starfighter in the jungle highlands, when hunger made him bold enough to go exploring. The original occupant had left long before, probably fearing the stories that the Marisota River was cursed. Sensing the dark side of the Force all around, Jelph had begun to agree—until he ventured north and realized that, in fact, the whole planet was under a curse. Kesh belonged to the Sith.

Jelph had devoted his entire adult life to preventing the return of the Sith to the galaxy. Toprawa had been devastated by the Jedi's war with Exar Kun; Jelph had been born into a world that had already lost all hope. Fatherless, he heard from his mother only horror stories of the Sith occupation. When she disappeared one morning never to return, the young Jelph might have lost hope, too—had it not arrived in the form of Jedi scouts. The woman they introduced him to would save his life.

Krynda Draay had also lost someone on Toprawa—her Jedi husband—and had assembled a Covenant, a collection of Jedi Knights willing to do anything to prevent the Sith's return. Assisting her watchful seers were the Shadows, agents serving her son, another Jedi of great vision. Master Lucien had somehow removed

Jelph from the Jedi rolls, giving the young man complete and total mobility. For years, Jelph had been the perfect secret agent, traveling the Outer Rim investigating potential Sith threats while the true Jedi Order occupied itself with matters of less importance. He'd been satisfied with his success . . .

. . . until early in the Republic's war with the armored Mandalorians, when everything changed. Jelph never learned exactly what had happened, beyond that some schism had decapitated the Covenant, revealing his existence, among others. Now regarded by the Jedi as an outlaw, Jelph found flight his only option. What irony that, in selecting Kesh as his refuge, he'd found the very thing that he had sworn to stamp out!

Jelph finished the meal and rubbed his eyes. He'd done everything right until now. After life as a Shadow, hiding from the Sith on Kesh hadn't been difficult. He knew how to shroud his presence in the Force. And the existence of a class of human nobodies made it easy for him to blend in, so long as he lived in the hinterlands and kept his contacts to a minimum. In short order, he had picked up the local dialect and accent, giving him access to the necessities of life. A life spent tending his farm during the days—and working to repair his damaged starfighter at night.

The starfighter. He had completed repairing most of the damage done to the Aurek by the meteor storm; it remained only to reinstall the communications console and select the time and manner of his departure. Then he would have truly been the sentinel he'd intended to be, warning the Republic and Jedi of the Sith, and reclaiming his name.

But he had met *her*. Ori Kitai was of the Sith, and he had gotten too close to her, despite his better judgment. He'd let her distract him from his mission. He'd allowed her into his home. And now she had discovered his

starfighter—and had gone, presumably to warn the Sith.

Or had she?

He'd left the farm quickly. There'd been no other choice. He preferred not to launch the starfighter without the communications system, which would take a week to reinstall. Catching Ori first was at least worth a try. But he cursed himself now for not studying the clues more closely. Yes, someone had gone through the shed, killed her uvak, and uncovered the starfighter. But it wasn't clear who had done what. Yes, Ori was missing, and her footprints led away up the trail. But other people riding uvak had recently been there, too, and left. Only enfranchised Sith rode uvak—but all of them were supposedly hostile to Ori, whom they now regarded as a slave. Had something changed? She hadn't left with them, in any event.

His bet was that the Tribe didn't yet know about his secret. If the Sith uvak-riders had discovered his vessel, they would've left someone to protect it. That left Ori. The previous day, when he'd been up in the jungle, he'd felt a profound pang of betrayal from her through the Force. He'd seen the destruction she'd wrought on his tiny farm. And now she was heading toward the capital city with knowledge capable of spreading destruction on a galactic scale.

She had to be. Ori's tracks had vanished before the crossroads, but Jelph remained certain she was bound for Tahv. There was nothing but jungle to the east, and no one to tell downstream in the abandoned towns of the Ragnos Lakes. With the monsoon rains choking the Marisota River, fords were out to the few southern cities. That left the capital, a city he had never visited. The center of evil on Kesh, home of Grand Lord Lillia Venn and her whole misbegotten Tribe.

He looked out the window toward the now-purposeless city walls. Where might Ori be? Where would she go?

“You don’t look happy, my friend.” The worried old Keshiri took the empty bowl. “I always try to have something to serve for the poor. I’m sorry it’s not better.”

“It’s not that,” Jelph said, remembering himself.

“Ah. The woman.” The old man retreated behind the counter. “I may not be one of your kind, young human, but I can tell you something universal. You let a woman into your life, and anything can happen.”

Jelph stepped toward the door, turned, and bowed. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

The last visitors filed out of the zoo. That was what Ori had always called it, but the true name was something more complicated. Originally a special park honoring Nida Korsin and the Skyborn Rangers, it had since had the names of two or three other Grand Lords affixed to it, though that didn’t seem a particularly high honor to Ori. There had once been wild animals inside, the last members of some of Kesh’s predator species. But the Sith had long since hauled them out and killed them for sport.

Now the facility served as the public home for the uvak mounts used in rake-riding—those few uvak who survived their bouts in that violent sport, anyway. Sith citizens and Keshiri alike came to marvel at the mighty beasts, being pampered and prepared for their matches at the nearby Korsinata.

Lately, though, they had come to see something else. Or, rather, *someone*.

Ori found her mother where she expected to find her—mucking out the uvak stalls. Jelph had been exactly right: Grand Lord Venn had made a public spectacle out of Candra Kitai’s fall from power. Under the watch-

ful eyes of the burly night guard, the deposed High Lord continued the work that she'd done all day for the viewing amusement of the passersby. Still wearing her ceremonial gown from Donellan's Day, now soiled and frayed, Candra stood on tiptoes, delicately relocating foul deposits with a large shovel.

Looking down from her perch on the roof of the shelter, Ori waited until the guard was right beneath her. Then she leapt downward, kicking out to knock the sentry senseless. Kneeling, she grabbed the man's lightsaber and dragged him into the stall behind the grounded uvak.

Eyes watering from the stench, Candra looked up at her daughter with a tired expression. "You came back."

"Yes."

"It's been weeks and weeks."

"More like two," Ori said, studying her mother. Such a short time since the royal fête, and she could barely recognize the woman. The gray hair always carefully hidden by the Keshiri beauticians was out in straggly force now. Candra stank of every vile thing she'd encountered in her work. Her hands, however, remained free from calluses. Ori could see why as Candra robotically returned to her work, gingerly holding the shovel and making little headway.

"They keep feeding them slop that makes them ill," Candra groaned. "I know they're doing it on purpose."

"You'll never get this job done shoveling that way," Ori said, springing up and seizing the tool. Looking at it for a moment, she suddenly remembered she was not a farmer and threw it aside. "You've been here all this time?"

Candra feebly pointed to the empty stall across the walk. "They let me sleep over there sometimes." Warily, she looked up at Ori. "You look tired, dear. Have you rested?"

Ori snorted. She'd run all the previous night and day from Jelph's farm after discovering his secret in the shed, finally reaching Tahv an hour before. Now, at last, she was here—and she had something to trade. What was he? Where was he from? REPUBLIC FLEET SYSTEMS, the old characters had said. The Republic, she remembered from her studies, was the tool of the Jedi—the puppet body through which the Jedi Knights ruled the weaklings of the galaxy.

It was definitely information worth something to someone. But who?

"I'm going to get you out of here," she told her mother.

"I can't just leave," Candra said. "They'll find us, wherever we go—and we'll both end up right back here."

Looking quickly back outside the stall, Ori pulled the older woman into the shadows. "I'm not going to break you out. I've . . . *discovered* something. Something that will restore us—restore *you*. You have to get me in to see the High Lords."

Candra looked at her, bewildered, for a long moment before returning her eyes guiltily to the shovel. "I'd better get back to work, before someone else comes to check on—"

Ori grabbed her mother's wrists before she could move. "Mother, I need to know who to talk to!"

Shaking her head, Candra fought to evade her daughter's stare. "No, Ori. I don't know what you think you've found, but nothing will make a difference. We've lost."

"*This* will make a difference!" Ori had no doubt about that. Quickly she explained. There was another starship on Kesh, one in addition to *Omen*. A new one, hidden on a farm beside the Marisota River. Ori's whisper grew louder with excitement. "This isn't just about our family, Mother! It's about reuniting the Tribe with the Sith!"

Candra simply stared at her, unbelieving. “You’ve gone mad. You’ve made this story up, to try to get back in—”

Hearing the guard begin to stir, Ori looked frantically at Candra. “You know the politics. I need to know what to do. Who can I go to?”

At the word *politics*, Candra’s eyes seemed to focus. Looking back mournfully at the shovel, she spoke in low tones. Three of the High Lords were newly appointed stooges of the Grand Lord, she said. But that left four others who might listen—two apiece from the former Red and Gold factions. They formed the balance of political power, and might well reward the Kitai family for bringing them the news first.

“If this is for real, you have to get them down there, to see it for themselves,” Candra said. “Send them messages through Gadin Badolfa, the architect. He sees them all, and I still trust him. Don’t tell them exactly what you’ve found—that way, they’re not compromised for coming to meet you.”

Ori ruminated. The much-demanded Badolfa was highly placed in Sith society, as well connected a figure as one outside the hierarchy could be. The High Lords might not believe the invitations were legitimate, even coming through a trusted family friend like Badolfa—but there wasn’t much choice.

She dragged the guard’s body back out of the stall. She’d passed a nice trough earlier that would make a good temporary home for him; the other guards would assume he was drunk on duty. But she’d keep the lightsaber. It had only been a day since the Luzo brothers had taken hers, but it felt good to have one in her hand again. “Mother, are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”

Leaning on the handle of the shovel, Candra looked long and hard at her daughter. “No, this is the place for

me right now. I'd only slow you down." She looked down at the floor of the stall and grimaced. "And if this plan of yours doesn't work, don't trouble yourself for me here. I don't expect to be around much longer anyway."

Chapter Two

Hate: pure, and oppressive. Tahv was a monument to it. Jelph felt it in every alley, at every crossroads. The dark side of the Force permeated this place, as nowhere he had ever visited.

Many times while growing up on Toprawa, Jelph had thought he was going insane. He was beset with constant headaches; each waking moment took a toll on him. Only later did he realize that the cause had been his developing Force sensitivity, responding to the psychic scars Exar Kun and his kind had wrought on the world, years before.

But their evil was past. The psychic acid that coursed through the streets of Tahv was alive. It was everywhere. The building he hid against was home to an old Sith man violently castigating a Keshiri servant. The window across the way, beyond which a young couple plotted the deaths of their neighbors. The sentry down the walk, whose memories held things beyond Jelph's worst imaginings.

Jelph tried to shut out the impressions coming at him through the Force without attracting attention to his psychic presence. It was nearly impossible. The Sith happily broadcast their hatred and anger, like wild animals baying at the stars.

Collapsing against a wall, Jelph doubled over. Too late, he realized it hadn't been a good idea to eat before coming here. He rose, gasping and wiping the sweat from his forehead. How many Sith lived here? he wondered. In Tahv? On Kesh? He'd never known. He was ostensibly a scout for the Jedi, even if they didn't recognize him as such; he'd wanted to deliver a full report on his eventual return. But every time he'd gone near any population center, he'd fallen ill. Including now, when he most needed his faculties.

Jelph struggled to collect his thoughts. *Ori*. He needed to find Ori. Her name, her face would be his lifeline. She was why he was here—and why he hadn't left.

He knew her presence through the Force very well, but had no hope of finding it in the sea of harsh feeling that was Tahv. He wondered how she had ever survived here. Her dark nature had never seemed to him in the same class with the other Sith of Kesh, however much she postured. Ori was proud, not venal; indignant, not hateful. He would have recoiled at her touch, had she been otherwise. He *had* to be right about her.

But what if he was wrong? Was she even here?

Jelph was about to surrender to the despair surrounding him when he saw something that stirred a memory. In one of their first meetings, Ori had bragged about how none of the other Sabers had her knowledge of the city's aqueduct system. It was her territory to patrol, with her apprentices. Jelph looked up to see one of several towering stone edifices stretching high across the city, bringing down water from the highlands. First constructed by the Keshiri, the system had been improved by the early Sith, who added storage reservoirs dozens of meters off the ground. Ori was right: from up there, all of Tahv could be seen. *And hopefully not felt*, he thought.

He crossed into the shadows beneath a massive aque-

duct support, a pillar nearly the size of a city block. The dark side sensation wasn't so bad there. Jelph scaled the support, careful to stay constantly in the darkness until he reached the top.

With a wide ledge on either side channeling rushing waters, the stone flume was the size of a city street. Lying prone on the ledge, Jelph marveled that the Keshiri had been able to build, in effect, a river in midair long before the Sith had arrived. What might they have accomplished unmolested? Shaking his head, he reached for his shoulder pouch and removed his macrobinoculars.

Studying the area, he noticed a mountain range looming far to the west. It filled him with dread. He'd heard that the Sith kept their wrecked starship there, in a temple. Would they be able to use materials from his fighter to repair it? Or would one Sith simply try to leave in his fighter, planning to return later for the others? Either way, finding Ori was the important thing now. Turning his attention back to the city below, he set the visor to night vision and scanned the streets leading to the great palace. Would she have gone there, even knowing what Grand Lord Venn had done to her family? Straining to see farther, he dared to stand.

"Ori, where *are* you?"

Suddenly an unseen hand slammed him backward into the coursing water. The macrobinoculars tumbled from his grasp, bouncing once on the ledge and shattering unseen on a marble rooftop far below. Once he touched bottom in the meter-deep canal, Jelph kicked his work boots against the greasy stone floor and launched himself up—only to go flying back again, pushed by the Force. Unable to right himself, he tumbled down the flume.

The current subsided, depositing him in a collecting pool—lower down, but still many meters above the nearby rooftops. He struggled to the shallow end,

unclipped his lightsaber from his belt, and lit it. Blue light flashing in the night, Jelph staggered about in the waist-deep water, looking for his assailant.

“*Liar!*”

The call had originated up the flume. There Jelph saw the silhouette of a woman launching toward him, brandishing a crimson lightsaber. With both hands on his weapon, he deflected the powerful blow, allowing the force of the woman’s attack to carry her into the reservoir with him. She regained her footing quickly and struck again.

“Liar!” Ori repeated, her normally brown eyes blazing with orange.

“You found it,” Jelph said, bringing his lightsaber against hers in a crackling deadlock. It was all he could think to say.

Ori snarled something inaudible and kicked through the water at him. Jelph sidestepped the move, causing them both to lose footing—and causing Ori to lose her lightsaber to the deeper portion of the basin.

Seeing her splashing about, looking for the weapon, Jelph stepped back to give her room. “You found it,” he said, deactivating his lightsaber. “You found it—and you destroyed the garden. I don’t blame you.”

“I blame you!” Standing again, she jammed her hand in the water, fruitlessly. “You’re a liar. You’re a *Jedi!*”

“I was,” he said. There was no point in denying it. “That was my spaceship you found. Thank the Force you didn’t try to get inside—”

“What? You don’t think I’m *smart* enough?” Dripping, she glared back at him. “I’m just some stupid groundling to you—no better than the Keshiri!”

“That’s not it!”

“We came from space, you know. And we’ll be going back! Is that what you’re afraid of?”

“Yes—among other things.” Suddenly remembering

where he was, Jelph looked nervously above. The reservoir was too high for them to be heard from beneath, but he'd seen aerial sentries earlier. At least he'd found her. "What . . . what are you doing here?"

Ori stomped around in the water, still unable to find her lightsaber. "I came to Tahv to tell them about you! To warn them!"

"Up here?" He'd expected her to head off to see someone of importance. He studied her as she shook the water from her hair. "Wait. You *did* see someone important. Your mother."

The Sith woman simply glowered.

"I thought your mother wasn't in power anymore—"

"That'll change!" Ori's face filled with rage. "With what we know now, she'll be back! *I'll* be back!"

Jelph stepped backward, as if shoved by the force of her words. "This isn't like you," he said. "The person who stayed with me those days didn't care about that anymore. That person—"

"That wasn't *me*," Ori spat. "That was *defeat!*"

"But I liked the other you—and I don't care what you call it. That was a part of you."

"That person wasn't Sith!" She pointed to the stars, peeking out from the clouds high above. "Those belong to us! It's not just about me. We've lived here a thousand years, waiting to get back there. Waiting to get back to what's *ours!*"

Jelph began to say something, but stopped. "That's right," he whispered, calculating. The Tribe was a remnant from the Great Hyperspace War, more than a millennium before. She didn't know what had followed.

He had a weapon. *History*.

"There are no more Sith," Jelph said.

"What?"

"There are no more Sith," he repeated. "They're extinct."

“You’re lying,” Ori said, wading toward the edge. “That vessel you were hiding was a warship! Those big . . . *prongs* on either side of it. Are you telling me those are for decoration?”

Jelph shook his head. “Yes, we have enemies. And we’ve even fought Sith in living memory. A Jedi, Exar Kun, fell to the dark side and revived the movement. But they were eradicated. Hunted down—all of them.” Carefully, he edged his way toward her. “As far as I know, your people are the only Sith left alive in the galaxy. Feel my thoughts. You’ll know I’m telling the truth.”

Breathing hard, Ori looked back at him. Her anger spent, she hoisted herself onto the edge of the basin and pulled off her boot. Water poured from it. “We’ll rise,” she said, calmer now. “Alone against one Jedi, or a billion. We’ll take our chances.”

“You’ll be crushed by the Jedi.”

“Does anyone even know we exist?” she asked. “If the Sith haven’t been looking for us, I doubt the Jedi have.”

“They’re looking for me,” he said. “And believe me, the Jedi are looking for you.” He didn’t know what had become of all the members of the Covenant since he’d fled—but he knew as long as Lucien Draay lived, someone would be watching for the Sith.

Ori rubbed her forehead, exasperated. “If I can’t save my family—and I can’t save my people—then what am I supposed to do?”

“Supposed to do?” Jelph laughed. “You’re the one that always says you set your own course.” He waded toward her perch on the edge. “Just decide what you want.”

For a long moment, Ori looked at him, standing in the starlit water before her. Finally, she closed her eyes and shook her head. “We’ll never be able to trust each other,” she said.

Jelph looked at her searchingly.

She opened her eyes and glared at him. “I can feel it in your thoughts. You think I’m beautiful. You think you want me. You want to trust me. But you’re looking behind every word I say, trying to find me out, trying to trap me. Because of who I am.”

Jelph looked down at the water. He hadn’t known why he had come all this way when so much was at risk. Not until now. “I think I know who you are, Ori.” He stepped forward and put his hand on her shoulder. She shrank at his touch.

“Jelph,” she said, grabbing at his hand but not pushing it away. “I can’t be the person I was back at the farm. If the only way to be with you is to be *weak*, I just can’t do it.”

“You *can* be strong,” he said, reaching for her and pulling her off the ledge, down into the water before him. Her feet touching the bottom, she looked up at him. “You *are* strong,” he said. “You just don’t have to rule the galaxy.”

She looked away from him, down at the pool. “It’s what we’re born to do, you know. To rule the galaxy.”

“Then the Tribe is built on a trick,” he said. “A deception. Everyone is fighting over something that only one person can have. Just one. Which means that to be a Sith—is to be an *almost certain failure*. Almost everyone who follows your Code is doomed to fail, even before he starts.” Jelph chortled. “What kind of philosophy is that?” Nudging her chin upward with his hand, he looked into her eyes, brown again. “Don’t be tricked. You can’t lose if you don’t play.”

He kissed her, uncaring what any Sith aerial sentry saw. Ori returned the embrace before pulling back. “Wait,” she said. “We’re *already* playing. It’s in motion. I can’t stop it.”

“What do you mean?”

Dark brow furrowed, Ori explained what her mother had suggested she do. “I’ve already sent word to the rival High Lords,” she said. “They’re going to meet me at your farm to see the spaceship.”

Shocked back to reality, Jelph released her. “What . . . what did you say to them?” Stunned, he climbed out of the reservoir.

Ori followed, appealing to him. Her mother had given her a phrase to use—code within the tiny High Lord community for a discovery of Kesh-shaking importance. “I didn’t tell them about the spaceship, but they know it’s important,” she said. “They’re supposed to meet me there tomorrow at sunset.”

“Sunset!” Jelph sagged. It had taken him a full day and night just to get here on foot. “How were you going to get there?”

“I was going to steal an uvak,” Ori said, standing atop the ledge and pointing up to a dark figure in the sky. “It’s why I came up here—I knew from the aqueduct, I could lure one of the aerial sentries down here.” She looked back at him petulantly. “Of course, that was when I still had a lightsaber.”

“Lucky thing you made a friend,” he said, standing on the ledge beside her and looking up at the hovering sentry. He smiled. “You know, Ori, you’re the first Sith I’ve ever fought.”

“You may need to try harder against this one,” she said, watching his lightsaber come to life. “We’re not all so easily charmed.”

Chapter Three

It felt good to fly again. Ori looked down at the countryside slipping away beneath the uvak's beating wings. Every so often, she turned back to see Jelph, clinging to her as she pulled the reins. He was still smiling. Flight was no mystery to him, she knew—but he'd lived for three years on the ground, looking up at flying Sith. This was a welcome change.

She wondered what flying in his spaceship would be like. She knew now why he hadn't simply flown away in it earlier—but now that they'd found each other, they needn't be bound to Kesh any longer. They'd be an uncomfortable fit in the one-seat vehicle, and she knew he wanted to reinstall some kind of communications system before departing. But even though they hadn't discussed it, she fervently hoped for that escape.

What would life be like for her, a child of the Tribe in a Jedi-dominated galaxy? Much like Jelph must have felt these past years, she imagined. She was beginning to think that way now. Empathy was a trait the Sith understood only as a means of better knowing one's enemy; it had no practical purpose otherwise. Ori had begun to see things differently.

Take Candra, for example. There were many reasons Ori had wanted to restore her mother's past position—

but most revolved around pride, vengeance, and shame over her current state. It was more important, she now realized, to simply improve her mother's life by getting her out of Venn's clutches. The four High Lords could do that, Gadin Badolfa assured her when she'd contacted him. She just needed something to give them in trade instead of Jelp's spaceship. Jelp had suggested the four functioning blasters he had hidden at home; she could claim to have discovered them in a grave somewhere. All the weapons they had from *Omen's* crew were long since exhausted. The discovery of charged ones could make a difference in the violent politics of the High Lords.

"We're not going to make it in time," Jelp said. Their uvak hadn't wanted to carry two strange riders and had fought them all the way. "What's that up there?"

Ori looked up to see a flying V of uvak—a lone figure trailed by three more on either side—soaring through the air high above them. "Blast it!" They'd found the jet stream, she realized. "They're going to get there first!"

"Steady," Jelp said. His hold on her tightened. "But faster!"

Ori allowed Jelp to leap free out of sight of the farm before touching down. She watched as he nimbly hit the dirt and rolled into the cover. It was so surprising to see him in action, as physically able in every way as a Sith Saber. And stealthy, too. The visitors, their creatures parked behind the farmhouse, hadn't seen a thing.

Taking a deep breath, Ori dismounted. The sack of blasters was right where Jelp had said it was, beneath the mixing trough. They looked much like the ones she'd seen in the museum. Hopefully, they'd be enough to buy her mother's redemption—and to make the visitors leave.

Under her breath, she rehearsed what she would say as she rounded the farmhouse past the destroyed trellis. She knew which four of the High Lords to expect. Sensing familiar dark presences, she called out. “My Lords, I have what you’re looking for . . .”

“Yes, I think you do.”

Ori turned ashen at the sound of the croaking voice. *The Grand Lord!*

Pale and shrunken, Lillia Venn emerged from the stable. Raising a mottled hand, she grasped Ori through the Force, immobilizing her. Four of her loyal guards appeared from behind the barn and took physical hold of Ori. Turning, the Sith leader called into the barn. “Lords Luzo!”

Ori felt her spine turn to jelly as Flen and Sawj Luzo opened the stable doors behind Venn, revealing the metallic mass of the Aurek strikefighter inside. She’d heard from Badolfa that Venn had elevated Flen and Sawj Luzo to Lordships for their loyalty. Now the conniving brothers had returned to the farm—with her worst enemy. “How did it happen?” Ori asked, struggling against the guards. “Did Badolfa betray me?”

“Oh, we let Badolfa deliver your messages,” Sawj Luzo said, squeaky voice high with delight. “Your mother made another deal.”

“*What?*”

“Yes,” Venn said, turning and hobbling back inside. “She didn’t think your discovery existed—and she didn’t think the other High Lords would come. So she alerted us to the meeting here.”

Ori looked horrified. “In exchange for what?”

Venn licked her dry lips. “Call it . . . *improved working conditions*. Had any High Lords arrived, I would have had them for treason.” She gestured to the space vehicle. “But this is a much better prize.”

Straining against her captors, Ori looked around.

Jelph was out there, she knew—but there were so many of them. And now the elder Luzo brother was helping the Grand Lord through the partially dug manure in the stable toward her discovery.

“I did it,” Venn said, triumphantly. “I’ve lived to see the day.” She released her hold on her escort’s arm and leaned against the starfighter. “Life is a cruel joke, Lord Luzo. You spend your years reaching the pinnacle of power—only then everyone thinks it’s time for you to die.”

“None of us, Grand Lord.”

“Shut up.” She stroked the cold metal of the vehicle. “Well, Lillia Venn’s life is not over. There is another peak, another place to conquer. I will begin again—in the stars.” Vaguely aware of the shifting feet of her allies behind her, she added: “I will take you all with me, of course.”

“Of course, Grand Lord.”

Outside, two of the guards—once Ori’s fellow Sabers—stepped away from Ori, their attention drawn to the excitement inside. Neither they nor her two remaining captors noticed the discarded, unopened sack of blasters behind them, silently levitating toward the bushes beside the farmhouse. But Ori did, beginning to move even before she heard Jelph’s mental call.

Ori! Down!

Instead of wresting free to run, Ori threw her weight to the ground, surprising the men holding her arms. The distraction was enough for Jelph, who emerged from the farmhouse firing. Brilliant beams not seen on Kesh since the first century of occupation struck the two guards from behind. Ahead, the remaining Sabers turned in shock.

Inside, Venn’s aged form came alive. She glared at her new Lords. “Secure this place!”

Jelph charged the yard, firing anew. The remaining

Sabers, who had never deflected a blaster bolt in their lives, moved frantically to parry the energy. Ori rolled on the ground, trying to find one of the fallen guards' lightsabers. Ahead, she saw the Luzo brothers standing guard in the doorway to the stable—while behind them, the Grand Lord had somehow clambered atop the starfighter.

No, she saw with a start. Not atop the vessel. *Inside.*

Ori spun toward Jelph, who'd arrived beside her. He saw it, too. For a moment he froze, his blasterfire stopping. The crone was inside his precious starship. He grabbed Ori's arm and helped her stand.

Firing again at the Luzos and their guards, he pulled at her arm. "Ori, let's go!"

Suddenly thrown into motion, Ori looked back at the barn. He clearly didn't understand. "Jelph, no! The Grand Lord is here," she called. "What are you doing?"

Jelph didn't answer. Instead he pushed her forward. Away from the barn—toward the river.

Inside, the old woman reached for the throttle.

A tinny voice came from the compartment. "Automatic navigation system engaged. Hover mode activated." Venn's eyes opened wide as she began her ascent.

Outside the Aurek, the Luzo brothers ordered the surviving Saber to guard the entrance against Ori and her unknown protector. The rear stable doorway accommodated wide-winged uvak; it would easily permit the exit of a hovering starfighter.

"Such power," Sawj Luzo said, watching the metal monster rise. "She won't even need us to sever the moorings."

"Moorings?" Flen looked beneath the ship. Two tiny monofilament cords tied around the landing struts were

just visible now in the light. As the lines pulled taut, the young Lord's yellow eyes darted to the other ends, buried in the muck where the vessel had parked.

There, in the ground, tiny pins snapped—and brought down a Dark Lord's dreams.

The security device had gone in before Jelph had brought the first starfighter part down from the jungle. The Aurek had sat hidden beneath a mound of manure in the barn—but beneath it was buried something else: two of the ship's proton torpedoes, surrounded by thousands of kilograms of ammonium-nitrate-based explosive. Transforming the fertilizer into something fit for an anti-theft system had required much patience and care—but it had given Jelph a way to turn his nominal job into something helpful to his mission.

Now the anti-theft system worked exactly as planned. When the cables yanked upward, triggers snapped shut on the torpedo warheads. The weapons detonated, igniting the surrounding explosives.

Thunder struck the farm as the fireball ripped and tore itself free from the surrounding clay, consuming the stable and its occupants in milliseconds. Outside, Jelph tackled Ori, plunging them both into the water even as the shock wave shredded the ground behind them.

Jerked through the disintegrating barn roof, the strikefighter rode aloft on a geyser of heat and force. For a split second the woman inside rejoiced at the motion, assuming it a natural demonstration of the vehicle's power. Her elation ended when, the vessel's shielding inoperative, the other four torpedoes detonated in their launch tubes. Night laborers as far away as Tahv saw the new comet flash into being and die just as quickly, bathing the southern sky with an eerie light.

Lillia Venn had found her way to the sky.

Chapter Four

The little hut was taking shape. Under a dense canopy of foliage no uvak scout could penetrate, the new structure sat atop a relatively dry lump in the middle of the thicket. The hejarbo shoots grew much stronger up here in the jungle; if it weren't for Jelph's lightsaber, Ori never would have cleared the grounds.

Eight weeks had passed since the blast claimed the farm. Jelph and Ori had descended from the jungle only once, under cover of night, to investigate what was left. There wasn't anything to see. The entire riverbank had fallen into the Marisota River. Dark waters eddied and swirled over the blast crater. All that remained was the stub of a weed-covered path terminating at the river's edge. The pair had returned to the jungle that night confident that no one would learn there had ever been a starfighter on Kesh. Ori had laughed for the first time in days, quoting her mother's favorite line.

"The Confidence of the Dead End."

Since that trip, their focus had been entirely on carving a place for themselves in hiding. There was no returning, Ori now realized; not after her mother's betrayal. Venn's death certainly had been broadcast through the Force—and just as certainly, would have set the remaining High Lords against one another all

over again. The game was renewed; maybe Candra might even find a role to play. Ori wanted nothing to do with any of it. That part of her was past.

And if no one mourned Lillia Venn, no one had come to look for Ori and Jelph, either. In fact, the two of them had spied fewer Sith and Keshiri in the surrounding lands of late than usual. Presumably, a Grand Lord vanishing mysteriously in an area feared as haunted since the tragedy of the Ragnos Lakes would have that effect.

It was fine with her. Ori had a new vision for herself now—based on an old story she'd heard as a child. Keshiri legend held that soon after the Sith arrived, some of their native population had escaped over the ocean. They'd chosen a one-way trip to privation and likely death over lives of service to the Tribe. Today's more devoted Keshiri told it as a cautionary tale: choice of destiny was a luxury reserved for the Protectors, not their servants. The cost of arrogance, for a servant, was isolation.

Ori saw it differently. If the exodus really had happened, whoever had led those slaves away was the greatest Keshiri of all time. Their fates had been decided—and defied. Jelph was right. There had to be a way to win at life besides climbing to the top of a fractious order—only to be stabbed by a shikkar or poisoned by a presumed ally. Had Venn been happy, she wondered, being immolated in her moment of triumph? The Tribe members seemed as hopelessly bound to their paths as the Keshiri who remained slaves. And they thought they were smarter?

Looking to the sun vanishing between the trees, Ori began cutting down the last of the meter-length shoots that would form their side door. It felt strange using the Jedi's weapon, she thought. All the lightsabers the Sith on Kesh used were red, but some of the original castaways

kept captured Jedi lightsabers as trophies. She had seen a green one in the Korsin Museum. This one's color was strange and beautiful, a brilliant blue found nowhere in nature. The only artifact of Jelph's alien origin.

Well, not the only one, she thought, extinguishing the lightsaber.

That's where he was now, she knew. As usual, he had risen at dawn to trap breakfast and gather their fruit for later. While offering nothing like the gardening conditions in the lowlands, the jungle provided other means of sustenance year-round; in this latitude, she doubted she would notice when winter came. He spent the rest of his day building their shelter, before retiring, at dusk, as he always did, to keep vigil beside the device—the one part of his space vessel he hadn't brought down to the farm. She walked there now, to the spot in the trees where Jelph sat on a stump for hours, staring at the dark metal case and fiddling with its instruments.

He hadn't kept it from her. For the Sith, the “transmitter,” as he called it, could be as explosive a discovery as the starfighter. Jelph had kept it for what it represented: his lifeline to the outside. He'd never been able to get a message out; as he explained it, something about Kesh and its shifting magnetic field prevented such attempts. That might not be a permanent situation, but it could be centuries before it changed. Ori wondered if that same phenomenon had thwarted the castaways centuries before. All he was able to do was set the device to scan for signals from the ether, recording them for later playback. Perhaps, if some traveler came near enough, he might be able to get a message to the beyond. She now understood his trips upriver in earlier months: he came to the jungle to see what sounds he'd snared.

Normally, he heard nothing but static. But whatever Jelph had just heard had thrown him.

“I can’t go back,” he said, looking blankly at the device.

Ori looked at the flashing thing, not understanding. “What happened?”

“I caught a signal.” It took him several moments to be able to say the words. “The Jedi are at war with one another.”

“What?”

“A Jedi named Revan,” he said. “When I lived there, Revan was like us—trying to rally the Jedi against a great enemy.” Jelph swallowed, finding his mouth dry. “From the sound of it, something’s gone wrong. The Jedi Order has split. It’s at war with itself.”

Jelph replayed the recorded message for her. A fragment of a warning from a Republic admiral, it cautioned listeners that no Jedi could be trusted. The ages-old compact between Republic and Jedi had been sundered. Now there was only war.

The message ended.

Shaken, Jelph deactivated the device. “This . . . is *our* fault. The Covenant.”

“The Jedi sect you belonged to?”

“Yes.” He looked up in the twilight, unable to find any evening stars through the foliage. “And that’s the trouble. There aren’t supposed to *be* any Jedi sects. The Order is divided now—but we divided it first.” He shook his head. “May the Force help them all.”

He turned his gaze to the wilderness again. Ori let him sit in silence. It occurred to her that during all her days of complaining about the world she had lost, Jelph was living with the loss of a whole galaxy. And he was losing it again now.

At last, he stood and spoke. “I don’t know what to do, Ori. We kept the Tribe from discovering a way off Kesh. But I always held out hope that with the transmitter, I could make contact one day. Make contact,”

he said, looking back at her for a moment, “to get us out of this place.”

“And to warn them about my people,” Ori said.

Jelph looked away. There was no avoiding the truth. “Yes.”

Ori touched his shoulder. “It’s only fair. I tried to warn my people about you.”

“Well, it’s pointless now,” he said, stooping to lift a stone from their future front garden. “If the Jedi are divided—or, worse, if Revan or someone else has fallen to the dark side—then bringing a planetful of Sith to their attention is the worst thing I could possibly do for the galaxy.”

“You don’t know that,” she said. “You could be wrong. The Jedi could still come here and wipe everyone out.”

“Yes, I could be wrong.” Laughing to himself, he looked at her. “You know, that’s the first time anyone’s heard me say that. Maybe if I’d said it more often back home, I wouldn’t be here now.” He tossed the stone into the stream and knelt again. “I’ve lived my whole life thinking I knew what I was supposed to do. I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do *now*.”

Watching him, Ori saw the look she’d seen in him in her previous visits to the farm. It was the expression he’d worn when toiling in the muck. Then he had been doing something unpleasant, but he’d been doing it because he had to do it, to keep his garden alive and his customers happy. His duty.

Duty. The term didn’t mean the same thing to the Sith. In the Sabers, Ori had had missions she was charged to perform—but she had taken them on as personal challenges, not out of some loyalty to a higher order. The galaxy didn’t have the right to give her odd jobs. Truly free beings had lives. *Slaves* had duties.

And now Jelph was suffering, certain that he had

some duty to perform, but unsure what it was. What service did he owe the galaxy—a galaxy that had already cast him out?

“Maybe,” Ori said, “maybe Sith philosophy has the answer for you.”

“What?”

“We’re taught to be self-centered. We don’t think *us* and *them*. It’s just *you*, versus everyone else. No one else matters.” Placing her arms around him from behind, she looked out at the dark stream, burbling quietly past on its way to feed the Marisota River. “The Sith cast me out. The Jedi cast you out. Maybe neither side deserves our help.”

“The only side worth saving,” he said, turning toward her, “is ours?”

She smiled up at him. Yes, she had been right from the beginning. He was so much more than a slave. “Give it a try, Jedi,” she said. “If I can do something selfless—then maybe it’s time for *you* to do something selfish.”

He looked at her for a long moment, a twinkle in his eye. Wordlessly, he broke the embrace and stepped over to the receiver. Uprooting it, he grinned at her. “Shall we?”

Ori watched him cradle the blinking machine for a moment before she realized what he intended. Exhaling, she stepped over and helped him carry the transmitter to the side of the stream. With one great heave, they tossed it in. Striking a shoal beneath the current, the contraption splintered noisily into shards. They watched together for a moment as bits of casing bobbed and vanished into the darkness. Then they turned back toward their house.

The cords were cut.

It was time to live.

Read on for an excerpt from
Star Wars: **Fate of the Jedi: Conviction**
by Aaron Allston
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Coruscant, Jedi Temple
Infirmary Level

The medical readout board on the carbonite pod flickered, then went dark, announcing that the young man just being thawed from suspended animation—Valin Horn, Jedi Knight—was dead.

Master Cilghal, preeminent physician of the Jedi Order, felt a jolt of alarm ripple through the Force. It was not her own alarm. The emotion was the natural reaction of all those gathered to see Valin and his sister Jysella rescued from an unfair, unwarranted sentence imposed not by a court of justice but by Galactic Alliance Chief of State Daala herself. Had they come to see these Jedi Knights freed and instead become witnesses to a tragedy?

But what Cilghal *didn't* feel in the Force was the winking out of a life. Valin was still there, a diminished but intact presence in the Force.

She waved at the assembly, a calming motion. “Be still.” She did not need to exert herself through the Force. Most of those present were Jedi Masters and Jedi Knights who respected her authority. Not one of them was easily panicked, not even the little girl beside Han and Leia.

Standing between Valin's and Jysella's gurneys with her assistant Tekli, Cilghal concentrated on the young man lying to her right. His body still gleamed with a trace of dark fluid: all that remained of the melted carbonite that had imprisoned him. He was as still as the dead. Cilghal pressed her huge, webbed hand against his throat to check his pulse. She found it, shallow but steady.

The readout board flickered again and the lights came up in all their colors, strong, the pulse monitor flickering with Valin's heartbeat, the encephaloscan beginning to jitter with its measurements of Valin's brain activity.

Tekli, a Chadra-Fan, her diminutive size and glossy fur coat giving her the aspect of a plush toy instead of an experienced Jedi Knight and a physician, spun away from Valin's gurney and toward the one beside it. On it lay Jysella Horn, slight of build, also gleaming a bit with unevaporated carbonite residue. Tekli put one palm against Jysella's forehead and pressed the fingers of her other hand across Jysella's wrist.

Cilghal nodded. Computerized monitors might fail, but the Force sense of a trained Jedi would not, at least not under these conditions.

Tekli glanced back at Cilghal and gave a brisk nod. All was well.

The pulse under Cilghal's hand began to strengthen and quicken. Also good, also normal.

Cilghal moved around the head of the gurney and stood on the far side of the apparatus, a step back from Valin. When he awoke, his vision would be clouded, and perhaps his judgment as well. It would not do for him to wake with a large form standing over him, gripping his throat. Violence might result.

She caught the attention of Corran and Mirax, parents of the two patients. "That was merely an elec-

tronic glitch.” Cilghal tried to make her tones reassuring, knowing her effort was not likely to succeed—Mon Calamari voices, suited to their larger-than-human frames, were resonant and even gravelly, an evolutionary adaptation that allowed them to be heard at greater distances in their native underwater environments. Unfortunately, they tended to sound harsh and even menacing to human ears. But she had to try. “They are fine.”

Corran, wearing green Jedi robes that matched the color of his eyes, heaved a sigh of relief. His wife, Mirax, dressed in a stylish jumpsuit in blacks and blues, smiled uncertainly as she asked, “What caused it?”

Cilghal offered a humanlike shrug. “I’ll put the monitors in for evaluation once your children are checked out as stable. I suspect these monitors haven’t been tested or serviced since Valin and Jysella were frozen.” There, that was a well-delivered lie, dismissing the monitor’s odd behavior as irrelevant.

Valin stirred. Cilghal glanced down at him. The Knight’s eyes fluttered open and tried to fix on her, but seemed to have difficulty focusing.

Cilghal looked down at him. “Valin? Can you hear me?”

“I . . . I . . .” Valin’s voice was weak, watery.

“Don’t speak. Just nod.”

He did.

“You’ve been—”

She was interrupted by a stage-whispered notification from Tekli: “Jysella is awake.”

Cilghal adjusted her angle so she could address both siblings. “You’ve been in carbonite suspension for some time. You will feel cold, shaky, and disoriented. This is all normal. You are among friends. Do you understand me?”

Valin nodded again. Jysella’s “yes” was faint, but

stronger and more controlled than Cilghal had expected.

“Your parents are here. I’ll allow them to speak to you in a moment. The Solos are here, as well.” *And little Amelia and her pet Anji, both of whom smell like they’ve been rolling in seafood shells left rotting for a week.* Cilghal had to blink over that fact. The child should have received a thorough disinfecting before being allowed in this chamber. Come to think of it, Barv also reeked. Where could a youngling and even a Jedi Knight go in the clean, austere Temple and end up smelling like that?

She set the question aside. “Bazel Warv is here, and Yaqeel Saav’etu, your friends. They can answer many questions about an ailment that afflicted the two of you just prior to your freezing.”

Jysella looked around, barely raising her head, her attention sliding across the faces of friends and loved ones, and then she looked at Valin. He must have felt her attention; he looked back. A thought, the sort of instant communication that only siblings can understand, passed between them. Then the two of them relaxed.

Jysella looked again at her parents. “Mom?”

At Cilghal’s nod, Mirax and Corran came forward, crowding into the gap between the gurneys. Tekli moved out of their way, circling around the head of Valin’s bed to rejoin Cilghal. She craned her neck to look up at the Mon Cal. “All signs good.”

Cilghal nodded. She turned to the others in the room. “All but the immediate family, please withdraw to the waiting area.”

And they did, exiting with words of encouragement and welcome.

In moments only the Horns and the medics remained with Valin and Jysella. Cilghal took a few steps to the nurse’s station and its bank of monitoring screens, giv-

ing its more elaborate readouts a look . . . or pretending to. Tekli found a mist dispenser and sprayed its clean-smelling contents around the chamber, driving away reminders of Amelia's, Anji's, and Barv's recent presence. Then she rejoined her superior.

If Cilghal's predictions were correct, Valin and Jysella would be reaching full cognizance right about now, if they had not already. And if the madness that had caused them to be subjected to carbonite freezing were still in effect, their voices would be raised in moments with accusations: "What have you done with my *real* mother, my *real* father?"

That was the insanity that had visited them, the manifestation of the dark-side effect of their connection with the monster known as Abeloth. But recently, Abeloth's power over the "mad Jedi" had been broken. They had all returned to normal—all but these young Horns, their recovery delayed by their suspended state.

Valin's voice was raised in a complaint, but it was not an accusation of treachery and deceit. "I can't stop shaking."

"It's normal." His father sounded confident. "Han went through it years ago. He said it took him quite a while to warm up. This gurney is radiating a lot of heat, though. You'll be warm enough before you know it." He frowned. "He also said his eyesight was gone right after he woke. How is it that you're seeing so well?"

"We're not." That was Jysella, raising her arms above her to stretch, an experiment that caused her to wince with muscle pangs. "I'm seeing mostly with the Force."

Valin nodded. "Me, too."

Cilghal and Tekli exchanged a glance. That was a relief. The conversation was idle chat, and would soon turn to minute discussions of who had been up to what while Valin and Jysella slept. All was well.

Unless . . . Cilghal still had one more test to run.

She raised her voice to catch the attention of all the Horns. “Excuse me. I must interrupt. We have to let the monitors get several minutes of uninterrupted data, and all this talking is interfering. I must ask you two to withdraw for a while.”

Mirax gave her an exasperated look. “After all the time we’ve waited—”

Tekli held up a hand to forestall her. “After all that time, you can afford to indulge in a few minutes of quiet relief with your husband.” She made a shooing motion with her hands. “Out.”

Grudgingly, the older Horns withdrew. They’d be joining the others in the waiting area.

From a cabinet, Cilghal took a pair of self-heating blankets. She approached the gurneys and spread one blanket over each patient. “Tekli and I need to make some log entries about your recovery. Josat will be here in a moment—ah.” As if on cue, and it was indeed on cue, a teenage Jedi apprentice, cheerful and maddeningly energetic, entered the chamber. Red-haired, lean with a teen’s overactive metabolism, he offered Cilghal and Tekli a minimally acceptable respectful nod and immediately moved over to the nurse’s station monitor to familiarize himself with his two charges.

Cilghal finished adjusting Jysella’s blanket. “If you need anything, Josat can provide it, and if he is not here, say ‘Nurse’ and the comm router will put you in contact with the floor nurse.”

Jysella glanced over at her brother. “I have just been tucked in by a large fish.”

He smiled, and when he spoke, there was amusement in his voice. “Maybe you’re hallucinating.”

The waiting room was a long chamber decorated with plants from a dozen worlds and a wall-side fountain shaped to simulate a waterfall on the planet Alderaan,

destroyed so long ago. The air here was fresher than that in the infirmary chambers, smelling of oxygen from the plants, mist from the waterfall—

Fresher in most ways, fouler in others. Leia turned to Allana and crossed her arms. “Sweetie . . .”

“I know, I know.” The child did not sound at all childlike, but she hugged her pet nexu to her with what looked like a need for reassurance. “We smell bad.”

“What did you get into?”

Allana’s shrug was uncommunicative. “I don’t know.”

Leia glanced at Barv, but the Ramoan Jedi Knight, big and green with ferocious tusks, avoided her eye.

Well, of course he didn’t want to explain. He’d been entrusted with watching over Allana, and he’d failed to keep her out of mischief. This was the sort of humbling experience young Jedi needed to have from time to time.

Han leaned into the conversation, but his attention was on his wife, not his granddaughter. “Garbage Compactor Three Two Six Three Eight Two Seven.”

Leia scowled at him. “Oh, shut up.”

Han grinned and there was a bit of mockery in the expression. He switched his attention to Allana. “Sweetie, I can remember when your grandma smelled just like that. And unlike you, she was rude and ungrateful, too.”

“Han—”

“Go get cleaned up, and sanisteam Anji if you can, while your grandma and I discuss the impossibility of keeping children—or teenage princesses—clean.”

“Yes, Grandpa.” Allana scurried while the scurrying was good. She didn’t have to look back to detect the glare Leia was visiting on Han.

Cilghal and Tekli walked toward an office at the far end of the hall from the Horns’ chamber, just short of the waiting room.

Cilghal had Josat's script timed and running in her head. He would now be moving around the Horns' chamber, humming to himself, cautioning Valin and Jysella not to move or talk—the monitors needed stillness to do this evaluation—but *he* could talk, fortunately, for it was impossible for him to keep quiet, or so his family said . . .

Tekli interrupted the holodrama in Cilghal's head. "So, what *did* cause the pod monitor to fail?"

"Maybe what I said. And maybe it was a spike of the ability Valin manifested when he went mad."

"The one that blanked out the encephaloscanner?"

"Yes. He was probably using the technique when he was frozen. The monitor failure would have been the last bit of that usage."

"Hmm." Tekli didn't comment. She didn't need to: Cilghal knew what she was thinking. Retention of that scanner-blanking ability was not an indication that Valin retained the madness, as well, but neither physician liked mysteries.

When the two of them entered their office, the main monitor on the wall was already tuned to a hidden holocam view of the Horns' chamber. They could see Josat indeed bustling among the cabinets, assembling a tray full of beverages, receptacles for medicines, blood samples, swabs.

Tekli heaved a sigh. "So far, so good."

Cilghal offered a noncommittal rumble. "Time will tell."

Josat moved to Valin and then Jysella, offering drinks. His voice was crisp over the monitor speakers. "We gave you the farthest room from the turbolifts and offices and waiting room. Much quieter here. If there's an emergency, though, it's safer to head to the stairs instead of the turbolifts. Right next door, take a left when you leave this chamber, it's the door straight ahead, you can

find it in pitch darkness. That can be important. I never used to pay attention to things like that, but since I started studying nursing, I have to know these things. Jedi Tekli will make me run laps if I ever don't know where the emergency exits are from any of my stations. Were your Masters always assigning you exercise when you messed up? Don't answer, the monitors need quiet."

Cilghal blinked, pleased. "He worked that in very well."

"About the punishment?"

"About the stairs."

"I know."

Cilghal sighed. "Mammalian humor. Deliberate misinterpretation."

"Tends to drive a Master crazy, doesn't it?"

Josat now stood beside Valin's gurney, his lightsaber swaying on his belt within Valin's easy reach. The apprentice eyed one of the wall monitors. "Slow progress on your evaluation. No matter. Nobody will come back to bother you until it's run its course. Half an hour at least, I'm guessing."

Cilghal nodded. "The last of the bait. He is not a bad actor." Under ideal circumstances, Valin or Jysella might feel a trace of deceit from him through the Force, but now, still suffering a little from the aftereffects of carbonite freezing, they were unlikely to.

They were, however, likely to add up four important details. First, they were in a room at the end of the corridor, away from most visitors and medical personnel. Second, they were next to stairs that would allow them to reach any level of the Temple while bypassing well-traveled turbolifts. Third, they had half an hour before their absence would be noticed. And fourth, they had ready access to a lightsaber.

If they were still mad, and merely concealing the fact, could they resist the bait?

But neither Horn made a grab for the lightsaber.

If they had done so—well, it wouldn't have been too damaging. The lightsaber would not have ignited. Switching it on, or having Cilghal or Tekli press a button on the comlinks they carried, would cause the false lightsaber to emit a powerful stunning gas. The Horns would have been felled without violence, never having even reached the corridor. Josat would have been felled as well, but it would have been easier on him than being thrashed by two experienced Knights.

But, clearly, escape was not a priority for them. Which meant that they, too, were sane. Cured.

Valin had felt nothing but warmth and relief from his parents—

From the man and woman *masquerading* as his parents.

As he lay listening to Josat's endless, maddening blather, Valin forced himself to remain calm. Any distress might send a signal through the Force to his captors, a signal that their deception had been detected.

And perhaps, *perhaps*, the man and woman who wore the faces of Corran and Mirax Horn didn't even know that they were imposters.

What a horrible thought. Perhaps they were clones, implanted with memories that caused them to believe, in their heart of hearts, that they were the real Corran and Mirax. What would happen to them when the truth was revealed? Would they be killed by their secret masters? Were they even now implanted with strategically-placed explosives that would end their lives when they were no longer useful?

Valin clamped down on that thought, suppressing it.

Again Josat came near, chattering about his studies, about politics, about the best mopping techniques for apprentices assigned to clean Temple corridors.

Again his lightsaber swung invitingly just within Valin's reach.

But, no. He and Jysella needed to know much more than they did now if they were to stage a successful escape. They needed to be rested, informed, and somewhere other than deep in the enemy-occupied Jedi Temple before they struck out on their own.

So he looked at his sister and offered her a smile full of reassurance. That emotion, at least, was real. In all the universe, the one person he knew to be true was Jysella. He'd known it from the moment they had reached for each other in the Force. Dazed, barely conscious, dreading what they would find, they had still connected, and they knew they were not alone.

She smiled back at him, an expression he felt more than saw.

They had each other, and for now, that was enough.