



ABOARD THE *JADE SHADOW*

THE LIST OF PLACES THAT JAINA, NATUA, BEN, LUKE, AND VESTARA had come up with read like a Top Ten Worst Places to Vacation, Ben thought as he looked at the names.

Dromand Kaas. Zios. Krayiss II. Khar Delba. Korriban. And it went on and on. Ben didn't know a lot about the specific history of each planet, but he was more than familiar with some. Like Zios.

He watched with not a little unease as Vestara read almost hungrily about the history of her—hopefully—former people. She methodically crunched a muja fruit, studying silently while they ate lunch in the galley.

Finally, uncomfortable with the silence, Ben said, “Your soup’s getting cold.”

“Hmm? Oh, right. Thanks.” She took a single spoonful and resumed reading.

Ben fidgeted, then said, “So I thought you’d already be familiar with a lot of these places. Maybe even tell us about some new ones.”

That got her attention. She looked up from the datapad. “A lot of them are familiar. But the *Omen*’s data bank did suffer some damage, and a great deal of information was lost. Remember, we didn’t really have the technology until recently to recover lost data. And Ship was much more interested in bringing us up to speed on the current state of the galaxy than on its history. So yes, a lot of this is new to me.”

“Interesting?”

She gave him a level gaze. “Of course it is. Knowledge is power, Ben, and I know you know that. I was born a Sith, even if I’ve changed my mind about a lot of what they stand for and who I want to be. I bet even you think this is interesting.”

He couldn’t deny it. “Well, yeah, it is. But it’s kind of like watching a ship crash. You can’t take your eyes off it, but you don’t really like what you’re seeing.”

She shrugged. “Perhaps. The nature of this is nothing new to me, only the details. And don’t worry. I’ve got plenty of information on ancient Sith planets to share with you.” She waggled the ’pad. “This is definitely incomplete.”

“Ancient Sith planets, but not Kesh,” Ben said.

Vestara sighed and put down the ’pad. “I’ve been thinking about this,” she said. “I know that there’s a very good possibility that Abe-loth and—and my father’s team have retreated to Kesh. But what I told Master Luke still stands. I’m afraid if I tell you where it is, every Jedi in the galaxy is going to converge on it and blast it back to the date that the *Omen* crashed. I can’t do that, Ben. I just *can’t*—and neither could you if you were in my situation.”

He stared into his soup. It was good soup, as such things went, with generous chunks of nerf meat and vegetables, but it was not holding his attention. Which was highly unusual, and a sign of how troubled he was by the direction the search was taking.

“I guess you’re right.”

She reached over and squeezed his arm. He glanced up from the soup and found her smiling. “Thank you for that.”

He gave her a crooked grin in return, then it faded. “But

still . . . by choosing not to tell us, you're putting all of us at risk. What if she *is* there? She's got to be stopped, Ves, you know that."

"I do. But not at the expense of my whole world."

Ben didn't know what to say. He wanted to argue that it wasn't genocide the Jedi were after, just . . . destroying Sith. But it sounded like the whole planet had become Sith, even the non-Force-users. He couldn't give her a promise that only the "bad people" would be targeted and destroyed, because as far as Jedi like his father went, *all* Sith were bad people.

She looked thoughtful for a moment, the datapad forgotten. "Unless . . ." she said, then shook her head. "Never mind."

"Unless what?"

She hesitated, gnawing her lower lip for a moment. Ben again found his eye drawn to the tiny scar, the single perfect imperfection in a face that otherwise, to him, had no flaws. "Unless . . . you could give me a promise that my people—those who haven't cooperated with Abeloth—would be safe."

He stared at her mutely, his blue eyes sad. She smiled, her own brown ones resigned. "See? I didn't think so. The only way for that bargain to work would be if I had a chip to bargain with. Which . . . you might be able to give me."

After so much time in her company, Ben was getting used to Vestara's subtle shifts in the Force. He was on the alert now, sensing that, contrary to what she wanted him to think, what she was about to say was something that had been on her mind for some time.

"Go ahead."

"Trust . . . comes hard. But this would be something each of us could use against the other—if we had to, of course."

"Of course." He leaned back and folded his arms, his face impassive.

"I would consider revealing to you the location of my world . . . if you would tell me who you think is this Jedi queen."

He almost laughed. "There's a difference, Vestara. Kesh is real. It exists. The Jedi queen is likely just some kind of figment of Taalon's fevered imagination."

"You know," she said, her voice equally conversational, "I some-

how don't think so. There's at least a kernel of truth in it, or else you and your father wouldn't have reacted so when it came up." She leaned her chin on her hand, smiling at him.

Ben considered the trade-off she was proposing. For about a nanosecond. And in that nanosecond, he came to the painful realization that at least for now, he didn't trust Vestara Khai, though he badly wanted to.

"If you're telling the truth," he said, "the best *we* can hope for is maybe—maybe—finding Abeloth and the Sith fleet. The best *you* could hope for is murdering someone very important to the future of this galaxy who might actually exist. And if you're lying, and I actually did give you information—if there was any information to give—you would have everything and we'd have nothing."

Vestara did not seem at all put out. She actually smiled. "Ben, I can see why Ship was drawn to you. There's the making of a fine Sith in you, you know that?"

"Let us not devolve into insults," Ben said. Vestara Force-tossed her muja fruit core at him, which he easily deflected. He wanted to be angry, but he couldn't be. This was where they were, plain and simple. He was frustrated, but unsurprised, and he found that it did not stand, and never had stood, in the way of his liking and caring about her. He still believed she was edging her way over to the light side, but she wasn't there.

At least, not yet.

"Well, now that you've had a chance to read about these," Ben said, dragging the subject back on track, "where do you think Ship would be most likely to go?"

"It's hard to say. Perhaps Ziost?"

Ben shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "There was nothing for him on Ziost. That's why he wanted me to free him, so he could get away from it."

She looked at him, no doubt picking up on his discomfort. "Sure you're not saying that because you don't want to go back there?"

The initial retort died on his lips. It was a fair question. He took a minute to think about it. "I'll be honest," he said, finally. "You're right. I *don't* want to go back there. I don't really *want* to go to *any* of these places. But my wants are irrelevant. If I thought Ship would

take Abeloth there, I'd be the first to investigate. But think about it. If there was anyone there on Ziosst who would be important enough to Ship or Abeloth, that being—or those beings—would have already freed Ship long before I got there.”

She nodded. “Good point. Well, what about—”

“Korriban’s our best bet,” came a female voice. They both looked up as Jaina strode in and without preamble set about making a meal for herself.

It was still odd, having Jaina aboard the *Jade Shadow*. It had been a while since Ben had been in such close proximity to his cousin for anything more than a family visit. He was glad to be working with her, but he knew that she, like his dad, was . . . well, to say “highly skeptical” of Vestara was putting it mildly. And yet, she had made a point of including Vestara in all the conversations.

“Why do you say that?” Vestara asked.

“It’s the homeworld,” Jaina said, pouring two cups of caf. “Most of these other places do have *a* history for the Sith, but Korriban’s *the* history. It’s logically the place we should visit first.”

Vestara lit up like an exploding sun in the Force for just the briefest instant. Ben’s heart sank.

“We can send others out to explore some of the possible sites, but me, I’d like for us to go to Korriban,” Jaina continued, taking a sip from her cup. She acted as if she hadn’t seen Vestara’s reaction. Maybe she hadn’t, thought Ben. He was more attuned to Vestara than either Jaina or Luke. He might have been the only one who noticed it.

“I would like to accompany you when you explore it,” Vestara said.

Jaina didn’t bat an eye as she moved to leave with the steaming cups. “I think you should.”

Ben was certain that he could literally *hear* his jaw drop.

“You told her *what?*” Luke was accepting a cup of caf from Jaina, and nearly spilled it as she told him what she had said to Vestara.

“You heard me,” Jaina said, plopping into a chair opposite her uncle. They were meeting in Luke’s quarters with the doors closed, so there was no chance of their being overheard.

“You want me to take a Sith, whose trustworthiness seems to de-

pend on the time of day, the season, and the phases of whatever moons happen to be nearby, with us on a potentially dangerous mission to the Sith homeworld.”

“That’s about right, yes,” Jaina said.

“Please give me a reason for why you think this is a good idea in any way, shape, or form.”

“I’ll give you more than one,” Jaina said. “First, it’s because she’s a Sith. She grew up with this, Luke. Like I grew up in a family of Jedi. Her culture is obsessed with its history, and she probably knows more about the ancient Sith, their technology, languages, and maybe even alchemy, than we do. If her own safety and life are on the line, she’ll tell us what she knows if we run across anything useful.”

“Set a thief to catch a thief,” Luke said, rather glumly.

“Something like that,” Jaina said. Her face split into an impish grin. “You know it always works when we send my dad out after people with shady reputations.”

“Can’t argue with success,” Luke said, allowing himself a small smile.

“Two,” Jaina continued, “Ship really does have a bond with her. That means if we get her near him, even if we can’t find him, he’ll be able to find her.”

“Why does that thought not fill me with delight?” Luke asked rhetorically.

“It should,” Jaina said, ignoring the sarcasm and choosing to address the question literally. “Even if he attacks, he’d be showing himself. And that’s what we want, right?”

Luke was forced to agree. “You make a persuasive argument.”

“Jag must be rubbing off on me,” she said. “In all seriousness though, Vestara Khai is a unique asset. We should make use of her.”

Luke sighed. “I am still very, very leery of bringing her along with us. I think it’s asking for trouble.” He had been looking down at the rapidly cooling cup of caf, but now he lifted his eyes to her. “She’s Sith, Jaina. Not just a dabbler, not a victim, not a fallen Jedi. Born and raised in an entire community of Sith. I’m convinced she’s not going to throw that aside and wholeheartedly join us, but I know Ben still thinks she can be redeemed.”

“There are those,” commented Jaina drily, “who still think you can’t be redeemed. Or Grandfather. Or Aunt Mara. Or Kyp Durrón, or—”

Luke held up his hand. “Point made. But those were different.”

“Were they? Or do you just want to think they’re different because you’re worried about your son getting hurt?”

Luke opened his mouth to retort, then closed it again. Jaina was right. His very quickness to respond negatively was proof of that. While Jedi did have to make split-second decisions over life-and-death matters, they were also not supposed to react emotionally, or to rush down a path recklessly. And he was doing precisely that.

“I do worry about Ben,” he admitted. “He’s a strong young man. And wise—much wiser than I was at his age. And no, you don’t have to agree with me,” he added as Jaina drew breath to speak. They smiled at each other. “I don’t think for a moment she’ll bring him over to the dark side. But I think he might get hurt—physically and emotionally—because he wants this so badly. He cares for her, Jaina. I can feel it.”

“Which means she can, too, most likely,” Jaina said. “I don’t want to get overly sentimental here, Uncle Luke, but—don’t underestimate the power of love. It’s pulled two family members back from the dark side already. Ben may be sixteen, but he’s not a fool.” She leaned forward, her dark eyes intense. “Maybe if he believes she’s redeemable . . . it’s because she *is*.”

Luke was silent. “All right,” he said at last. “Vestara can come with us to Korriban. But we are going to be watching her every minute.”

“Of course we will. And drink your caf, it’s getting cold.”