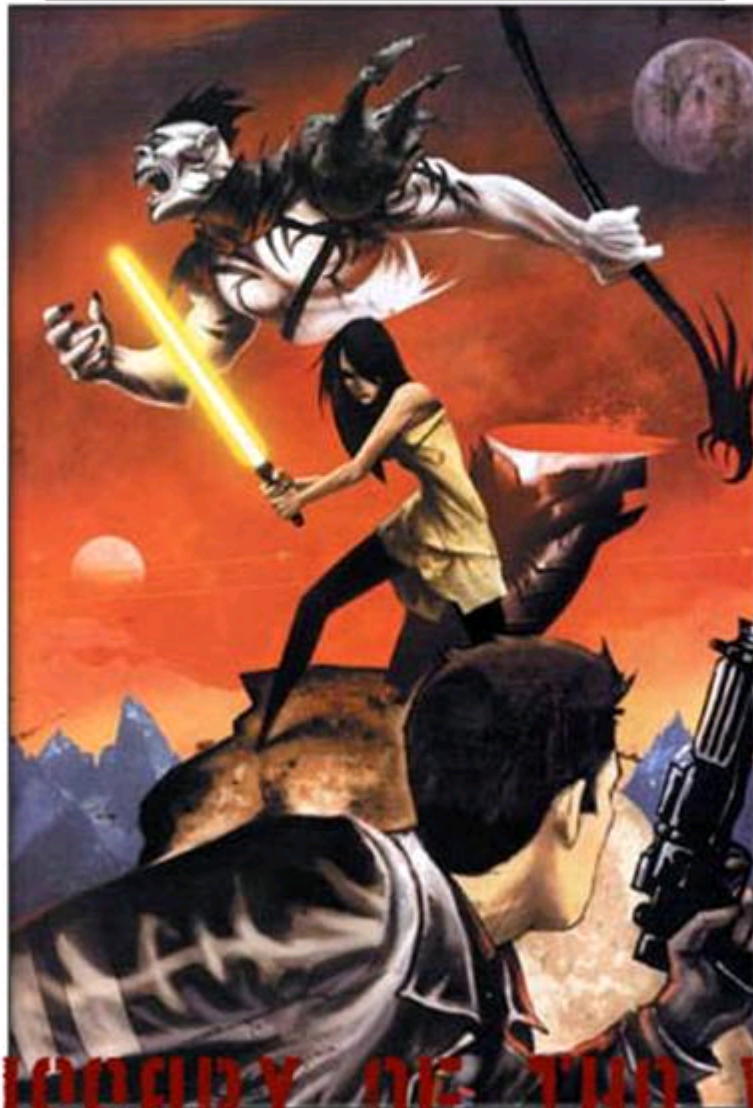




THE NEW JEDI ORDER



EMISSARY OF THE VOID

BY GREG KEYES

Emissary of the Void

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Best-selling novelist Greg Keyes (author of the Edge of Victory duology) writes an original serialized epic of The New Jedi Order. Originally found in the pages of Star Wars Gamer magazine, starwars.com presents the first three chapters of Emissary of the Void here to online readers. The story starts here and will continue online in the coming weeks, and then move to the Star Wars Insider, starting with issue #62 (due out on newsstands in October). To subscribe to the Star Wars Insider, the official publication of the Star Wars Fan Club,click here [1] .

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BONADAN

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I:Battle on Bonadan

WELL, THAT'S INTERESTING, Uldir Lockett thought, as a pair of feminine legs in black tights came hurtling over his left shoulder. Above the tights he was vaguely aware of a dark yellow skirt and, even farther up, a young, determined face framed in short dark hair. But it was the feet that held his attention as they hit square in the center of the table at which he and his companions sat, shocking their drinks into brief suborbits. Then the feet were gone, propelling legs, yellow skirt, and all an estimated two meters up

and one out toward the balcony above them. Searing flashes of weapon fire hissed by, and Uldir found his hand groping at an empty holster.

'Stop her!' Someone behind Uldir shouted.

Two of his three companions, Uldir saw, were also reaching for weapons that weren't there. The third, a human woman with startling platinum hair, brushed a fleck of Corellian whisky from the long scar beneath her left eye.

'I need a new drink,' she noted, as another volley of yellow streamers seared by, striking the synthewood balcony the girl had managed to grab. The patrons of the In the Red cantina were diving away from the newly declared war-zone, but the music from the band continued to blare cheerfully over the sound of weapon fire.

'I hate locals,' Leafth growled, thumping the curled fist of his foot on the table and scowling as only a Dug can scowl.

A glance over his shoulder confirmed what Uldir already suspected: The girl's pursuers were Corporate Sector Authority law enforcement, the only people on Bonadan allowed to carry weapons. From the color and intensity of their beams, he figured they were using a stun setting, and in any event their target was definitely the girl, who was now significantly above them, putting Uldir and his companions well out of the line of fire. He relaxed a little, settling his amber gaze on the girl as she heaved herself up,

wondering what she had done to provoke such a strong reaction from the local constabulary.

"Very impolite," Vook said, apparently agreeing with the Dug. His flat, noseless Duro face was unreadable, but his tone, as usual, was melancholy, as if even this put him in mind of his lost homeworld.

"I hate vacations," Leaft said, thumping the table again.

It wasn't exactly a vacation. A close scrape with a Yuuzhan Vong interdicator on the Hydian Way had left the transport the unlikely quartet shared with a sputtering hyperdrive and no shields at all. They had managed to limp to the Corporate Sector, a rimward territory still essentially neutral in the conflict between what remained of the free New Republic and the fierce extragalactic Yuuzhan Vong, who were gobbling it up system by system in their religious crusade of conquest. Left with nothing to do while repairs were effected, Uldir figured they could all use a little time off, and consequently the four soon found themselves on the galasol strip, a colorful collection of overpriced cantinas and casinos near the spaceport.

The fleeing girl was dressed like the attendants Uldir had seen earlier that evening at the Blue-Shift Luck casino, but if she was really a game-girl, she was a nimble one. As he watched, she flipped over the balcony, twisting deftly between the several lines of fire directed at her, and crouched behind a now abandoned table. The CSA lawmen clustered below the balcony, firing up.

'That's probably a mistake," remarked Vega Sepen, the platinum-crowned woman.

'Tactically unsound," Vook agreed, gravely.

'One unarmed short human against four corp-clowns," Leaft sneered. 'Not worth the price of admission."

'She's not that short," Uldir corrected, crossing his arms and lifting the square tip of his chin toward the balcony. 'She's a girl."

'Uh, oh," Vega murmured.

'Don't discuss human gender," the Dug growled. 'The whole idea sickens me.

Urr . . . Captain." He added that last a little sullenly, probably remembering one of the many formal reprimands he'd gotten lately from superiors.

About that time, the table the girl was hiding behind suddenly came over the balcony rail. It hit three of the security men squarely and nicked the fourth. With a fierce grin, the girl turned and ran off across the upper level toward an exit.

'She's getting away," Vook noticed.

'Yeah," Uldir said. 'Maybe not."

Vega must have seen the expression on Uldir's face.

'Not our fight," she cautioned. 'We're rescue fliers, not bounty hunters."

'Well, we can't fly without a ship, and I'm bored," Uldir said. 'Anyway, she owes me for these drinks." With that, he pushed back his chair, closed up his flight jacket, and leaped onto the table.

'This won't turn out well," he heard Vook mournfully predict.

Uldir followed the girl's example, launching himself from the table. He caught the balcony, swiftly pulled himself up and over and ran toward the exit through which she had vanished.

The exit led to an upper story, open-air courtyard. There, beneath a rusty evening sky, he found a trail of angry and confused patrons cursing after his quarry as she clambered up the output cable of the ion shield that filtered Bonadan's polluted air into something approaching pleasant. Uldir's opinion of the young woman's athletic prowess rose another notch, offset by the growing suspicion that she was probably some sort of burglar or spy. Maybe she had stolen something from the casino, or had been attempting to. Whatever it was, he was determined to find out.

He skipped to his right to avoid tripping over a fallen Rodian, but that brought him face-to-face with an immense Barabel male gnashing a set of very sharp teeth some half a meter above his own meter-and-a-half frame.

'Sorry,' Uldir grunted at the scaled tower.

The Barabel's black reptilian face contorted. 'You insult me?' He flexed his claws, and it occurred to Uldir that the Bonadan police couldn't confiscate natural weapons.

The Barabel had teeth, claws, and sixty kilos on him. Uldir had his fists and the best unarmed combat training the Search and Rescue Corps could provide.

So he ran, dodging behind a stumbling-drunk Togorian as the Barabel took a swipe at him. The big lizard tried to correct for Uldir's sudden movement and instead hit the white-furred humanoid, who yowled and lurched to face her antagonist. Uldir thought he wouldn't mind seeing how that turned out, under ordinary circumstances, but once again he'd lost sight of the thief.

He went up the cable hand-over-hand, pulling himself onto the rooftop. From here he couldn't see the galasol strip, but he could hear it in a blare of music -- Uldir and his companions had arrived during a sort of local festival thrown by one of the new execs of the corporate sector. They'd had to push their way through a parade dominated by floaters bearing likenesses

of the various leaders of the CSA, distributing free gambling chits for adults and trinkets for the kids. His vantage now overlooked the uglier side of Bonadan, the warehouse district that lay behind the flashy facade of the strip.

'How in the . . . ?' Uldir began, then realized he was talking to himself, something he considered a bad sign. But how had she made that jump? It was four meters to the air lane the barges traveled in if it was a centimeter.

She was running toward the next barge up, which was separated from its companion by only a meter or so, and the line of barges went on as far as the eye could see.

'Carbon flush," he swore. If he could not make the jump, he'd lost her, but it sure wasn't worth seeing if he could make the jump, so that was that.

He heard a hiss behind him and turned to see the Barabel coming up fast and decided it was worth finding out after all. He took ten paces and leaped with all of his might. At the last instant, he had the sudden sinking feeling he wouldn't make it, followed swiftly by the sinking feeling of gravity having a joke on him. He'd jumped long enough, but not high enough. He wouldn't even scrape the side of the barge going down.

He almost didn't see the multi-sensor cable dangling in front of him, but at the last instant he did, and he wrapped his hands around it, wincing at the friction burn he produced killing his momentum. Swearing a silent thanks to

whatever fates protected fools and starpilots, he started pulling himself up, ignoring the sibilant string of unintelligible curses the Barabel was howling after him.

On top, he took a moment to catch his breath, and for an instant he stood awestruck by the evening. Bonadan's primary was a giant red egg yolk smeared against a stark ebony horizon of eroding hills and slag heaps. In the melting glare of that light, the plexisteel towers of the spaceport appeared to be molded of living lava. Plumes of black smoke drifted up from distant refineries, pancaking into clouds made luminous by the dying light of the sun, stretching shadow fingers toward the horizon of night. In the deep of the sky the actinic flares of ion drives winked here and there as ships arrived and departed. The ore train he stood on stretched far away, like some sort of magical path above the barren landscape.

There was nothing admirable about the ecological mess the Corporate Sector Authority had made of a once-lush planet, but there was beauty in everything, even devastation. The Force was present even in a wasteland.

The barges were strictly planetary, their anteriors open to the air. He didn't recognize the ore -- he hoped it wasn't radioactive -- but it certainly made for bad footing, so as he started after the girl, he ran along the raised metal lip of the barge. The narrowness of it didn't bother him -- as a boy the spaceports on Coruscant and pretty much everywhere else in the galaxy had been his playgrounds, and he'd spent many an hour doing

far more foolish things on far more precarious surfaces.

To his satisfaction, his quarry didn't seem to have noticed him yet. She was taking her time, certain she'd lost her pursuers. He jumped the meter to the next barge, and then the next, closing all the while, confident that the steady hum of repulsorlifts would mask his approach. Besides, the girl had stopped now, lifting up her dress to reveal something taped to her leg. She began working at the adhesive, tearing it off in strips.

Ah-hah, he thought. Now we'll see what you've stolen.

When he came within five meters, however, the girl stopped what she was doing and spun on her heels to face him.

'Stay there!' she shouted over the thrum of the barges. 'I will defend myself.'

'Oh, I'm sure of that,' Uldir said. 'I saw what you did to law enforcement back in the cantina.'

She lifted her chin, and he suddenly realized she was kind of pretty, with her dark eyes and short brown bangs. And young -- maybe younger than he. She certainly did not look like the glamorous ideal of a galasol game-girl -- more like someone's kid sister playing dress-up.

'What business is that of yours?' she demanded, looking him over. 'That's

not a CSA uniform."

'You owe me four drinks," he said. 'Besides, I just have this odd feeling you're up to no good."

'You're wrong there," the girl replied. 'You have no idea how wrong."

'Explain my error, then. I'll be happy to listen."

She smiled faintly. 'You don't need an explanation," she said.

It occurred to Uldir that he really didn't. Now that he had met her, she seemed an honest sort. Whatever problem she had with the CSA was probably a misunderstanding. He shrugged and was starting to walk away when he got it.

'Hey!" he said, turning.

A lump of ore thudded into his shoulder with enough force to knock him down. He bounced back up, fast, but she was already there. Now that he knew what she was, he wasn't surprised.

Nor did he get a chance for more conversation. She was in midair, aiming a kick at his solar plexus.

Training took over. Flying kicks were good for taking opponents off of

speeders, or maybe if they were paralyzed, but they stunk against someone standing with balance and a little presence of mind. He spun aside and chopped at the back of her neck as she hurled past -- except she didn't hurl past. Instead, she touched down and pivoted, turning the kick into a wheel that caught him on the same target he'd been aiming for on her. He rolled with it, tumbling roughly over the ore, coming up to find her already on top of him. In her haste she had gotten sloppy, however, and he blocked her next kick and drove stiffened fingers into her midriff. She wheezed and fell back roughly onto the ore.

'Listen -- ' he began, but before he could get more out, she gestured with her left hand, and another chunk of rock leapt up from about a meter away and popped him in the forehead. He sat down, hard.

'Ow," he said, rubbing his head. 'You didn't have to do that. I'm -- '

He noticed it before she did, maybe because she was stunned from his punch and maybe because she was concentrating on him. He dove toward her. She jerked her hands up defensively, but he caught them and hauled her to her feet just as several white-hot flashes melted pits through the ore she'd been lying on.

'Fliers!" he shouted.

Sure enough, five atmospheric security fliers were descending toward them, spraying blaster fire. Uldir suddenly found himself face-to-face with the

girl, still holding both of her hands. She seemed to study him for about a nanosecond, then broke free and began running again. Uldir followed, blaster fire warming his heels.

The girl ran to the edge of the barge, followed it for a few seconds, and then leaped out into space.

"Wait!" Uldir shouted. Too late. He came skidding to a halt, peering over, hoping she'd dropped onto some tall building, but there was nothing but a sixty-meter plummet to the drab, one-story duraplast outskirts of the spaceport.

A bolt came near enough to curl his eyebrows, and he gathered that he had become a substitute target. Several more shots spanged around the barge's edge, and with a wordless curse he jerked back into motion, dropping back into the barge so he could use the raised lip as limited cover. His hand itched for his blaster, but that was still on his ship.

The pilots were smart. Four stayed back, laying down a sort of perimeter of fire that kept him boxed on the barge. The fifth zoomed in lower, focusing on hitting him. He tried to clear his mind, feel the shots coming before they did, but his Jedi training had been mostly wasted -- he had no natural talent for the Force. Still, now and then, his luck was unusual enough to suggest that Master Skywalker's academy had left him with something.

This time, he didn't think he would be as lucky as usual. When a sixth flier rose up from below the barge, scarcely two meters to his right, he was sure of it. He winced as blasters fired.

But the bolts seared over his head and struck the flier harassing him at close range, and his focus suddenly changed, centering on the yellow-and-black-clad figure at the controls of the newly arrived vessel. The figure was gesturing impatiently.

'You don't have to tell me twice,' Uldir muttered. Still dodging the more distant fire, he ran toward the flier and jumped in. The instant he was on board, the girl punched the throttle, weaving through a net of white bolts.

'Thanks,' Uldir said.

'If this is a trick, you'll regret it,' the girl snapped. 'Why were you chasing me?'

'I didn't know you were Jedi.'

The girl banked crazily and dropped low toward the landscape.

'I think you really want altitude, here,' he added.

'Yeah? You want to fly?'

'Um -- okay."

'Great." She let go of the controls, leaving Uldir to dive for them before the flier smacked into a transmission tower. Meanwhile, she went back to work on whatever was strapped to her leg.

'Didn't know I was Jedi?_That's_ why everyone else is after me."

'I thought you were a thief," Uldir explained, nosing up in time to avoid a serious insult from coherent light and charged particles. 'Why are they after you?"

'Because I'm Jedi. Are you stim-pickled? Don't you know every planet in the galaxy is scrambling to turn us over to the Yuuzhan Vong?"

'I'm aware of that," Uldir said, dryly. 'I nearly got turned in myself."

She laughed. 'You're no Jedi."

That stung more than Uldir cared to admit. 'Hey, be nice to me. I saved your skinny . . . er, your skin."

'And I returned the favor," she reminded him. 'We're even now. So. Why would anyone try to turn you in?"

Uldir flipped a lock of his chestnut hair away from his eyes. 'I'm a rescue flier,' he said. 'An ex-partner of mine turned out to be Peace Brigade, and he found out I once attended the Jedi academy. He arranged an ambush I was lucky to get out of. That was right after the Yuuzhan Vong warmaster announced that if all the Jedi were turned over to him, he'd stop conquering the galaxy.' He shook his head. 'As if anyone could really believe that.'

'You attended Master Skywalker's academy?' The girl asked, skeptically.

'Is there another?'

'No.'

'I didn't have any aptitude for the Force, though,' Uldir added.

'So much is obvious,' the girl said.

'Yeah, I think you mentioned that,' Uldir said, veering sharply to port, where the police fliers were trying to flank him and doing a pretty good job. 'Hold on a second,' he said. 'We'll have to fight a little, here.' He glanced over his shoulder. 'My name is Uldir, by the way.'

'Klin-Fa Gi, at your service,' she said grimly. 'You almost got me killed, Uldir. Don't do it again.'

'I'll try not to, Klin-Fa Gi. Stay down. We're going to take some hits.'

'Not if I have anything to say about it.'

For the second time that night, she leaped past him, landing with feline grace on the prow of the speeder. She stood there, a perfect target for the two fliers they were barreling toward. Then a snap-hiss carried over the wind, and a sliver of yellow energy appeared in her left hand, cutting quickly into a figure eight and sending a pair of blaster bolts humming off into the wastelands.

'So that's what was taped to her leg', Uldir concluded. Klin-Fa must have walked in front of one of the weapons sensors that Bonadan was lousy with.

'I guess I have shields now,' Uldir murmured, thumbing the blaster fire controls on his stick and jinking starboard. His shot was dead on, frying the opposing flier's stabilizer. It went spinning off. Uldir hoped the pilot would get the flier under control before it hit the ground below.

'That's one', he thought, as Klin-Fa executed another crazy series of parries that left their flier unscathed by enemy fire.

As he'd noticed before, the pilots weren't stupid. Contrary to the usual tactics of aerial combat, they were now trying to get underneath them, where the Jedi's lightsaber wasn't. He let the flier drop, hoping that Klin-Fa could keep her footing, afraid to do any really tight turns.

Shadowed wasteland came up at them, endless hectares of chemical-blistered ground cut into fractal patterns by violent erosion. Bonadan's primary was now a thin red lens on the horizon, and a little north of that lightning serpentine inside an anvil-shaped cloud. The wind tasted of water, grit, and unwholesome carbon compounds.

The storm gave him an idea, though, so he flattened his course toward the thunderhead. Rain would stymie eyesight, and lightning would confuse instruments. Maybe even the eye-in-the sky droids the patrol was undoubtedly tapping into. If he and Klin-Fa got through that, maybe he could circle back and find the _No Luck Required_ before the security fliers picked up the trail. If the ship was repaired, then they might be able to get off-planet before the port authority shut them down. If . . .

He grinned tightly, remembering what Vega would say: _"If" is just a short way of saying, 'we're doomed.' _

'Are those guys Peace Brigade?' Uldir shouted to the girl.

'You mentioned them before,' she shot back. 'I never heard of them.'

Uldir arched an eyebrow. That was surprising. 'They're a collaborationist organization,' he told her. 'They figure we can't beat the Yuuzhan Vong, so they might as well join them, get in their good graces while it's still possible. Sometimes they infiltrate local law enforcement.'

Klin-Fa snorted. 'Nobody in the Corporate Authority ever needed prompting when there was any potential for profit, and the 'zecs don't deal with middle-men unless they have to. There's a Yuuzhan Vong executor on this planet even as we speak. I'm guessing the 'zecs cut their own deal.'

'What? But that violates the neutrality pact.'

'I'll bet it doesn't. CSA attorneys can find a loophole when there isn't even a loop.'

The cloud loomed, but the fliers were getting too close. He dipped lower, dropping into one of the arroyos that crawled downhill toward the spaceport.

'I guess you can fly,' Klin-Fa conceded reluctantly, leaping over the cockpit to land on their stern, now the most threatened portion of the ship.

'You don't say?'" Uldir retorted. 'Gosh, I'm glad you told me. I'd never have known. Now I'm all beaming and confidant. I just know I can get us out of this.'

She ignored the sarcasm. 'Rescue flier, huh?'" she mused. 'Who do you rescue?'"

'Jedi, mostly.'

Klin-Fa blocked a bolt aimed for their rear stabilizer and shot him a strange look. "What?" She asked. "Who do you work for?"

"The paychit comes from the New Republic Search and Rescue Corps, but that's sort of a cover. The orders come from Master Skywalker, ultimately. He's been organizing a network to move Jedi out of danger for months."

"I wouldn't know about that," she said. "I've been . . . out of touch. I didn't even know about the warmaster's ultimatum until yesterday."

That explained why she didn't know about the Peace Brigade either. "Where were you that you didn't hear about that?" Uldir asked.

Her eyes narrowed. "You'll understand if I don't just volunteer that information."

"Hey, you're the Jedi. Can't you tell if I'm lying, or a threat?"

She hesitated. "I've been fooled before," she admitted. "Just understand this -- I'm on a mission, also for Master Skywalker. I've discovered something of utmost importance, a dire threat to the New Republic."

"But you won't tell me what it is?"

"No."

Uldir was impressed at how impassive she remained. Though his crazy course through the canyons had them temporarily free of blaster fire, it couldn't be easy for her to keep her footing, yet she hadn't even blinked. She had liquid helium in her veins, this girl.

'We're about to plow straight into a storm,' he said. 'Maybe you ought to get back into the cockpit.'

'Storm? No. Maybe you ought to --_watch out!_' "

Uldir jerked on the stick, mentally tasking himself for becoming distracted. One of the security fliers had somehow worked its way up a side canyon and was now quite suddenly in front of him. Blaster fire scorched along their underbelly, and the craft jerked like a harpooned toukfin. The power system whined, and all of the indicators on the board went dead. The flier dropped as Uldir frantically juggled at the re-route to emergency systems.

The power failure lasted only an instant, but it was a gut-plunging one, and he was now on a collision course with the offending flier. He banked hard to port, momentarily forgetting he had a passenger balanced on his prow.

Klin-Fa didn't seem to mind -- she deftly shifted to stand on the narrow part of the flier now presented to the sky, crouched, and cut downward at the other vehicle. Uldir saw a shear of sparks before the impact. It was a glancing blow, and their opponent went gyring away missing a good chunk of

its nose. Uldir was vaguely aware of the crunching sound it made as it plowed into a canyon wall, but most of his attention was focused on avoiding the same fate. The repulsors sputtered again, and with a silent curse he rose out of the arroyo, unable to trust his craft enough to maneuver there anymore.

It was then, facing the black wall of the storm, that he realized he didn't see Klin-Fa. His last maneuvers must have dislodged her.

He dug into a sharp turn -- hoping to spot her and hoping as well that her Jedi abilities had helped her survive the fall -- when a shout from below got his attention. He saw the young Jedi clinging to the craft's magnetic mooring lock by the fingers of one hand.

'Hang on!' Uldir locked the course for the storm and reached into the dash compartment, coming out with an enforcement special blaster. Then he climbed out of the cockpit and onto the nose of the craft, waving his arms for balance.

The three remaining fliers were catching up quickly, and the air was brittle with ionized death. Uldir dropped to his belly and reached over the brink, grasping Klin-Fa by the wrist. She locked her own fingers around his wrist in turn and dangled in space, whirling her lightsaber to deflect a blaster bolt that would have cut her in half. Uldir stood, hauling her up, watching in amazement as she continued to fend off attacks. With his free hand he grimly fired at the lead police craft, which was coming in way too fast. He

grazed it twice, then hit the cockpit a glancing blow that must have hurt the pilot, because the craft peeled off suddenly. Then two concussions in a row rocked his flier so badly that Uldir nearly lost his footing. He swung the Jedi back onto the bow just as the first of the rain spattered around them.

'Back in the cockpit!' he shouted. The craft was beginning to list weirdly toward starboard, indicating a probably fatal malfunction in one of the stabilizers.

Another bolt hit them as they made it to the crash seats, and then, as if they had passed under a curtain, the rain was driving so hard Uldir couldn't see anything. He flipped on the weather shield, and the water began sheeting off against its field, but visibility didn't increase in the slightest.

An eighteen-headed dragon of lightning howled around them, and Uldir's neck hairs pricked to attention. The sound was like the implosion of a planet.

'Sithspit!' Klin-Fa shouted. 'What have you done to us?'

'You don't see our friends anymore, do you?'

'No. They'd know better than to fly into a sweeper storm.'

'A what?'

'Bonadan has weather control stations all over it. You don't think this is natural, do you? They generate these on the outskirts when the air gets too caustic for the miners. The rain and lightning precipitates some of the crud they put in the sky every day.'

'Oh. Your point?'

'My point is, it's more concentrated and violent than a normal storm, jets-for-brains. The funnel around the eye is designed to create maximum ionization.'

'Maximum -- uh-oh.'

It had been getting darker, but in the not-to-distance he saw sheets of lighting dancing like nebula veils.

'So we don't want to go there, huh?' Uldir grunted, frantically pulling the stick starboard. Nothing happened. The ship was carrying them nowhere but the heart of the storm.

'No. So get us out of here already,' Klin-Fa shouted. Even through the windscreen, the sound of the storm was almost deafening.

'I can't. I locked the controls when I went out to get you. They're still locked.'

'Well, unlock them, vac-brain!'

Uldir continued flipping switches. 'Not happening,' he said.

'Well, what, then?'

'Hang on, I guess.'

He pointed the blaster at the rear repulsor assembly and fired.

'Are you insane?' Klin-Fa shrieked.

'I wasn't before I met you,' Uldir replied. 'Now I'd need a professional opinion.' He fired again, and the flier seemed to sag against the wind. The bow dropped nearly perpendicular to the ground.

'Like I said,' Uldir remarked, as another net of lightning crackled completely around them, 'hang on.'

He felt a tingle then that did not come from the lightning, and he recognized it as a movement in the Force. He might not be sensitive enough to actually wield it, but he had been around the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy, and had learned to recognize its use.

Especially now, when it felt somehow wrong. He looked at Klin-Fa and found her eyes shut and her face utterly composed. For some reason that was momentarily terrifying. Then he didn't have any more time to think about it, because they hit the ground, skipped, tumbled, and hit again. The screen went down, and rain was suddenly smothering them. After that, darkness.

* * *

Uldir woke spitting water from his mouth and feeling the painful itch of it in his lungs. One of the flier's running lights shone murkily from beneath the surface. Other than that, the darkness was broken only by the terrible white and red flares of lightning that grew more extreme with each second. The rain was mixed with hail now, which struck painfully against the bare skin of his face, and the thunder was an almost uninterrupted roar. The torrents unleashed from the sky were continuing to sculpt the arroyo he'd crashed in as it had been doing since the natural vegetation of Bonadan had given up its tenuous hold on existence. The flier was fetched up against something and filling quickly with water.

In the dull light, he made out Klin-Fa Gi, slumped unconscious, her face just out of the water. He felt for her pulse and, to his relief, found it strong. When he failed to wake her, he got her in a swim carry, holding her from behind so her head would remain above the surface. Even as he did this, the level and speed of the flood rose, and swiftly. He had to get to higher ground; that much was obvious. Not too high, though -- lightning had a lofty aim, and Uldir already felt like he was on a target range for a tactical

air-to-planet assault force.

The current took him, and it was far too strong to fight. He pointed his feet downstream, using his boots to protect him from rocks and other obstacles. This was awkward, as it put Klin-Fa on top of him, and his head went under with regularity. He'd been trained for this sort of situation, however, as part of his preparation for rescue flying, and the little voice of panic that threatened to become a shout kept relatively quiet. All he had to do was keep his head, he told himself. And his arms, and his legs . . .

When he started to feel the shock of the lightning, that became more difficult to do. Nightmare images of stone and turbid water strobed every few seconds, so he had almost a continuous view of his surroundings now. Kicking from a protruding rock, he aimed himself at what looked like a slope that might take him above flood capacity. He nearly missed it, but he managed to get a clawhold on a rock and -- pulling against the immensely strong current -- drag himself and the Jedi onto the incline. He lay panting there for a moment until a bolt struck so close that he felt the hot spray of spalled stone on his cheek. With a grunt, he got Klin-Fa on his shoulder and made for what looked like a sort of overhang.

His luck held; it was indeed a small cave in the side of the canyon. It went in deep enough to be dry. He hoped it was also deep enough not to conduct a lightning strike, and high enough that the flood wouldn't fill it, because he didn't have a joule of strength left. He lay in the darkness, trying not

to flinch at the barrage outside, promising himself that the next time a girl upset his drink he'd just buy another one.

Outside, it seemed the planet was burning, the thunder become like the sound of a fusion drive blowing in atmosphere. He closed his eyes against the glare and waited for it to pass.

It did, finally, and an eerie calm settled as the eye went over. Then Uldir was treated to another fireworks display, courtesy of Bonadan weather control.

When the lightning finally receded, he began to realize he was cold. Was it winter here? Did Bonadan have a winter? He couldn't remember. Maybe when the renewed search found them, they would find a couple of frozen corpses.

By the light of a glowstick he had in one of his many pockets, he examined Klin-Fa with the small medpack he always carried. A nasty swelling on her head indicated the cause of her continued unconsciousness, but otherwise she seemed sound -- he couldn't find any evidence of broken bones or internal bleeding.

He gave her a broad-spectrum anti-inflammatory and antibiotic, made her as comfortable as he could, then turned to his remaining resources.

That consisted more-or-less of his comlink. He handled the small cylinder thoughtfully for a moment, considering. It had been modified with a

trace-scrambler -- though any searchers in the area would know he was transmitting, it would take a security decryption to allow them to triangulate. The CSA probably had pretty decent technology in that area, but he could probably transmit for thirty seconds or so before they had enough data to either unscramble the message or pinpoint his position.

It was getting colder. It was worth the risk. He keyed it on.

Static roared, probably due to the nearby storm. Still, after a second, he made out a distorted version of Vega Sepen's voice.

'Hey, boss-boy," she said. 'You really should follow my advice now and then."

'Listen, Vega," Uldir said. 'The girl was a Jedi, turns out. We've eluded pursuit for the time being, but we're down in the outback, maybe fifteen klicks southeast of town."

'Those aren't very good directions."

'Just look for wherever the police fliers are shooting," he said.

'With what? The ship's still in dock."

'I trust you, Vega. You'll think of something. Gotta go, before they trace

this."

'Okay. Good luck, boss-boy.'

'I hate it when you call me that.'

'I know.' The signal crackled out, and Uldir keyed off the comlink. He was probably still safe, but the next time he used it they would find his location in seconds.

Klin-Fa stirred and moaned. He touched her forehead and found it cold. He'd actually started shivering himself, from the wet and the falling temperature. With a sigh, he drew off his jacket. He lay next to the young Jedi, spooning against her, and covered them both with the jacket. It took a long time before the contact began to feel warm.

* * *

He woke with dark eyes centimeters from his own.

'Did you enjoy that?' Klin-Fa asked.

'Huh?'

'Snuggling up against me? Is that your idea of a good time?'

'Hey, I was just trying to keep us warm. Keep you warm.'

She_almost_ smiled. 'Relax, jets-for-brains,' she said. 'I know what you were doing, and thanks. Just don't get any ideas.'

Uldir realized their bodies were still touching, and he felt suddenly and completely uncomfortable. 'What? No, of course not.'

She tapped his forehead with her finger. 'Right. I didn't think there was that much danger of an idea popping out of there, but you never know.'

'Hey, I was doing more thinking than you were last night.'

'I_bet_ you were.'

'That's not what I meant.' His face felt tingly.

She sat up. Harsh yellow-white light glared through the entrance to the cave. 'Where are we?'

'Somewhere in the badlands south of town. Our flier went down, you may remember.'

'I remember you flying into a sweeper storm.'

'Hey, how was I to know? For that matter, how did you know?'

'I'm from here,' she growled.

'Bonadan?'

'No, this cave. Yes, Bonadan. I grew up on this miserable hole.'

'Hey, everyone has to grow up somewhere.'

'Yes, but they don't have to go back. I did, worse the luck.'

'Why?'

'You and your questions. Are you a pilot or a reporter?'

'A pilot,' Uldir said.

'And where's your ship?'

'I -- ah, I don't know.'

'Not much of a pilot then, are you? Looks like its up to me to get us out of here.'

'Well, it is your planet.'

'Don't remind me." She started toward the entrance, then froze.

'What?"

'Come here," she whispered. 'Be quiet."

He went with her to peek through the cave entrance. Beyond was the gully that they'd both nearly drowned in the night before. It was dry now, silted with fresh alluvium, and they could see about half a klick down it. Near the bend, up toward where the flier had gone down, he could see eight figures on foot, moving down the arroyo in their direction.

'Search party," he said.

'Yes," she replied. 'See that one third from the left?"

'I'm not blind."

'I am, where he's concerned," Klin-Fa replied. 'I can't feel him in the Force. That can only mean one thing."

Uldir nodded. 'Yuuzhan Vong," he said. 'Things just got a whole lot worse."

As if to underscore the remark, he heard the whine of fliers overhead, several of them.

II: Dark Tidings

'WHAT A NICE START to the day,' Klin-Fa Gi commented, cutting her dark eyes at Uldir. Her sarcasm wasn't lost.

'At least we're alive,' he said. 'That was anything but a given last night.'

Klin-Fa's mouth settled in a thin line. Uldir wondered if he would ever see the young Jedi smile. She was pale, her short brown hair matted and full of silt from the flood they had survived the night before, and the bump on her forehead had gone a shade of purple he'd heretofore seen only in certain nebulae. Still, he felt if she smiled, she'd be pretty.

Annoying, almost insufferable, but pretty.

'Yes, we're alive,' she admitted. 'Bravo. Terrific job. Now if you'll just take care of that search patrol and the -- what? Eight enforcement fliers? Maybe I'll forget that if it weren't for you I wouldn't be in this mess at all.'

That was a little too much. 'CSA was chasing you before I ever laid eyes on you,' Uldir said. 'Without me they'd have you by now.'

'Doubtful," Klin-Fa retorted. Then she sighed. 'Also irrelevant. Do you have any weapons?'"

'No. I lost the blaster.'"_My hands were full saving you from drowning, he silently finished._

'At least I still have my lightsaber."

'Yeah," Uldir said, eyeing the ever-nearing search party coming down the arroyo toward the cave where Klin-Fa and he were hiding. 'Look, I'll admit you're pretty handy with that thing, but against these odds -- '

'The Force can prevail against any odds," she insisted firmly. 'Anyway, it's not like we have a choice. They'll find us soon enough. Unless you have a plan."

'I do, as a matter of fact. Sit tight until the rest of my outfit shows up. They're bound to be here soon. If you want to use the Force, try to project the thought that we're in a different direction."

Klin-Fa's mouth twisted as if she'd just chewed a sour thorn, but she eased her head in a reluctant half-nod. 'That might work -- even at this distance, I might be able to project a suggestion. But it won't fool that Yuuzhan Vong down there.'" She lifted her chin toward one of the members of the search

party. Even from this distance, Uldir could make out the scars and tattoos that marked him as a member of the extragalactic invaders bent on conquering the galaxy -- and doing a more than competent job of it so far.

"True," he admitted, "But he doesn't know where we are. He'll have to trust his local guides."

Klin-Fa grunted what he guessed was agreement, took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She reached out her arm, and the fingers of her right hand fluttered slightly. Uldir felt the Force in motion, which had the affect of deepening his frustration with the whole situation. He'd studied at the Jedi academy but left it a failure, having no natural aptitude for the Force. The most his training had left him with was a slight ability to sense Jedi when they worked with the Force, and what some would say was an uncommon sort of luck. Still, the experience had taught him something important -- sometimes it didn't matter how hard you wanted something, you weren't going to get it. You lived with what you did have and took pride in your real assets, not the ones you wished you possessed. He'd thought he was over useless self-remonstrations at his failure, and he had been. He really had -- at least until Klin-Fa Gi had bounced off the center of his table in a local cantina, pursued by law enforcement officials of the Corporate Sector Authority. Her attitude had managed to wake the old resentment in him. Why did someone like her have such strong affinity with the Force, while he could only hear it whisper?

It wasn't fair, which made him even angrier, because he knew the universe

wasn't fair.

But it ought to be _balanced_. That was what the Force was all about, right?

And there was something very unbalanced about Klin-Fa Gi. When she had used the Force to cushion the crash of their atmospheric flier, he'd almost thought he sensed something dark.

Her eyes were still closed, and Uldir studied her. She didn't look evil, in her tattered yellow skirt and black leggings. She looked young and intent.

Ah, what do I know? Uldir asked himself. _I couldn't tell a Sith from Master Yoda himself, not with my puny senses._

She'd said she was on a secret mission for Master Skywalker. He'd believe her until proven wrong. Anyway, she was Jedi, and Uldir's job was to rescue Jedi from the Yuuzhan Vong and their agents. He might not be able to use the Force, but no one had ever said he wasn't good at his job. There wasn't a better rescue pilot in the business.

Of course, right about now it would be nice to have something to pilot.

The group of searchers was pointing up the other side of the arroyo. He heard shouting, and then they broke into a trot.

'You _did_ it,' Uldir breathed.

'Yep," she said. 'It won't fool them for long." She started forward, out of the cave mouth.

'Hang on," Uldir said, waving vaguely upward. 'There're still the fliers to consider."

'You consider them. You're the pilot."

'No. We should wait on my people, or make_some_ kind of plan."

She pushed a straggling lock of hair from her face. 'Hey, you had a good idea, jets. Don't spoil it by thinking too much."

'Now, listen -- hey!"

Too late. She'd already sprinted from the cover of the cave and was starting up the arroyo slope in the opposite direction in which she had sent the search party.

'Vaping Moff's!" Uldir snarled, and did the only thing he could do, the thing he'd been doing from the start of this whole mess -- he started after her.

He came over the lip of the ravine in time to see her vanish down into another one. Bonadan had lost most of its natural life forms to the brutal

industrialization of the Corporate Sector, and without roots and rhizomes to hold them in check, erosion had fast furrowed the highland soils outside of the spaceport, peeled back their planetological history, and turned them into a badlands.

Somewhere, Uldir heard the whirl of fliers, but he didn't see them. They were probably conducting some sort of grid search. They likely had satellite intelligence, too. The broken nature of the terrain gave them a chance, but only a small one.

He caught up to Klin-Fa Gi as she hit the bottom of the next ravine at a dead run. 'Where do you think you're going?' He snapped, trying to keep his voice down and match her pace at the same time.

'Away,' she said. 'Away from the Vong.'

He got it then. 'You're scared of them. The Yuuzhan Vong.'

'Scared? No. I'm scared of nothing. But my Jedi powers are useless against the Vong. If I fight, I might lose, and I can't afford that. The galaxy can't afford it. My mission cannot fail.'

'Hey, I've dealt with Yuuzhan Vong before,' Uldir chuffed. 'They aren't invincible.'

'It's great you feel that way. Why don't you go hold 'em off for me?'

'Maybe I'll just do that,' Uldir snapped. 'It's better than -- down!' He yanked her against the wall of the ravine, just as the shadow of a flier moved across their feet. The steep angle protected them, mostly, but Uldir still held his breath.

The shadow moved on.

'That was too close,' he said. 'Next pass we might not be so lucky.'

'Fine,' she said. 'What do you think we ought to do? Your friends don't seem to be showing.'

'I can signal them,' he said, indicating his comlink.

'You're just now thinking of that?'

'No,' Uldir said reluctantly. 'I called them last night.'

'Last night? They're taking their time.'

'Our ship's in dry-dock. It might have taken them all night to get it out.

Besides, it's not like I had exact coordinates to give them.'

'Maybe you would have if you hadn't had the stupidity to fly into a sweeper

storm," she reminded him.

'Me?'" Uldir growled. 'I was just trying to make the best of a bad situation, and you were no help. Maybe if you weren't so closed-mouth about what it is you're up to . . ."

'Uh-uh," she said. 'I can't trust you."

'Not even now?'"

'No."

'That's just great."

'Why don't you stop whining and call your shipmates?'"

'I could do that, but those fliers would get a fix on us. If my friends aren't around, we'll only get caught faster."

Klin-Fa slowed to a halt and gave him a glance as hard as durasteel. 'Fast or slow, makes no difference," she said. 'Either your crew found some way out here or not. Either we'll get caught or we won't. What, do you have a cushy retirement planned?'"

Uldir returned her glare, but she was right. He keyed on the comlink.

'This is catchhawk one," he said. 'Catchhawks, do you copy?"

Static drizzled for a moment, then the voice of his second-in-command, Vega Sepen, answered him.

'I hear you boss-boy. You're still alive, I guess." There was nothing in the tough Corellian woman's tone that suggested she'd been worried about him.

'I'm in a bad spot, two, right between a supernova and a black hole. Did you manage to find some legs?"

'Ah . . . sort of," Vega replied.

'Great. Got a fix on me?"

'Sorry. Don't have that sort of equipment on board, I'm afraid." There was a background gabble he couldn't quite make out -- Vega talking to someone else -- and some sort of music. Then Vega's voice came back. 'Vook thinks he can triangulate with our comlinks. Can you keep sending?"

'Sure," Uldir said. ' _Asyui-ln_."

'Understood. We'll get you boss-boy, sit tight."

'What's that music?'

'Nothing.'

'What in the Force are you flying, two?'

Vega didn't answer.

'If you keep sending, they'll be able to track us,' Klin-Fa snapped.

'Shh.' He laid the comlink under a nearby rock. 'I know that.'

'But your friends -- '

'My friends know that *asyui-lu* means 'not' in Dug,' Uldir replied.

'They'll look in a radius around the signal. Now, come on.'

'Wait,' she said. In the next instant, she bounded up the side of the ravine, just as Uldir noticed the sound of the flier returning. Klin-Fa reached the lip of the chasm as the patrol vessel came over. Blaster fire kicked up dust around her feet, but she dodged lightly, and her lightsaber was suddenly on. In the next instant it was a whirling disk of brilliance, shearing through the nose of the flier. More blaster fire from somewhere else made a spectral bridge over the arroyo top, but by then, Klin-Fa had dropped back below the rim, the deadly lightsaber returning to her hand and

extinguished.

Illustration by Mike Huddleston

'Carbon flush!' Uldir breathed. Then she was rushing past him.

'Move!' She shouted.

They ran down the arroyo, cutting over a low rise into the next, then doubling back.

Right into a patrol, four humans with enforcement blasters and a Yuuzhan Vong. They were less than two meters away.

'Hey!' One of the humans shouted.

Uldir didn't think. He hurled himself low and hard at one of the humans, feeling the heat of blaster fire scorch his back. He hit the man in the waist and they went down. Uldir hoped the others would be reluctant to shoot for fear of hitting their comrade. The two men rolled, and then rolled some more as Uldir suddenly realized that his mad tackle had taken them down yet another slope. Rocks dug angrily at his back as his opponent tried, with moderate success, to club him with the butt of his blaster. Fortunately, the blows were glancing, and by the time they fetched against a stone large enough to stop them, Uldir had managed to get one of his hands free for a sharp uppercut. He felt teeth snap together, and the officer went limp.

Blaster fire cracked the stone that had arrested them. Frantically, Uldir dove away, at the same time searching for the officer's weapon. He found it a meter away, rolled and caught it up, then trained it back up the slope. Another shot dug into the sand centimeters from his knee. Uldir fired, missed, scrambled to his feet and ran up the slope shooting. His third shot hit an officer in the sternum and kicked him back out of sight.

By the time he reached Klin-Fa, she had taken out the remaining officers and was in a swirl of motion with the Yuuzhan Vong. Like all of his kind, the warrior disdained the use of mechanical contrivances -- he fought with an amphistaff, a living weapon that resembled a snake, at turns rigid and sharp and flexible and whip-like. Klin-Fa was having a hard time countering the furious, complex attack. Uldir raised his blaster to change the odds.

At the same moment, another flier came over the ridge, blasters pumping. Swearing an Ettian curse he'd never quite understood but liked the sound of, Uldir dodged into cover behind a shelf of rock and fired back. His bolt ricocheted off of the side of the flier, and the answering shots pulverized his shelter. He could see the pilot grinning through the windscreen. Snarling, he broke out at a run, firing as he went. He couldn't get a proper bead, and his shots all either went wide or glanced off the tough metal of the flier. The pilot was having no such trouble aiming -- hovering, his front-mounted blasters followed Uldir like a pair of fiery footsteps, getting closer. One bolt hit so close it caused him to stumble, and in a

strange moment the world seemed to go entirely still. Uldir felt his finger depress the trigger a final time, and then the weapon went flying from his hand as his face smacked against the ground. He spat out the taste of blood and metallic dirt, waiting for the inevitable.

The inevitable didn't come. Warily he glanced back up. The flier was still hovering, but the pilot wasn't smiling anymore -- he was slumped sideways in his seat, and there was a neat hole in the windscreen.

"Wow," Uldir breathed. Sometimes his luck surprised even him. He picked up the blaster and turned toward the sounds of combat, fearing what he would see.

Klin-Fa was in his line of fire, but as he watched, she ducked beneath the whipping amphistaff and swept her leg at the Yuuzhan Vong warrior's foot. She clipped it, putting him slightly off-balance. He took a long retreat to correct for it, but Klin-Fa leapt high into the air, flipped over her opponent's head, and struck down at the same time. To his credit, the warrior caught the blow in a behind-the-back parry and spun to riposte. Klin-Fa, however, landed in a split, and the blow whistled over her head as she drew her blazing weapon through the Vong's midsection. He gaped and fell in two cauterized halves.

He still took another swing at her, but the Jedi was back on her feet, dancing out of range.

'For Yabeley," she snarled. Uldir wondered who or what Yabeley was.

The Yuuzhan Vong watched her go, black eyes glittering with hatred.

'_Jeedai_', he growled. 'Your days are drawing to a close.'

'Not as quickly as yours," she said. Her voice was colder than night on the dark side of an airless moon.

The Yuuzhan Vong spat blood. 'Your blow was skilled," he said. 'I salute you. But you will die. All of your kind will die. Even your own kind has turned against you.'

Klin-Fa gestured contemptuously at the downed officers. 'These cretins are not my kind," she said. 'I don't claim kinship with anyone foolish enough to believe the Yuuzhan Vong will stop their conquest of our galaxy simply because they turn Jedi over to you.'

The warrior smiled strangely. 'It is not your galaxy," he said. 'You have merely infested it for a time. We have come to end the infection, in the name of glorious Yun-Yuuzhan.'

'_Our_galaxy,' Klin-Fa repeated, firmly. But the Yuuzhan Vong did not hear her. His gaze had wandered beyond the stars.

Klin-Fa extinguished her saber and clipped it to her belt.

'Hey," Uldir said. 'Nice moves. But we're not out of this yet. I hear more fliers coming."

'Let them come," Klin-Fa said, grimly.

They did, three of them, and soon Klin-Fa was acting as a living shield, deflecting bolts as Uldir tried to hit the fliers or their pilots at some critical point. These pilots didn't hover, however, but began spreading out to encircle them. When that was done, it would be all over. Klin-Fa couldn't block fire from every direction.

A bolt sang through her defenses and scorched Uldir's ear. Klin-Fa gasped as a second scored along her thigh, and the fliers tightened in for the kill.

Uldir and Klin-Fa stood back-to-back.

'Thanks for trying," Klin-Fa said. It sounded as if she really meant it.

'No problem," Uldir replied. 'It's my job." He wanted to say something else, but what it was exactly eluded him. He fired four shots at the nearest flier instead.

'Do you hear music?" Klin-Fa asked.

'Now that you mention it, yeah. I thought I was losing it." Two fliers had

him firmly in their sights, now. He could try and dodge, but that would leave the Jedi's back unguarded. He repressed the urge to close his eyes. He'd watch death come for him, thank you, and stare it down until the last second.

Except that the flier didn't fire. Instead, it was forced to turn at a barrage of small-arms fire sizzling against its hull. In fact, all of the fliers were under attack. One didn't turn fast enough to meet the new threat, and lost its aft stabilizer and repulsorlifts within a few heartbeats of one another. It wobbled and then dropped like a stone. One of the others banked up and caught it in the belly, dropped low and limped away smoking. Uldir fired after it, as something rather strange showed itself over the edge of the arroyo.

A pair of gigantic eyes was staring down at them, set into a head at least a meter-and-a-half wide. From its gaping mouth, music was blaring. Stranger still, a figure seemed to be dancing on the head, spinning out streamers of bright green light.

'What in -- ' he began, before it finally started making a twisted sense as he noticed the light was not streaking off randomly but harassing the remaining flier. The dancer was a Dug, balanced on one forepaw and firing blasters with his other three hand-feet.

'It's Leaft!' he shouted.

A thicker series of bolts joined the Dug's wild firefight with the flier, and Uldir made out a platinum-haired woman standing beside the head, which he could now see was mounted on some sort of hover-platform. That was Vega and her blaster rifle.

'Come on!' Uldir told Klin-Fa.

'That's your crack team of rescue pilots?' She asked, skeptically.

'You better believe it.'

'Why are they riding on exec Lounha's head?'

'I'm sure they have a good explanation,' he replied.

The two ran through a decreasing volume of skyborn fire until they reached the floater. Vega gave Uldir a hand up without looking at him, at the same time stitching red bursts through the windscreen of the last flier still in sight. It went down, leaving a blaze of flame across the far wall of the canyon.

'That's three to your two,' she called up to Leaft.

'Hurr. Human luck,' the Dug snarled down. 'Next time -- '

Vega ignored her companion. 'Vook," she called into the gigantic head.

'We've got the boss. Now get us out of here."

'Doing!" The Duro called.

At an excruciatingly slow speed, the floater began drifting back toward the spaceport.

'This is insane," Klin-Fa said. 'Where are we going on this thing?"

'Farther than you were going on foot," Vega said, dryly. 'You okay, boss?"

'I'm fine," Uldir replied. 'But she has a point. One of the fliers got away, and besides, they must be in contact with their headquarters. We can't fight off another half-dozen fliers on this thing, let alone something bigger."

'Hey, we did the best we could," Vega said. 'This was the only thing we could find on short notice."

Despite himself, Uldir cracked a grin. 'A float from the parade? You were always good at improvising, Vega, I'll give you that."

'You better believe it," Vega replied. 'And I'm not done yet."

'What's that mean?'

'I got a call from Uvee right before we picked you up. He finally got the ship out of dry-dock. It's on the way.'

'Uvee?' Klin-Fa asked. 'Another one of your aces?'

'Our astromech,' Uldir clarified.

'An astromech flying a ship? Alone?'

'He's not your ordinary droid,' Uldir replied.

'No,' Klin-Fa said. 'I don't expect he would be.'

* * *

The No Luck Required arrived about ten minutes later, flying a little erratically and landing with a bump that set Uldir's teeth on edge. He hadn't wanted to say so in front of the Jedi, but he'd had his own doubts about whether he would ever see his ship again after Vega's casual announcement -- though he'd modified the UV-002 droid to fly the ship in emergencies, the reality was pure theory until now.

Though the landing was a little rough, the droid seemed to have done okay, and it was good to see the rugged transport. They abandoned the floater and

crowded up the landing ramp. Uldir went straight to the controls, where the readout was scrolling, Uvee talking to him from his mooring station.

_Hi boss-boy. How did I do?_the droid translator read.

'You did great, Uvee,' Uldir said, making a mental note to keep Vega away from the astromech in the future. He hated being called 'boss-boy.'

'Perfect.'

Shall I take us to orbit? 'That's okay,' Uldir quickly replied. 'Take a rest. I'll get us out.'

'Fliers, four clicks,' Vook said, from tactical.

'That's just fine,' Uldir said. 'They can chew our exhaust.' He punched in the drive, turned the ship skyward, and left Bonadan in a bloom of ions.

Only much later -- two jumps from Bonadan -- did he relax, and then not much.

'We still don't have shields,' he noticed.

'No,' Vook said. 'And the hyperdrive is -- undependable. The repairs were not completed.'

Uldir blew out a breath and nodded. 'Well, you take what you get,' he said.

'At least we have some drive capability. Where can we set down to finish repairs?'

'Well, there's Shelter,' Vega said. 'That's close.'

'Yeah. And in the Maw. I won't try that run with a testy hyperdrive.'

'Good point. How about Mon Calamari?'

'Sounds prudent.'

'No!' Klin-Fa interrupted. 'We can't spare the time for that. You have to plot a course for Wayland, immediately.'

'Wayland?' Uldir said. 'What in blazes are you talking about?'

'And just exactly who are you?' Vega asked, her gaze tracing uncharitably up the Jedi's figure.

'And what in space makes you think you can tell us what to do?' Leaft added, edging close to her, his teeth barred.

Klin-Fa tensed, but otherwise ignored the threatening Dug.

'I suppose introductions are in order,' Uldir allowed. 'Everyone, meet

Klin-Fa Gi. She's a Jedi, if you haven't figured that out already. Klin-Fa, this is my crew -- Vega Sepen, Leafth, and Vook Gehu."

Vega nodded her platinum tresses curtly. Leafth continued to growl, and Vook turned his flat face toward her and nodded absently. 'Pleased to meet you," the Duro said. He didn't sound pleased -- he sounded doleful. Vook always sounded doleful.

Klin-Fa wasn't distracted. 'I have to get to Wayland," she said.

'It's important."

Uldir grinned sardonically. 'But you won't tell me why."

'I can't. I've explained that."

'You want me to space her, boss?" Leafth asked, in a helpful tone.

'Yes," Uldir returned, 'but you'd better not. Klin-Fa, Wayland is in Yuuzhan Vong occupied space, in case you haven't heard. I'm not taking a ship in this condition there unless I have ample reason. You've given me no such reason."

'I'm on a mission for Master Skywalker. That should be reason enough."

'Sure. If I believed you, but I'm not sure I do. Trust goes both ways. You want me to take you to Wayland? Tell me why.'

'I can't.'

'Fine. Then we're going to Mon Calamari. Meanwhile I'll try to contact Master Skywalker and see what he has to say about this.'

'You're making a mistake.'

'I've been making mistakes since the moment I first saw you. Why should things be different now?'

'Because the fate of the galaxy depends on what we do now, that's why. There's no time to lose.'

'So you say,' Uldir said, shrugging.

Klin-Fa's face registered barely concealed fury, and again Uldir felt something a little troubling in her presence. The feeling faded as she composed herself and vanished when she quirked a little grin, the first he had seen. He was right -- it made her prettier.

'I guess I wouldn't believe me, either,' she admitted, reluctantly. 'Fine. When you contact Master Skywalker, he'll confirm what I've said. But you ought to do it quickly.'

Uldir raised his eyebrows in surprise. "That sounds almost too reasonable."

She shrugged. "What choice do you leave me? I'm at your mercy."

'Great," Uldir said. He glanced at his filthy clothes. 'I'm glad that's settled. We've got a long hyperspace jump -- I for one, could use a 'fresher. You could probably do with the same."

'I suppose," she conceded.

'You can go first. Vega will find you a change of clothes."

* * *

An hour later, feeling considerably more human, Uldir met with Klin-Fa again in the ship's small lounge. She looked smaller in one of Vega's black jumpsuits, and younger, too.

'Maybe we got off on the wrong foot," Uldir said. He stuck out his hand.

'I'm Uldir Lockett. Pleased to meet you."

She grinned wryly and took his hand. 'Pleasure," she said.

'You'd better watch that," he said.

'What?'

'That's twice now you've smiled. It might ruin your look.'

'If you'd been through what I have . . .' she began, but trailed off, her gaze going muddy, lost in a past that Uldir knew nothing about.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Well, if you ever feel like talking about it, I'm a good listener.'

'Right. The soul of concern.' She shifted. 'So this is a Jedi rescue ship.'

'Yep. My little kingdom.'

'Looks kind of beat up.'

'Well, we don't like to attract attention. But she can do the job, when she's in good condition.'

'You're proud of her,' Klin-Fa noticed.

'Sure. And of my crew. You won't find better.'

'I don't deny the four of you seem to get through, somehow.'

Uldir couldn't tell if that was a compliment or not. He let it pass.

'Want a look around?' He asked.

'Well, you've seen one transport . . ."

'Nah. C'mon."

'Shouldn't you be trying to contact Master Skywalker?' She asked.

'Vega's working on that. We have to bounce the signal around a good bit and put it through several layers of encryption. Takes time."

'Not too much, I hope."

'No. I expect an answer in an hour or so."

She sighed. 'Fine. I guess I'll take that tour."

'Okay." he stood and started leading her around. 'The chassis is an old Corellian medium transport," he explained, 'but we've made a few changes."

He took her up the shaft into the turbolaser turret.

'Nice," she said, when she saw the armaments.

'Turbolaser is state-of-the-art," he replied. 'Cesium vapor, and packs a real mean punch. We can also target proton torps from here, as well as from the central panel. And there's an extra layer of plating."

'But just one turret?"

'Yep. I sacrificed the other for something better."

'What's that?"

'The best part. Come back up."

She followed him to an access hatch.

'This used to be the cargo hold," he explained, keying the hatch open.

'Between that and the missing second turret, we made room for these."

He finally had the pleasure of seeing her surprised.

'Starfighters!" She breathed.

The No Luck Required, starship illustration by Jeff Carlisle

'Yep," Uldir said, gesturing at the sleek little ships. There were four of

them, nestled in a rotating frame. 'We can only launch one at a time, but we can still get them all out in under a minute, if we have to.'

'A-wings,' she noted, sounding somehow disappointed.

'You know your ships,' Uldir said. 'They came out of the shipyards as A-wings. Now they're a little something special -- each has room for a passenger and emergency medical equipment. Sometimes we have to get into tighter places than the _No Luck Required_ can go.'

'You use them to extract Jedi?'

'And place them. We're not only in the rescue business -- sometimes we ferry Jedi into Yuuzhan Vong space, when a mission calls for it.'

'Interesting. Things have changed a little since I've been away.'

'I guess so.'

'I see you sacrificed the escape pods, too,' she mused. 'But I suppose the A-wings can serve the same purpose.'

'Yeah. It's never come to that, but that's part of the plan. Number one there is even hyperspace capable, so if we have to split the mission or send for help, we've got the extra legs to do it.'

'Fine," she said. 'You've impressed me." As if to belie that, she yawned.

'Now, with all of this, do you have a spare bunk? I haven't slept in -- well, I guess a week. I think I'll take the rest of that hour to have a nap."

'No problem," Uldir said.

After showing her to her bunk, Uldir went back up to where Vega sat at the controls.

'Nice new friend you've got there," the Corellian commented.

Uldir nodded. 'Not bad with a lightsaber."

'From what I saw, I'd say spectacular," Vega corrected. 'Cute, too."

"That I hadn't noticed."

'No, of course not. You just instantly recognized her as Jedi in need of aid and chased after her."

'I thought she was a thief," Uldir said, defensively. 'I thought I'd help the local authorities catch her. I didn't know they were the bad guys."

'Yeah," Vega said. 'Speaking of which, I think we can mark the whole

Corporate Sector down as unfriendly now. I did some checking up on that new exec, the one whose head we borrowed. From what I was able to glean, I'm guessing he's been in secret negotiations with the Yuuzhan Vong for two weeks now."

'Given that there was a Vong in the search party, that's not surprising. And Klin-Fa said there was an executor on Bonadan."

'Well, things just keep getting better and better don't they?"

'Just makes things more interesting," Uldir said.

'You can say that again. And you probably will. There's more hot systems every day."

'It'll turn around, eventually," Uldir said. 'Now that Master Skywalker has plans in motion."

'You put an awful lot of faith in him," Vega said.

'It's not faith. Faith is something you accept without proof. Master Skywalker and the Jedi have proven themselves time and again. It's the government of the New Republic that's gumming things up."

'Don't be too sure," Vega said. 'The Jedi are all well and good, but they

aren't invincible." Her tone became somehow more cautious -- and more leading. He knew Vega, and knew she was about to make a point of some sort, probably an unpleasant one.

"What?" He said.

"The Jedi. If even one of them turns to the dark side, we could have bigger troubles than the Yuuzhan Vong."

"That's true, but I don't think it's likely." He tilted his head in suspicion. "You have a reason for bringing this up?"

"Sure. Just how much do you know about this Klin-Fa Gi?"

He hesitated.

"Well?"

"It's just -- I got some disquieting feelings from her, back on Bonadan."

"What do you mean?"

Uldir frowned. "I'm not sure. Probably nothing."

Vega twisted her mouth. "Look," she said, "I know you've got a little of this Force thing -- "Very little. What I have isn't dependable."

'Maybe not. But don't let a pretty face distract you from what it might be telling you.'

He turned to her seriously. 'What are you saying?'

'Well, I got a feeling from her, too. Not one of your mystical ones -- just the suspicion that something doesn't add up about her. And Wayland -- why Wayland? I can think of only two possibilities, right off hand, to explain why a Jedi would want to go to Wayland.'

'I haven't had time to think about it all,' Uldir admitted. 'Fill me in.'

'Wayland is where Emperor Palpatine's secret toy-box was. All kinds of nasty dark side things on Wayland.'

'Not anymore,' Uldir said.

'Wrong. I've read the reports. Some of the Emperor's devices are still there -- buried, yes, but still there.'

'Buried under a_mountain_', Uldir corrected.

'Yes. But the Yuuzhan Vong are there now, and they have a way of digging things up, don't they?'

Uldir acknowledged that with a tilt of his head. 'But the Yuuzhan Vong don't exist in the Force,' he pointed out. 'Even if they found some kind of dark side weapon, they wouldn't be able to use it.'

'Probably not -- but they might be able to learn something about the Jedi that will be of use to them.' she held up a finger. 'So that's one possibility -- they've studied the Emperor's old tech and are developing some sort of anti-Jedi weapon. Our new friend learned of this somehow and is off to foil their evil plot.'

'You mentioned two possibilities.'

Vega unfolded a second finger. 'The other possibility is that they've found something Klin-Fa Gi thinks she can use herself.'

'You're saying she's gone dark.'

'I'm saying she's angry. Even I can see that. And aren't you always telling me that anger is of the dark side?'

'I think she lost someone,' Uldir said. 'She mentioned a name, when she killed the Yuuzhan Vong warrior. And I'd be angry too, if my home planet was doing its level best to turn me over for sacrifice.'

'Does the reason she's angry really matter? So she feels justified in

whatever she's planning. Would that make it any better?"

'But if Master Skywalker ordered her to Wayland -- '

'Well, that's the problem," Vega said. 'He didn't.'

'What?'

She tapped a readout. "This came in just before you did. Klin-Fa Gi was killed on Gyndine, or presumed so, two months ago. And Master Skywalker doesn't know anything about any mission to Wayland."

'Oh. Carbon flush.'

'Yeah. You see.'

'What does Master Skywalker want us to do?'

'Bring her in for debriefing, as soon as possible.'

Uldir nodded wearily. 'I guess that's what we'll do, then.'

'Where is she now?'

'Taking a nap. Or at least -- ' he paused. 'Does the air smell funny to

you?"

Vega's eyes widened, just as Uldir felt his ears pop.

He turned quickly to his instruments. 'Vaping Moff's! We're losing air pressure.'

At that moment, the ship shuddered as if struck, and the lights went out. Cursing, Uldir brought emergency power online. 'We've dropped out of hyperspace!' He said.

'Interdicted?'

'No. The drive failed.'

'I bet it didn't just fail,' Vega said.

'I bet you're right,' he agreed. 'Vega, get back there. Don't be afraid to shoot.'

'It's too late,' the Corellian told him.

But Uldir saw that, too. A-wing one was just crossing their field of view, under full acceleration. An instant later it vanished into hyperspace.

'Vook!' Uldir shouted. 'Get that vector!'

'Got it, boss," the Duro's voice replied. 'But we have our own troubles.'

The air was getting really thin now. 'She's opened us to space," Uldir growled. 'That little -- '

'And sabotaged the hyperdrive," the Duro added. 'We aren't going anywhere, sir. We're stranded here.'

'Nearest planet on slower-than-light?" Uldir asked, grimly.

'Two years away, sir. The stars are sparse out here.'

'Like I said," Vega drawled. 'Things just get better all the time.'

III: War on Wayland

SPACE WAS ABOUT TO KILL Uldir Lockett and his crew in a most unpleasant manner. Although it wasn't the first time the void had tried to snuff him out -- not by a gigaparsec -- Uldir still had plenty of objections.

'We're losing atmosphere, fast," He muttered, combing his fingers through the switches and indicators at the helm of his transport, the No Luck Required. 'But where?" His voice already sounded unnaturally thin, and his eardrums felt like they were going to explode. How soon before his blood

started to boil?

Stop thinking about that. That's not helping.

'Where do you suppose?' asked Vega Sepen, his first officer, her eyes flashing like corusca gems beneath her platinum bangs. 'It's not complicated. Your girlfriend jammed the starfighter bay open.'

'Well, seal it off!' he snapped, returning the Corellian's glare. 'And do not call her my girlfriend.'

'Touchy,' Vega said. 'You shouldn't let one little spat bust up a good thing. I mean, she only sabotaged our hyperdrive, stole our only hyperdrive-capable starfighter, and left us bleeding air.'

'Yeah? You sound jealous to me, Sepen,' he snapped.

'Oh, yes, of course,' Vega said, studying the system indicators. 'I've got the big hurt for you, all right. I'm going to make my move as soon as you're out of diapers.'

Her voice sounded weird. The falling pressure, probably.

'Boss . . .' Vega went on, in a more normal tone.

'What?'

'It won't seal.'

'Sithspawn!' He raised his voice, trying to project it through the thinning air. 'Vac suits, everyone, now!' He rose to his feet and found his legs wobbly. He suppressed a giggle as the situation suddenly seemed amusing. Was harder-than-corundum Vega Sepen actually jealous of the rogue Jedi? Vega was like a tough older sister -- there had never been anything between them.

Nor was there anything between him and Klin-Fa Gi. She had been an irritating mynock on his hull from the second they met, and that was before she had tried to kill him and his crew.

Another funny thing, this one a real side-splitter. He was pretty sure he didn't have time to make it to the storage lockers before passing out. Why hadn't he thought of the vac suits first? Where was his brain?

Oh, right. Starving for oxygen.

He couldn't help it. He laughed at that one. The galaxy was the best practical joker ever.

He was still chuckling when he tripped over Leaf. The Dug had collapsed in a pile, his limbs sticking up at odd angles. His normally ferocious face actually looked sort of cute with no surly consciousness to animate it. And

he had brought some blankets to curl up on, or was it laundry?

No, those are the vac suits, you idiot, some stubbornly rational part of Uldir snarled. You forgot. Leaf didn't.

His vision was blurring. He didn't have long. He put the helmet on first and twisted the feed valve, then started shimmying into the suit. The fresh air smelled good, but his lungs couldn't get much of it -- not enough pressure, without a seal between suit and helmet.

A bunch of black holes suddenly appeared in the bulkhead. Yuuzhan Vong voids? Were they under attack, now, on top of everything else?

"That's it," he muttered. "I give up."

He did, too, as the black holes devoured the ship, the light, and finally Uldir Lochett.

* * *

He awoke to the hiss of air in his helmet. The flat face of a Duro was staring at him with concern. The Duro was wearing a vac suit. It took him a confused moment to understand that it was Vook, the fourth member of his crew. It took only another heartbeat to recall his last memories.

'Leaf, Vega! We have to -- '

'Already done, Boss-boy," Vega's voice sounded tinny in his helmet transceiver. 'We're all okay. Leaft's a little on the puny side -- '

'I'm fine," the Dug snarled. He sounded more groggy than convincing.

'Good work, Leaft, going for the suits," Uldir said. 'Next time, remember to put yours on first. Always."

'Hrrm. Basic training. Wasn't thinking straight, though." Leaft sounded chagrined, which was a rarity. 'Thinking like a human," he added. That was more like Leaft. Uldir was relieved.

'Vook was thinking straight, at least," Vega said.

Vook looked embarrassed, but said nothing.

'Okay," Uldir said, wobbling to his feet. 'Let's see what's wrong and fix it."

'And then?" Leaft growled.

'Then we go get our starfighter back and make a certain Jedi experience a great deal of remorse."

* * *

Uldir was with Vook in the engine crawlway, puzzling over the defunct hyperdrive, when Vega stuck her head down from above.

'We got the outer doors sealed," she said.

'And the inner?'"

'Well, it's good news and bad news," Vega allowed. "The bad news is she cut through the inner doors with her lightsaber, so we're going to have to patch them. Leaft's on that. The good news -- I guess this is good news -- she didn't jam the outer doors on purpose. She banged the mechanism with the A-wing when she took off."

'Then she didn't intend for us to die," Uldir mused.

'Think not? So you plot she hasn't gone over to the dark side?'"

'If she were truly rogue, she would hardly have any compunction about killing us. She could have torped us, for that matter, to make sure of it."

'I think you're still woozy," Vega said. 'She stranded us in Vong space without a hyperdrive, twenty light-years from anywhere. She cut the hyperwave antenna, too, so we can't call for help. That in itself is a death sentence. A slow, cruel one. Very dark."

'Maybe she figured we could fix one or the other.'

'She knew we were already in bad shape, that we needed supplies to effect repairs.' Vega cocked her head. 'Don't forget, she's on her way to Wayland. She must be after some of the Emperor's old toys. Even if she hasn't given in to the dark side, she must be right at the shatter zone.'

'Yeah,' Uldir assented. 'I'll give you that. We just have to hope she hasn't gone over. At least the Jedi still have a few friends left. A Dark Jedi could lose them what little support they have. It would be all the hard-liners in the Senate need to make the policy of turning Jedi over to the Yuuzhan Vong legal.'

'That could be the least of it, if she finds any of the Emperor's weapons,' Vega said. 'We know from experience how much damage a single Dark Jedi can do.'

'Yes,' Vook said softly, 'but if that damage were to the Yuuzhan Vong, it is to be desired.'

'Vook . . . ' Uldir throttled his immediate retort. The Duro had lost his homeworld to the Vong. He was understandably upset.

'I can't imagine how you must feel, Vook,' Uldir said. 'But the dark side

can never be the answer. I didn't learn a lot at the Jedi academy, but I did learn that."

Vook blinked slowly and was silent for a moment.

'I can repair the hyperdrive," he said, apparently dodging any debate.

'You can?'"

'Yes. She cut through one of the motivator-engine linkages. That's easily repaired. However, when we dropped from hyperspace, the resulting surge spread out over the rest of the system and fried the remaining motivators. I can realign the one good one to handle the engines, but only for two, maybe three jumps. Then it burns out, too."

'That's terrific," Vega said. 'Can we make Mon Calamari?'"

'Yes."

'No," Uldir said. 'We're going to Wayland."

Vega fixed him with her steely eyes. 'And just how will we leave, once we get there? Don't forget, the Yuuzhan Vong have a base on Wayland, too."

'We'll deal with it when the time comes," Uldir replied. 'As it is, my last instructions from Master Skywalker were to bring her in for debriefing.

"That's what we're going to do."

"You're not thinking with your head, boss," Vega said.

"And that's enough of that," Uldir said. "It's not funny anymore." He turned to Vook. "How long until it's done?"

"Three hours, maybe four."

"Fine. Get to it. Vega, you'll help me get us as battle-ready as possible."

He raised his voice. "Leaft, how are the repairs on the inner doors coming?"

"Faster if you'd let me work in peace," the Dug's voice came back over the intercom.

Vega was still staring at him. Her eyes and the set of her frame told him she was unhappy with his decision. He didn't like to resort to pulling rank, if he could help it. It was always better when your crew agreed with you. But in this case he wasn't going to entertain any discussions. He would not, could not be responsible for giving a Dark Jedi even the slightest opportunity to resurrect any of the Emperor's old technology. Not even if it killed them all.

* * *

The _No Luck Required_ dropped out of hyperspace with a bone-jolting thud.

The inertial compensators whined and g-force tried to suck Uldir's brain out of his right ear. A great green world filled most of his view, far too near.

'Nice jump, boss," Vega said.

'What happened?" Uldir demanded, of no one in particular. 'We're lucky we didn't end up starfood, coming out this close to a singularity."

Vook answered. "The motivator failed during the jump," he said. "We are no longer hyperdrive capable."

'Well, at least you got us here. Good work, Vook."

'Yes sir," Vook murmured, and added, "We're doomed now, sir."

'No we're not," Uldir replied. 'I want you to start exploring options. See if you can cannibalize enough parts to put together one jump, to anywhere. Scan the system for any hulks we might be able to salvage from. Anything. Just get me one more jump, Vook."

The Duro's expression remained unreadable, but he shrugged. 'Okay," he said.

'Boss," Vega said, 'I've got three objects turning our way."

'Perfect,' Uldir said. 'What are they?'

'Coralskippers.'

Uldir toggled on the intercom. 'Leaft, you hear that?'

'Yes,' the Dug grunted. 'I'm in the turret already.'

Uldir flipped to long-range scanners. There were the skips, all right. Like all Yuuzhan Vong tech, the skips were living creatures, modified by advanced biotech into deadly killing vessels. Uldir had dealt with enough of the small furies to know that even one was a problem -- three made for a very bad day indeed.

'It could be worse,' he sighed.

'I've got a corvette analog coming around the planetary horizon,' Vega said. 'I estimate we have about eight minutes to handle the skips before we have it to deal with, as well.'

'Ah,' Uldir said. 'So worse. Remind me not to say that again.'

'What would be the point in that?' Vega asked. 'You don't seem to be handling advice all that well these days, even your own.'

'And you're plotting a course toward insubordination, fast," Uldir snapped, starting the ship on a series of evasive maneuvers. 'Vook, we've still got full maneuverability?"

'In sublight, yes."

'Fine."

'Permission to speak, sir," Vega said stiffly.

'Vega . . ." he sighed. 'What?"

'You don't need me here -- you've got Vook for fire control and repair and Leaf for the turret. Let me take out a starfighter. Even the odds a little."

"That's a fine idea."

'Great." She reached for the buckles of her crash harness.

'Two minutes until maximum range," Vook said.

'Wait," Uldir said. 'I meant taking a starfighter out is a good idea. But I'm taking it. You assume command of the _No Luck Required_."

'Boss, that's -- '

'Listen to me. We can't slug it out with every skip in the system. Try to cover my exit with a barrage -- dump some garbage, too, and I'll go out cold silent. Then I want you to get going -- hide someplace, on the planet, in orbit running silent -- whatever. Once I'm clear of the fight, I'll find Klin-Fa Gi, grab her, and bring her back."

'Right. Grab a Dark Jedi."

'I'm the only one of us with any Force sense at all," Uldir said. 'So I'm the only one who even stands a chance of even finding her." he paused. 'Anyway, I brought her on board. It was my decision to come after her. I'll take the consequences."

Vega looked like some nasty insect had stung her inside her mouth.

'I don't like it," she said.

'You don't have to. I'll find you, don't worry."

'One minute," Vook said.

'Rotate fighter two," Uldir said. With that, he left the helm and hurried toward the starfighter bay.

* * *

A globular bolt of plasma greeted Uldir as his A-wing cleared the fighter bay. He jerked reflexively at the stick -- forgetting he was powered down -- but he was still inside of the No Luck's shields, which the blast spread across in rainbow fluorescence. Gritting his teeth, he let the tiny ship drift in the cloud of released garbage. He watched as a spread of proton torpedoes from the Luck winked into silent fiery starlets, accompanied by a fusillade of energy bolts from Leaft's position in the turret. His finger itched on the power-up switch. Had the coralskippers seen his ship emerge and targeted him specifically, or was the near-miss merely coincidence? He would know in a few seconds. He had drifted clear of the shields, now, and though the A-wing had many non-factory modifications, its shields were not upgraded. A single solid hit and he wasn't merely out of the action, he was dead.

But the skips were too busy to notice him, thanks to his crew. One was already carrying a livid wound where one of Leaft's lasers had singed along the yorik coral, heating it to incandescence. As he watched, another took the fringe blast of proton torp. For a moment, he thought the fight would be over quickly.

No such luck. He watched, drifting and feeling helpless as the skips closed to their most effective range and the tables turned. Leaft still needled at them with deadly accuracy, but the shots stopped dead in space meters from

the organic starfighters. The Yuuzhan Vong ships didn't have shields as such -- instead, the same dovin basals that furnished their gravitic drive opened tiny singularities which swallowed anything they touched -- concussion missiles, torps -- even the coherent light and particles of a blaster bolt vanished into them without a trace. They had their limits of course, and Republic pilots had learned a trick or two about slipping the occasional shot through those gravitic defenses, but it was no easy going. Meanwhile, the skips bombarded the No Luck Required with gobs of supercharged plasma, fired from what look for all the world like miniature volcanoes set in the rough surface of the coralskippers. Now they avoided the arc of the turret gun, diving in close. Vega couldn't effectively fire missiles from that range, both because she wasn't likely to hit and because the resulting concussion would damage the transport as well.

'Go, Vega, go!' He muttered. 'What are you waiting for?'

But then the Luck's drive kicked on and a stream of hot ions engulfed one of the coralskippers, whose pilot had clearly forgotten that an ion drive made an effective if short-range weapon in itself. The voids couldn't swallow all of that. The skip flared orange, yellow, blue -- and was gone.

'That's it!' Uldir muttered, watching the No Luck Required dwindle with astonishing speed. The remaining skips went after her, of course, though they had little chance of catching her if she didn't let them. Unless the Vong fighters were hyperdrive capable, which he didn't think they were.

The corvette analog probably was, but it wouldn't go faster-than-light until it was a little farther from the planet. But if they spotted him . . .

He resisted holding his breath as the larger ship cruised by only eight kilometers off his lower starboard. If it noticed him, it gave no indication.

New light caught his eye, as some of the junk ejected with him hit Wayland's outer atmosphere and began to burn. One eye still on the passing cruiser, he reached for his stick. It wouldn't do for him to hit the atmosphere wrong. Too shallow an angle and he'd skip off into space. Too steep and he'd be incinerated. Time for a little course correction.

He didn't bring the ship to full power, instead firing maneuvering thrusters from independent power sources. That steepened his approach. He reached for the stick -- and gaped at what he saw on his sensors.

Three little blips, launched from the cruiser, all headed his way.

So they had been watching the jettisoned junk, and he had revealed himself.

No use cursing the void, his grandmother used to say. It'll get you in the end, and you might as well be on good terms. He went to full power, dropped his nose, and dove planetward. The skips accelerated after him.

"That's right fellows," Uldir grunted. "Bring those flying rocks into the soup with me."

He bumped through high-altitude clouds of ice crystals that shattered the light from Wayland's primary into rainbow and diamond. He flattened his descent a little, noting that the less aerodynamic coralskippers were dropping behind his speedier ship. Their weapons, effective enough in space, lost range in atmosphere. He could probably outrun them easily enough.

He rolled into a tight turn. He couldn't afford to take that chance -- he could outdistance the skips, all right, but they could keep him spotted until craft more apt for atmosphere could vector in on him. Uldir had met a few of their fliers, and some were pretty nasty. If he didn't want to have to deal with fighting the Vong the whole time he was searching for Klin-Fa Gi, he'd better do something about this now.

He aimed his prow at the coralskippers as they hit the turbulence he'd just passed through. He opened up with laser cannons, not really thinking to do much damage at this range, but hoping the brief opening and closing of their voids would roughen the air around them and sap some of their energy reserves. When he was in range, he gave them the present he'd been planning on -- a concussion missile. The weapon was one of his own modification, equipped with a gravitometric sensor. As soon as it sensed a void, it would go.

It blew some ten meters from the lead skip. At such short range, in an atmosphere, a concussion missile had considerable authority, expanding air in a supersonic sphere that slapped the lead coralskipper back the way it had come. The other two had begun peeling away, but not far enough, and both went tumbling. Uldir braced for the milder jolt when the wavefront reached him and began using his laser cannons in earnest, stinging one of the tumbling skips. From his peripheral vision he noted the lead skip falling planetward, apparently unchecked by its gravitic drive. The third skip he could no longer see, but instinct told him he had a few seconds before it picked up his tail.

Yellow plumes of vaporizing coral sent the skip ahead of him pitching and yawing, making it more difficult to hit, but it didn't seem to be using its voids at all. He almost had a solid lock, but that's when the warning in his head went off -- time was up. He yanked on the stick up and port -- and felt blood rush to his head. He'd been right -- streamers of plasma boiled by where he'd been. He tightened into a loop. Both skips were below him, now. He noticed with satisfaction that the fire from the one behind him had struck its brother a glancing blow, and it was burning.

Almost laconically, Uldir drilled the final skip and then sprinted toward the forest far, far below.

* * *

When he was a few meters above the treetops he leveled out and called up a

map of the planet. It was well detailed, but few features were actually named. One of them was a dot in the northern hemisphere on the big continent labeled 'Mount Tantiss.' Wayland had been the Emperor's secret for many years, listed on no star chart due to -- of all things -- an ancient clerical error. Mount Tantiss had been his arcanum and storehouse. Grand Admiral Thrawn had tracked the planet and the mountain down after the Emperor's demise, bent on finding weapons that would help him reclaim what the Empire had lost. Later, Master Skywalker and some of the other heroes of the Rebellion had found it as well and destroyed the mountain with a seismic explosion.

If Klin-Fa Gi was really a Dark Jedi, the ruins of Mount Tantiss were probably where she was headed.

He brought up the transponder overlay. Not surprisingly, it confirmed his suspicions -- the A-wing seemed to be motionless on exactly that spot. Grimly he changed his heading to take him there, keeping a wary eye on long-range sensors.

* * *

Uldir found the A-wing abandoned and hidden by a makeshift covering of huge leaves fallen from the canopy above. He took a deep breath, listening, watching, and smelling the jungle around him, trying to reach out with the limited Force ability he commanded.

From above, Wayland had looked much like Yavin 4, where he had attended the Jedi academy. Here, on the ground, the similarities seemed superficial.

Although both Wayland and Yavin's moon had land masses covered mostly in jungle, Wayland's rose higher and stratified into two canopies. The air of Yavin 4 had been spiced with the scent of blueleaf. Here the atmosphere lay heavily on the forest floor, musky and ripe with decay, whirring, buzzing, and click-clackering with the sounds of unfamiliar fauna. He remembered how dangerous the jungles of Yavin 4 had been, and there he had known something of what to expect. This world he did not know at all. The sounds around him might be harmless insects or the Wayland equivalent of Yavin's piranha beetles, which could strip a person to the bone in the time it took a Toydarian to beat its wings.

Still, he was pleased to discover that Klin-Fa Gi seemed even more out of her element here -- her trail of scuffed leaf litter and bent or broken understory was easy enough for him to pick up. It led, as he suspected, up through the foothills surrounding what had once been Mount Tantiss. Somberly, he shouldered a survival pack, his blaster, and a few concussion grenades and set off after her.

At least, he hoped it was her.

It wasn't long before Uldir found evidence that he was indeed following the Jedi and not some strange and clumsy beast. Unfortunately, that evidence came in the form of the five corpses -- sentients, by the look of them, two

different species. Neither of the species were Yuuzhan Vong, which meant they were probably locals. Whoever they were, they had been killed by a lightsaber -- few weapons left the same distinct, cauterized slashes as a Jedi's signature weapon.

Grimly, he studied the scene for details. Three of the dead were of a tall, ectomorphic species with six limbs, of which four apparently functioned as arms. They had flexible snouts and their skin -- where bare of the hides and bone ornaments they wore -- glistened like an insect's carapace.

The other two were squat, powerful in appearance, and naturally armored with bony plates on their rounded backs. Like those they lay beside, they seemed to have been basically bipedal.

Uldir had never seen either species before, not in the space lanes or among slaves that the Yuuzhan Vong used as shock troops. That wasn't surprising -- there were plenty of beings in the galaxy who weren't space-going, either because they didn't have the technology or the inclination, and he remembered from his all-too brief scan of the files on this planet that it was supposed to have several intelligent species, all at an essentially stone-age level of technology.

When he saw what they gripped in their dead hands, however, Uldir's blood ran cold. Now he understood something about why they had died. At first glance, their weapons resembled clubs, spatulate on one end and pointed on

the other, about thirty centimeters in length. Uldir had seen such weapons before, but even if he hadn't he would have noted something strange in the way that they slowly wriggled, flexing from side to side like Hothan glacier worms. They were alive, and unmistakably of Yuuzhan Vong biofacture.

He studied the bodies more carefully, searching for other signs of the Yuuzhan Vong, wondering if these creatures had been slaves or willing allies. He found no sign of the coral implants the invaders used to control unwilling subjects, which seemed to suggest they were allies.

Still, there were many means of control, and Yuuzhan Vong knew most of them.

As he reached to turn one of the short, armored sentients over to inspect his underside, he suddenly realized that something was wrong. The forest sounds around him had changed, with most of the animal life having fallen silent. He drew his blaster -- casually, as if he really only meant to brush the side of his trousers.

'Lay down shame weapon!' A piping voice commanded in heavily accented Basic. 'Lay down shame weapon or breathe-not you, offworlder!'

To emphasize the point, a quivering shaft appeared as if by magic in the tree nearest him. Uldir hesitated -- he had seen arrows before. They had a primitive but effective way of making holes in people. On the other hand, he had a blaster, which made bigger, more efficient holes. But the voice was behind him, and he didn't know how many there were . . .

Whoever it was could have killed him already. He might as well see what the odds were, and what they had to say. He raised his arms slowly, turning toward the voice. He did not lay down the blaster.

The speaker was a stripe of color in the underbrush, hard to see, but Uldir could make out that it was one of the slender, six-limbed humanoids. Uldir breathed slowly and deeply, his eyes tracking through the strange leaves for others.

'Lay down shame weapon," the creature said again.

Uldir kept the weapon above his head, pointed at the sky, but did not do as demanded. He nodded his head at the corpses. 'I didn't kill your friends," he said. 'I found them like this. I'm in pursuit of the one who did this."

He heard faint rustlings in the brush all around him, and his heart sank. He had probably lost his opportunity to shoot his way out of the situation, if he'd ever had one.

Looking at the dead, however, he found part of him was glad of that.

The creature made a faint trumpeting sound. 'If kill Cut-Up-Wish-to-bes, not our enemy," he stated. 'Lay down shame weapon. Not tell again."

'I won't be defenseless," Uldir said. 'I know what the Yuuzhan Vong do to their captives. I won't be taken captive."

Another trumpeting sound, this one trilled. An answering call came from someplace to his left.

'We not friends of the Cut-Up-People," the sentient said, emphatically.

'Never we fodder them."

Uldir could see two more of them now, both of the stockier race. They bore bows, arrows, and stone axes with wooden hafts, like the one who had been speaking. None of them carried anything that looked like Yuuzhan Vong biotech. Uldir's shoulders relaxed a tick. Deliberately, he returned his blaster to its holster and raised his hands, palm outwards.

'The Yuuzhan Vong are my enemies," he said. 'If you are also their enemies, we are friends."

The thin figure swayed forward. 'Outworlders not friends," he said. 'They bear shame, and bear it upon us."

'I came here only to find the one who left this trail," Uldir said. 'When I have her, I will leave. I mean you no harm." He indicated himself. 'My name is Uldir Lockett."

The creature regarded him for a moment. 'You offer name?" He said at last.

'Yes. I offer my name.'

The being seemed to consider that for a moment. 'I offer in return. I am called Txer. I am leader of the Free People.'

'Pleased to meet you, Txer.'

Txer then said something in his native language, and several of the others -- Uldir now guessed about fifteen -- responded to him. It seemed to be a debate, of sorts, and he suspected the point debated had something to do with whether Uldir got to keep breathing or not. Finally Txer chopped both of his upper hands, and silence fell. He moved closer to Uldir, until they stood only about two meters apart.

'You follow the one who made this trail. She is strong.'

'Yes,' Uldir said.

'We hear her battle with Cut-Up-Wish-to-bes. Come to see. Hear your shame-thing land, watch you. You come only for her? Is truth?'

'Yes,' Uldir replied.

'Why follow her? If they who fight Cut-Up-People your friends, why not her?'

Your words have Offworld poison in them, maybe."

'It's complicated," Uldir said. 'Yes, she is enemy to the -- er,
Cut-Up-People. But I fear she seeks something here, something the Emperor
left. Do you know of the Emperor?"

Txer trilled loud and long, then babbled again in his own language. A few of
the others responded, sharply, and all of the creatures Uldir could see
brandished their weapons. His hand itched toward his blaster.

'Dark man," Txer said, finally. 'She seeks the things of the Dark Man."

'Yes, I suppose so," Uldir replied.

'So do Cut-Up-People," Txer replied. 'They make holes, deep and long, in
cracked mountain."

'Yes," Uldir said. 'They look for his secrets. So does the one I follow."

'Must not to allow," Txer said, his voice a thin wisp. 'Cut-Up- People bad.
Dark man worse. All things of shame, his. I remember." His luminescent eyes
narrowed. 'Also remember some outworlders who broke mountain, buried his
things. You cousin to them?"

'Sort of," Uldir replied.

Txer tilted his long head thoughtfully, then spoke some more to his people.

'We also follow this trail," he said, simply.

'I'll appreciate your help," Uldir replied.

'Not to help you," Txer said. 'To watch."

* * *

They traveled for the rest of the daylight through steadily steepening terrain. Twice, for no reason Uldir could tell, they hid in thickets, remaining utterly silent until some unspoken signal released them to walk again. That night they camped in the cavernous shelter of the gnarled roots of a fantastically huge tree.

'Why do you call my weapon a shame weapon?" Uldir asked Txer, as the light faded to nothing.

'Is shame to use. Not from life." He paused, searching for words.

'Machine," he said at last, as if the word bit him on the way out of his mouth.

'Oh," Uldir replied. It made sense -- these were people who lived simply off what the land provided. Given that the Empire had been here, most of

their experiences with technology had probably been of the negative sort.

'Is that why some fight for the Cut-Up-People? Because they also hate machines?' That was putting it mildly, of course. The Yuuzhan Vong considered all 'dead' technology to be an abomination, and those who used it so unclean as to deserve extermination. Their conquest of the galaxy was more of a holy war than one for territory -- they had long since conquered worlds enough for their people to live on.

'Wish-to-bes think like this, yes,' Txer replied. 'They say Cut-Up-People like us. They are not. Life is for respect. They do not respect life. They break it, twist it, make it as they want, make it foul. They do same to us.'

'You're right about that,' Uldir told him. 'I've seen it happen, on world after world. And in the end, those who help them suffer more than those who resist them.'

'Offworld wisdom we do not need,' Txer said, stiffly. 'Free People see this for themselves. Need not your eyes to see.'

'I understand that,' Uldir said.

'We fight them, like we fought Dark Man,' Txer went on.

Stone weapons against the Vong? Uldir thought. That was an uneven fight.

Unless the equation changed, the Free People were doomed.

'I should go on alone, when the light comes," Uldir said. 'I don't want to put your people in danger."

'We fight them," Txer said firmly. 'And if you lie, we fight you too. We fight until offworlders all gone, or until we all die. Sleep now. Tomorrow we enter Cut-Up territory, and then no sleep."

Uldir spent a restless night trying not to worry about his crew, hoping they were still alive and had managed to find a hiding place. He did not think Klin-Fa Gi would stop to sleep, and he felt her drawing ahead of him, and that made him even more anxious.

When he did sleep, his mind built dreams whose architecture was darker than the night.

* * *

'The jungle looks sick," Uldir remarked the next morning. The upper canopy looked ragged and skeletal, and the lower was covered with what looked like a fine mold or dust.

'Yes. Will get sicker," Txer assured him.

It did. Soon they were walking through only the memory of a forest; the mighty trunks were still there, but no hint of green or color of blossoms was anywhere in evidence -- only a drab, charcoal gray.

'What did this?' Uldir asked.

Txer rubbed his mouth. 'Not know. No one living has seen what does it. No one dead talks about it.'

A kilometer later the trees became charred stumps, obviously scorched by some high heat. The burned zone went off to his left and right for as far as he could see.

Two kilometers later, even the stumps were gone, and they stood on a high ridge looking across a shallow valley at what remained of Mount Tantiss.

Under force of the seismic disruption, the peak had shuddered and collapsed. This side of the mountain had slumped and become a rolling, churned slope of talus. On this vast jumble of basalt, at about the same level he now stood on, grew the Yuuzhan Vong base.

Five of the living compounds looked to be star-shaped, or at least radially symmetrical. This sort of structure Uldir had seen before, in records taken by an erstwhile smuggler named Talon Kaarde. Called damuteks, the Yuuzhan Vong had grown some on the ruins of the Jedi academy when they'd captured the Yavin system a few months earlier. Uldir's old friend Anakin Solo had

fought his way through a damutek and had reported a lot of useful information about them.

'I think those are Shaper compounds," Uldir told Txer.

'Shapers?'

'Yes. The Yuuzhan Vong are divided into castes. The Shapers are the ones who make their biotech -- ah, who twist life into the shapes they want. You understand?'

'Yes. Have seen -- not as cut-up as those who fight. Have hair like nest of brvol-snakes.'

'Shapers, right. Those compounds are their laboratories. But what's that thing?" He indicated something that resembled a squat cylindrical tower, albeit a crooked one. It was huge, at least a hundred meters high and nearly that in diameter. Like the damuteks, it looked as if it were made of coral. Unlike them, its upper surface seemed to be perforated with hundreds of openings, each of which must be a meter or so in diameter.

Uldir lifted his macrobinoculars and examined the base of the thing more closely, but he couldn't tell much else except -- yes, it seemed to be slowly rotating, as if boring into or out of the ground.

'It's a drill," he muttered.

'Makes holes," Txer said. 'We think, anyway.'

'A big hole. That's some kind of giant worm, I'd guess, or was before their Shapers got hold of it.'

'But one thing we never reckon," Txer said. 'If digging, where puts-it rock?'

Uldir looked at Txer, reminding himself that primitive didn't mean stupid.

'That's a good question," he replied. 'I guess it digests the rock, somehow, breaks it down. He shrugged. 'Doesn't matter. But look, see those capillaries connecting the mine to the rayed compounds?'

'Yes.'

'Those must be ways down into the mines the worm is digging. If they find anything, they'll bring them up through there. Which means I'll find Klin-Fa Gi either in the mines or in one of those compounds.' He sighed. 'In other words, she could be almost anywhere down there.'

He moved the macrobinoculars down, and the multitudes of figures moving amongst the compounds resolved into recognizably Yuuzhan Vong shapes, but there were plenty of Myneyrshi -- the tall spindly race -- and Psadans, the

armored ones -- as well. There were also more than a few humans, of which Txer's band also included a number -- the descendants of a long-lost colony, if he understood their story correctly.

He focused on the nearest group, who seemed to be tending some sort of plants that grew on slope, just above where the burned zone ended. They were about a hundred meters away, and Uldir saw no Yuuzhan Vong guards.

'Maybe I can pass for one of them,' Uldir speculated. 'If they've caught Klin-Fa, there ought to be talk about it. If they haven't, there might be talk about that too.'

But looking up at the complex, he didn't feel much hope. He didn't have the leisure time to insinuate himself into the Yuuzhan Vong camp the way Anakin Solo had done on Yavin 4 -- Vega and the rest were out there, possibly fighting for their lives, waiting for him to finish his mission here and get back into space. Every second he spent here was a risk not just to his own life but to his crew's, and for that matter to everyone he and his crew might have rescued if they weren't here chasing one rogue Jedi.

'Jedi,' he murmured, and Txer narrowed his eyes.

'What Jedi?' He asked, suspiciously. 'You Jedi?'

'No, I'm not. The one I chase.'

Uldir closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to ignore his body, his thoughts, his immediate surroundings, to feel through the living Force around him. To search for Klin-Fa Gi. She was probably the only living Jedi on Wayland, and the Yuuzhan Vong did not appear in the Force at all. Klin-Fa ought to stand out like a Wookiee at a Tintinna wedding, even to his less-than attuned senses.

The sounds around him faded thin and were forgotten. In the outward-reaching eye of his mind, he was a sphere, expanding, not so much taking in all that he touched, but reminding himself that he was already a part of it.

He felt the belt of sickly life behind him, growing stronger as it marched away from the Yuuzhan Vong settlement. He felt the verge of death and pain he stood on, and the odd blankness of the Yuuzhan Vong themselves. He felt the fractured stones of Mount Tantiss.

Part of him was excited. He'd never commanded this sort of clarity in the Force, even on his best day at the academy.

And yes, better still, there, a flicker, he felt Klin-Fa Gi, and it seemed she was near. He felt her heart pounding, sensed danger, a goal reached, something desired found . . .

Then a black spike of anger and despair struck him between the eyes, and a shriek of hatred that was somehow more the taste of salt and bitter Jiqui

peels than a sound.

His tenuous hold on the Force snapped, replaced by another sensation, a sort of burring in his bones.

It took him a moment to understand the feeling was coming from beneath him, up through his feet, that it was the ground trembling. And it was growing stronger. He opened his eyes, gazing at the ruined mountain, at the terrible Vong-thing growing into it.

Something was different, but it took him a moment to place it. Then he saw, but still didn't understand. The tower was larger, puffy, bloated looking.

'Txer," he said, 'Run. Now.'" He bolted down the hill, across the blasted landscape toward the Yuuzhan Vong settlement.

'Why?'" Txer shouted from behind him.

'Just do it!'" He didn't have time to explain that he wasn't quite sure why, but that if he waited to think it through they would all be dead.

A glance behind him showed Txer and his Free People still hesitating. 'Come on!'" he howled.

Txer started forward. After that, Uldir kept all of his attention on the

rocky path and the rumbling in the planet that grew stronger with each footfall. He ran, hoping the Free People followed -- hoping his luck hadn't betrayed him at last.

He'd reached the bottom of the foothill they'd stood upon and just started up the slope toward the damuteks when he heard shouts from the sentients behind him. The Psadan, who were basically armored spheres, were mostly rolling down the hill. The Myneyrshi were having a bit more trouble with their delicate looking legs. As they started uphill, however, their positions were reversed. The Myneyrshi pulled themselves gracefully up the slope with their six limbs, while the Psadan began to lag behind. It was Txer who first shouted and exclaimed, and Uldir followed the direction the fellow indicated with his gaze. The vibration in the ground was rattling his teeth, now.

The tower bristled. From each of the hundreds of openings on its upper surface, a snaky tube emerged and lengthened, arcing in unison out over the valley and toward the foothills in what looked like slow motion, but which, given the distances involved, was probably quite fast. Each of the tubes was headed for a slightly different destination. Many of them seemed to be coming straight toward Uldir.

Uldir quickened his pace.

"What is?" Txer asked.

'We have to make it out of the burned zone!' Uldir shouted. 'To the first of the Yuuzhan Vong gardens.'

He glanced up, and could see the dark mouths of the tubes facing down now, like cave worms coming to take a bite out of him. How low did they have to get? The sky was full of the arcing shafts now, some aimed far beyond the ridge. It might have been curiously pretty if he didn't remember the perimeter of destruction, if the burned zone didn't fit so well with the geometry of what he was seeing.

They were about to find out what the drilling-worm digested rock into, and he didn't think they were going to enjoy the enlightenment.

The end of the scorch-zone was just ahead, but the Psadans weren't doing so well. One stumbled, and Txer supported him. Another slipped back near Uldir. He bit his lip. If he paused to help the Psadan, he might die, which was one thing, but then he would fail his mission, which was altogether another. He couldn't . . .

No. Whatever else his mission was, first and foremost it was to help his fellow being in need.

He put a shoulder under the Psadan's stout arm, and together they struggled toward the strip of green ahead. They had maybe thirty meters to go -- some of the Myneyrshi had already reached it.

The sky was a vault of black cords now, and an opening wide enough to swallow Uldir was dropping swiftly toward him. He didn't think it would swallow him, though. He wondered, in fact, if he would feel much of anything.

The smaller rocks on the hillside were actually rattling now, from the pressure building below them. Any moment now . . .

Uldir's foot struck a rock wrong, and he slipped down, his ankle twisting painfully as the Psadan's weight fell disproportionately on him. Grunting apologetically, the Psadan tried to lift him into a carry.

"Too late," Uldir muttered.

He didn't see the yellow-and-black clad figure until she was beside him, until her strength had flowed into him and he and the Psadan were practically carried forward to the edge of the Yuuzhan Vong fields by the power of the Force.

"You're an idiot, Uldir Lockett," Klin-Fa-Gi informed him.

The Free People shouted as one, as out and across the valley the hundreds of tubes coughed out a fluorescent orange haze. The smell was lightning against stone, hot copper hitting water. The haze collected in low spots, cooling to blood red and then nearly black, rolling over the hills in an expanding

torus which left the Yuuzhan Vong base and gardens -- and thankfully, Uldir Lockett -- untouched in the center.

'What is it?' Txe asked, waving at the terrifying sight.

'Mining vents,' Klin-Fa Gi said, briskly. The Chom-Vrone chews up rocks and digests into a state of semi-plasma in a process a lot like the weapons their skips use. When it has a full load, it spews it in a perimeter around their settlement, as you see. Keeps things clear and undesirables out.'

'Yeah,' Uldir grunted. 'Or almost all of them, anyway.' He noticed that she had a few new wounds, though none of them looked serious. She also had something strapped to her back, something wrapped in layers of what seemed to be living tissue.

'What's that you've got?'

'Never mind that now,' Klin Fa said. 'We've other troubles.' She pointed. Coming down in a wave from the settlement above were dozens of Yuuzhan Vong warriors. Behind Uldir, the curtain of superheated rock vapor was still spreading. They could face the warriors or fry.

'Well,' Uldir grunted. 'At least we have our backs to a wall.'

To Be Continued in Insider #62. . .

Greg Keyes is the author of Star Wars: The New Jedi Order -- Edge of Victory

I: Conquest and Star Wars: The New Jedi Order -- Edge of Victory II:

Rebirth.

IV: Relic of Ruin

V: A Perilous Plan

AS THE_NO LUCK REQUIRED_ TUMBLEDlaconically though the void, Vook Gehu watched the stars drift across his view, remembering a Duro maxim older than some species.

If a star should but blink, it would miss all of our history.

The stars did not care who won this war. They did not care if Vook was freeze-dried in vacuum or blasted into vapor. That he would die without companions did not trouble them.

Vook found an odd comfort in that.

He checked to make sure the emergency transponder was working properly. It was, pulsing a steady distress call. He hoped it would be answered soon, or this would all be moot.

He needn't have worried. Five minutes later, a response came, and Vook's

blood seemed to drop to the temperature of surrounding space. He searched the stars a few more moments before he found the newcomer-an irregular darkness that was not a distant nebula, but something much nearer.

Something that-unlike the stars-did indeed take an interest in what happened to Vook.

In this, he took no comfort at all. His mind wandered back to the conversation-only an hour or so before-that had crashed him into this situation, and he sighed.

He answered the hail.

'This is Vook Gehu of the _No Luck Required._ I need help. The rest of the crew is dead, and I am injured. My sensor grid is down and my ship is badly damaged. I am in great need of assistance.'

The comm unit sputtered and clucked, then spoke to him in a harsh, nasal baritone.

'You have found your assistance, infidel,' the reply came. 'I am Vintul Cat of the Yuuzhan Vong. Shut down all of your auxiliary systems and prepare to be boarded.'

Vook vented another sigh and keyed the return. 'Hello, Yuuzhan Vong,' he

said. 'So runs my luck-I hoped to attract a friendly ship, but I see my gamble has failed."

'There is no luck," Qat replied. 'There are only the gods and what they will."

'Yes? Then you may tell your gods I will not be boarded, Vintul Qat, not by you or any other of your despicable kind. I shall die before surrendering."

'By your own admission you have no sensors," Qat replied. 'Your ship is losing atmosphere."

'My weapons are still on line," Vook replied. 'And my reactor is damaged, yes. Indeed, in its condition it might well make a better weapon than a power source. Consider that, and come for me at your peril."

'My ship is full of captives," the Yuuzhan Vong said. 'Some of your own kind. Should you manage to destroy it, you will kill many more infidels than glorious Yuuzhan Vong."

'Better they die than receive the fate you offer them," Vook said.

'In any event, it is moot," Qat snapped. 'We are out of your range."

'For the time being," Vook replied. 'Try and board me."

'I can be patient," Qat replied. 'In a short time, your reactor will either go critical or fail. If it overloads, I'll watch you die. If it does not, I will take you then."

'Delude yourself if you wish," Vook muttered. 'It makes no difference to me. You destroyed my planet and scattered my people. Do not think you will find me easy prey, no matter the condition of my ship."

Vintul Qat's only answer was a harsh laugh.

Vook closed his eyes, wishing it were an hour ago, when the boss was still with him.

Realspace was somehow always a surprise after the nothingness of hyperspace.

The relativistic universe was never quite as Uldir remembered it, as if his mind protected itself from the absurdity of faster-than-light travel by distancing itself from the reality it had been formed to comprehend.

Whatever the cause, reversion was one of Uldir's greatest pleasures, even if the view was-from any other perspective-unimpressive.

But sometimes the show was better than all expectations, and for the crew and single passenger of the _No__Luck Required,_ this was one of those times.

From their entry above the system's elliptic plane, the primary was a

blue-white jewel, a spark of electricity captured and made constant. But something had reached into the star and tugged out a streamer of glowing plasma, pulled it in an arc half a light year long before twisting it into a spiral that wound tighter and tighter before vanishing. Intersecting the spiral and girdling the blue pinprick was a vast, faintly glowing indigo torus.

His instruments and charts told him that the cause of the phenomenon was a black hole, sucking matter into the nowhere of its event horizon, the great wreath of stray hydrogen atoms that had escaped to orbit in the singularity's path, but the cause didn't matter. For a moment, beauty swept everything from Uldir's mind, including the absurdly dangerous business that had brought him and his companions to this unpopulated system along the Hydian Way.

'They aren't here,' Vega Sepen pronounced in that terribly certain way that meant 'I told you so.'

Uldir glanced at the platinum-haired Corellian, wondering if she felt anything beneath that tough exterior, if the wonder of the universe penetrated through those steely eyes to the person beneath.

Maybe. He thought he caught a glimpse of blue fire in them, not a reflection from without but a light from within.

At least that's what he imagined he perceived for about a nanosecond. In

that instant, he saw Vega in a very different way. The angular plains of her face seemed softer-younger, though she hadn't yet seen her thirtieth standard year. He realized with a start that she was pretty, in a quirky way. Hadn't he ever noticed that before?

Then the moment was gone as if it was a quantum phenomenon, destroyed by observation.

'Boss?' Vega's voice became more insistent.

'What?'

'Where are you? I said they're not here. No sign of any Yuuzhan Vong vessels in the system.'

'Our sensors aren't that good,' Uldir said.

'Well, no, not if they're hiding. But this sector of space is completely under Yuuzhan Vong control, and they have nil reason to expect company. What with that black hole down there, and all of the attendant gravitational hoopla in this system, there are only a few places it makes sense to drop out and plot the next jump. This is one of them-I've checked the others. Nothing.'

'They'll be here,' another feminine voice said.

Vega raised her eyebrows in the same way Uldir had once seen her do when she'd discovered a Barraken weed-scorpion stalking her. Then, the small forehead twitch had been quickly followed by a blaster rifle discharge. Uldir tensed, involuntarily.

The new speaker, Klin-Fa Gi, tensed too, her Jedi senses doubtless warning her of danger. Klin-Fa was small, with dark eyes and black hair hanging in bangs. Her eyes narrowed as if challenging Vega.

'Yeah?' Vega's voice was soft, but it was mynsilk wrapped around durasteel. 'How do you know they haven't already been here and gone?'

'I would know,' Klin-Fa replied.

'Ah, the infallible, inscrutable Jedi,' Vega scoffed. 'But I thought you couldn't feel the Yuuzhan Vong in the Force?'

'I can't,' Klin-Fa said. 'I feel Bey.'

Uldir never liked it when the Klin-Fa said that name. He'd never met the fellow but was developing the opinion that he wasn't going to like him if he ever did.

'Good,' Vega said. 'Just find him on the sensors now, and you can contribute something useful.'

'They'll be here. I feel it.'

'Great,' Vega said. She rolled her eyes.

Klin-Fa pressed her lips in a tight line and didn't reply. Uldir felt a momentary desire to defend the young Jedi. She'd changed out of the living Yuuzhan Vong cloak she'd worn when she came aboard and was now dressed in a pair of Vook's red coveralls. They were too big for her, making her seem small and vulnerable.

Yeah, right, he reminded himself. Small and vulnerable enough to cut a Yuuzhan Vong warrior in half at the waist. He'd seen her do exactly that. Not to mention the grief she'd put his crew, his ship, and himself through-stranding them in the middle of nowhere, for instance. She was big trouble in a small package. Vega was right-he was crazy to trust her after all she'd done.

Still ...

'Move out of the safe point,' he told Vega, 'and power down. I don't want them seeing us when they get here.'

'When?' Vega asked skeptically.

'If," Uldir conceded. 'And Vook, you and Uvee run diagnostics on the weapons systems and shields again. It was a minor miracle you managed to patch our girl up in the time you did-if we have a breather, I want to use it to bring our combat readiness to maximum."

'Well, that makes sense at least," Vega allowed. 'How's this? We go find a Star Destroyer and come back. That should improve our chances a little. This isn't a warship we have here."

'We're not exactly defenseless, Vega," Uldir pointed out.

'And our target isn't a warship either," Klin-Fa added.

'Every Vong ship is a warship," Vega countered. 'And it'll come escorted:"

Klin-Fa rolled her eyes. 'We're talking about a Yuuzhan Vong slave transport traveling through secure Vong territory. The Yuuzhan Vong are proud-escort will be minimal, because they won't want to seem like cowards. Besides, when I infiltrated their data systems I noticed something interesting-one out of every three warships on duty in this sector has been relocated. It happened almost overnight."

Vega frowned. 'That sounds like they're starting a new offensive. Now that's something worth knowing. Shouldn't we be reporting that instead of trying to rescue some old lover-boy of yours?"

Klin-Fa colored slightly. "That isn't what this is about. It's not about Bey, or me. Jedi fight, Jedi die. We know the risks. Bey knew the risks-but the secret he carries is crucial. And it's more important than any conventional Yuuzhan Vong offensive."

"Despite the fact that you don't know exactly what this hypothet-ical new weapon of theirs is," Vega said.

Klin-Fa crossed her arms and leaned against the bulkhead. "I know they believe it will all but end the New Republic's resistance to their invasion."

"Well, yes, that's what you say," Vega replied. "That and two hydrogen atoms will get you helium if you squeeze hard enough."

"That's enough," Uldir cut in. "This debate is over."

Vega looked surprised at his tone, and he realized he had been uncharacteristically harsh.

But Klin-Fa had blushed when Vega referred to Bey as her 'lover-boy.' Uldir liked the missing Jedi less every second.

'Just-' he stopped, sighed. "Vega, I may be crazy, but I believe her. And I'm the captain, last I heard. We're doing this. I need your support now,

not your dissent."

Vega's eyes widened. 'Boss, just because I don't agree with you doesn't mean I'm not a hundred percent there for you. I am with you.'

'Glad to hear it.'

'I mean, even if were to think this were a bone-headed, irresponsible, absurdly dangerous gambit to salvage the remaining shreds of your masculinity-'

'Point taken, Vega. You're with me. Now shut up.'

'Yes, sir. Always eager to shut up.'

'I'm with you too, captain,' Vook's voice came over the intercom. 'And we'll be ready to fight, I promise you.' He sounded confident, for a change. Vook never sounded that way.

Vega noticed it too. 'Is that really Vook?' She asked softly.

'I don't know,' Uldir replied, muting the comm unit. 'After that outburst of his yesterday-I'd better have a talk with him.'

He found Vook in the turret, working at the turbolaser. He didn't look up as Uldir came in. His flat Duro face registered no emotion Uldir recognized.

'Vook, is there a problem?'

'No, sir. I'm adjusting the phase modulation for more efficient fire.'

'That's great, but I wasn't talking about the turbolaser. I was talk-ing about my mechanic.'

'I'm fine, sir,' Vook said, stiffly. 'I can do my job.'

'I'd never question your ability to do your job, Vook. I'm worried about your anger.'

'The Yuuzhan Vong destroyed my homeworld,' Vook said bluntly. 'My people flew among the stars when most species in this galaxy were still subsisting on the fruits and bugs of their native forests. To be destroyed by the Yuuzhan Vong, by barbarians who don't even have brains to comprehend what they've done-' he broke off.

'No one expects you to have any love for the Yuuzhan Vong, Vook. No one expects you not to mourn your homeworld-'

'Yes. Mourn is what I do. Don't you think I know what you all think of me? Vook the mournful. Vook the always sad. Poor old Vook. Well, I'm tired of it. If my choice is to be between misery and anger, I'll take the anger,

sir. It feels better."

"Those aren't the only two options," Uldir pointed out.

"Sir, with all due respect, you have no homeworld to lose. You wouldn't understand."

Uldir was silent for a moment.

"There was an arboretum on Bburru. Did you know it?"

Vook's brow wrinkled oddly. "Yes."

"I spent my fifth and my eleventh birthdays there. There was one tree in particular, a big olop, and if you sang near it, it would chime an accompaniment-"

"I remember the tree," Vook said. "It was a native of the home-world, the last of its kind. They were trying to clone it when the Vong destroyed the city. Now it's lost forever."

"Yeah," Uldir said. "I'll miss it."

"Not as I will," the Duro replied.

"Probably not. That's not my point. I spent my fourth birthday on Coruscant.

I spent my fifteenth on Yavin Four. You're right, Vook, I have no homeworld.

My parents were traders and freighter pilots, and I grew up in the space lanes. This galaxy is my homeworld. Look what the Yuuzhan Vong have done to it"

Vook dropped his head and nodded slightly. 'I understand."

'I know you do. I don't hurt more than you do Vook-that's a competition I can live without. But you can't turn inward and imagine that not all of us have lost something. And you can't give in to your anger. My Jedi training may have been a bust, but I know that much. Anger isn't good for anyone, Jedi or no. It just feels that way."

Vook sighed. 'There is logic in what you say. Logic ought to be comforting. It is not."

Uldir cocked his head quizzically. 'Why now, Vook? Why, after all this time are your emotions just now getting the better of you?"

Vook turned back to the turbolaser. 'It's this Jedi woman. She's made me understand how little I actually do:"

'She said something to you?"

'No. But she acts. She takes the fight to the Vong. So do you."

'No I don't," Uldir averred. 'I'm a rescue pilot. I became a rescue pilot because I didn't have what it took to be a Jedi, but I wanted to be like them-to help people in trouble. Jedi don't live to kill, Vook, not the good ones. They avoid it when they can. Sometimes they avoid it at the cost of their own lives. I passed up offers from half-a--dozen fighter squadrons because I like doing what I do. We've been in a lot of scrapes the past week or so, but never because I wanted to attack the Yuuzhan Vong. Never because I wanted to kill one. I'm just trying to do my job-a job that would be impossible without you, by the way. We could never have escaped Wayland without your expertise, Vook. Who else could have fixed our hyperdrive with century-old junk? Why do you think I requested you for my crew?"

'You requested me?" The Duro sounded genuinely surprised.

'Of course. What did you think?"

'I thought-I mean no one else..."

'Vook, you're the best mechanic the service has. And I like you."

Vook dropped his gaze to the deck, and then lifted it to meet Uldir's.

'Thank you, sir."

'Now-"

'Hey, boys," Vega's voice came over the intercom.

'What is it?"

'We've got company."

'Looks like your sweetheart was right after all," Vega said, as Uldir entered the cockpit. 'It's late, but that's definitely a Yuuzhan Vong transport."

'Big," Leaft-the fourth member of the crew-grunted. The Dug scratched behind his ear with one of his foot-hands.

Uldir silently agreed. Irregular but vaguely lozenge-shaped, the transport looked to be half a kilometer long. Like all Yuuzhan Vong vessels, it gave Uldir the impression of some sort of thousand-legged sea creature, though it had no limbs in evidence.

'Minimal crew, though," Klin-Fa said. 'I was on one just like it. Most of the space is reserved for captives."

'Escort?" Uldir asked.

'Four skips," Vega answered. 'Nothing we can't handle."

'I don't like it," Uldir said. 'It seems too easy.'

'Easy?" Vega said. 'Maybe if our goal was to blow it out of the sky. But we're aiming to capture that thing, remember? Without killing this Bey Gandan fellow or any of the other captives.'

'Yeah," Uldir agreed. 'That is the tricky part. But Klin-Fa has an idea.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me?" Vega wondered.

'Follow her plan?" Leafth snarled. 'I'd sooner milk a rancor.'

'I don't think rancors produce milk," Vook commented over the intercom.

'Just listen to her," Uldir said. 'Klin-Fa?"

The Jedi nodded, made a point of meeting Leafth's angry gaze, then cleared her throat.

'When I was on Wayland, I managed access to one of the Yuuzhan Vong data-storage modules, what they call a_qahsa._ That's how I discovered which ship Bey would be on and where it was going. I also had a look at the structural design of the ship. The outer hull doesn't have nerve endings, but the inner hull does. Breach it, and alarms go off everywhere.'

'Okay," Vega said. 'We knew that.'

'Here's something you may not know. Near the dovin basal, the inner hull nerves are compromised.'

'Compromised?' Uldir said.

'Yes. The dovin basals are creatures in their own right-they don't grow as a part of the ship but are nursed separately and then grafted on. But it's not a perfect symbiosis-the gravitic distortion of the dovin basal desensitizes the nerve clusters immediately adjacent to it. In war-ships or on any vessel where it's important to have a complete tactile net, the Vong compensate by implanting special nerve biots around the dovin basals that aren't confused by the gravitic anomaly. In transports like this, such a small vulnerability isn't worth the effort of amending.'

Leafth switched his scratching to his chin. 'So there's a dead spot where we can breach the hull without them noticing. Great. What's that mean?'

'It means the boss really has gone out of his m-' Vega began, then caught Uldir's glare. '-gone out of his way to really think this plan through,' she finished.

'So I have,' Uldir said. 'Here's what I have in mind. Vook? Are you listening? You're important to this.'

Vook watched the Yuuzhan Vong vessel edging nearer. He keyed on the comlink.

'I warned you!'" He snapped. 'Come no closer.'

'The holy and terrible Yun Yuuzhan and all the gods know you will never be in a position to command me," Vintul Qat informed him.

Something hit the _No__Luck Required, then,_ hard. Vook cursed in Duro.

'Perhaps without your sensor grid you did not notice our escort," The Yuuzhan Vong commander said.

Vook allowed himself a thin smile. 'Perhaps in your arrogance you did not notice that my ship is fully functional.'

He flipped on the shields, launched a spread of concussion mis-siles, and kicked in the ion drive. 'Uvee," he told the astromech droid, where it was patched into turbolaser, 'Destroy those coralskippers. I will handle the transport.'

Affirmative, the droid's reply scrolled across the translator.

'This is foolish," Vintul Cat warned. 'What can you hope to accomplish?'

'Wouldn't you like to know," Vook said, under his breath. But over the comlink he shouted, 'For Duro! Death to the Yuuzhan Vong!'

'It's started," Uldir said, pointing to the sudden flashes of light across

the interstellar night. 'Klin-Fa-if you please, before they start maneuvering. We don't want to be standing next to the dovin basal when they turn it on."

'Got it." The Jedi's yellow blade strobed into existence and she began quickly hacking at the yorik coral hull they had tethered them-selves to. Leafth pulled at the chunks as she cut them loose, sending them drifting off into space.

It took only minutes before Uldir felt the gentle pressure of atmosphere blowing out of the hole. A moment later it was large enough for them to enter.

Uldir stuck his head in.

Like the outside of the ship, the inside had the grown, organic look that came from actually being grown and organic. The walls glowed a pale yellowish green, though even as he watched the light began to fade as the absolute chill of space killed whatever creature created the luminescence.

Uldir pulled himself quickly through. 'Hurry," he said. 'They might not notice the hull breach, but pretty soon they'll figure out they're losing air."

'They'll put it down to a laser strike," Klin-Fa said.

'I hope we aren't counting on that," Vega grumbled.

Pseudo-gravity pulled Uldir to the deck, which-though biotic--was already frozen harder than most metals. He saw that they stood in a long corridor that followed the curve of the outer hull. In either direction, membranes were dilating to close off the breached section.

He picked the nearest seal, only about three meters away, but before he could reach it, it had completed its job.

'What now?" Leaft grunted.

'I can cut it," Klin-Fa said.

'Right," Vega drawled. "Then the next section decompresses and seals off, we cut through that, and the next section decompresses-no, they'll never guess we're coming."

'Watch and learn," the Jedi said. With the tip of her weapon, she cut a narrow horizontal line through the emergency bulkhead. Then she stepped forward and pushed through the flexible membrane.

'Hurry," she said.

Uldir went through last, and found it difficult, for the slit was now only

half the size as when Klin-Fa cut it.

'It's alive, remember?'" She said. 'It heals quickly. No more decompression. They won't know we're here until we're nearly to our destinations. Maybe not even then, if they're really distracted by the battle outside.'

Uldir noticed the barometer on his wrist array registered breathable pressure. He pushed up the visor on his pressure suit mask. The others did the same.

'Which way, Klin-Fa?'

She gestured up the corridor. 'This way.'

Now that they had opened their visors, Uldir could smell the ship. It wasn't unpleasant, exactly-a faint musk with hints of iodine and sulfur compounds. The bioluminescent whatever's were still alive in this section, and though it provided them enough light to navigate, the dimness was unsettling. Too many shadows, and in every one Uldir imagined a Yuuzhan Vong warrior bristling with weapons. But none of the shadows moved, and the corridor was silent save for the faint swish of clothing and shush of breath. Even their footfalls were silent, for the deck here-also still alive-flexed faintly beneath their feet.

Klin-Fa passed several small corridors, and then stopped at a larger one.

'This leads to the auxiliary passage," she said. 'Follow it until you reach a large, straight corridor. You can follow that up to their bridge."

'Which way when we get there?"

'Right. I think."

'You think?" Uldir said.

'Hey, I've gotten us this far."

'Right," he sighed. 'Okay. Vega, you go with her to find the prisoners."

'See, this is another part of the plan I don't like," Vega said. 'The whole splitting-up part where I have to trust my back to our oh-so--dependable Jedi pal here. Why don't we just all take the bridge and then worry about the prisoners?"

'Because the guards will kill them once they know they ship has been taken, that's why," Klin-Fa shot back. 'Besides, the prisoners can help us fight. Especially Bey-he's a Jedi too, remember?"

'Yes," Uldir said, 'An unarmed one, fighting enemies who don't exist in the Force."

'Boss-boy, you for this plan or not?' Vega asked. 'I take orders from you, not from her.'

'No, she's right. They will probably execute the captives once we've taken the bridge-if not before.'

'If we take it, as opposed to standing here all day wagging mandibles,' Leaf said.

'Right,' Uldir said. 'Come on, Leaf. Good luck, you two.'

'Wait a moment,' Klin-Fa said. 'A word alone with you, captain?'

Uldir noticed Vega raising an eyebrow.

'What about?' He asked.

'Alone?'

'You can trust everyone here,' Uldir replied. 'I do. Just say what-ever it is you wanted to say.'

Klin-Fa sighed and stepped closer. 'Okay. If that's the way you want it. I just wanted to thank you for trusting me, that's all. Whatever happens.'

She was very near. All he could see were her eyes. He could feel her breath on his face, and something went funny in his chest.

And then she kissed him. It was just a brush on the lips, but it nearly knocked him off his feet.

Then she spun on her heel and started down the corridor.

'Brother,' Vega said, her voice registering a mixture of impatience and disgust. She followed the Jedi, shaking her head.

'Hey...' Uldir began, but the two women had turned and were out of sight.

'That's one of the single most sickening things I've ever wit-nessed,' Leafth said. 'Thanks for ruining the rest of my day.' He shud-dered. 'Humans.'

'Hey, I didn't do anything!' Uldir protested.

'Right. You just stood there and took it.'

Uldir scratched his head. 'Yeah. I did, didn't I?'

'Come on,' Leafth growled. 'Now I really want to kill something.'

This corridor was as empty and silent as the last, save for the occasional distant thud that testified that Vook and Uvee were still out there shooting. He hoped the Duro was okay; he and Uvee should be able to handle four coralskippers, and the transport's defenses were probably too slow to nail him. Still, so many things could go wrong...

The corridor took a hard turn to the left, just as Klin-Fa had said it would. The lack of guards and personnel were really starting to make Uldir nervous-he kept reminding himself that this was just a trans-port, and like his father's freighter, didn't need a large crew. Besides, the Yuuzhan Vong had spread themselves pretty thin in the last few months. Though they were technically at peace with the New Republic, they still had to control the planets they had taken-and they had taken a lot of planets. And if Klin-Fa was right, and they were gearing up for a military strike-shoot, maybe there weren't any war-riors on this vessel at all.

He was just thinking that as he emerged into the auxiliary corridor and saw a Yuuzhan Vong. He never even got a chance to see what caste he-or she-was; Leaft snapped off shots from all three of his blasters nearly simultaneously, and the Vong went down, smoking.

"That might not have been a warrior, Leaft," Uldir said.

The Dug looked at him as if he had just suggested a nudist colony on Heth.

'Boss-I don't care," Leaft said. 'It's four of us against a whole ship. We

stop to ask questions, we'll be alight meal for one of their ugly gods."

"True," Uldir said. "Still-"

He was interrupted by the whirr of thudbugs. Two Yuuzhan Vong--clearly warriors by their tattoos and facial mutilations--had just stepped from somewhere in front of them and released the deadly insect-weapons. Uldir turned sideways and fired his blaster. Leaf joined him, filling the corridor with a web of coherent light. One of the thud bugs struck Uldir a blow in the shoulder, but it was already carbonized and didn't hurt to speak of. The warriors rushed forward, raising amphistaffs. Blaster bolts sparked and ricocheted from Vondun crab armor, but the warriors weren't wearing masks. Uldir walked his blasts up the front of the lead Vong until he came to the face. Leaf hit both knee joints of the other, sending him stumbling. He didn't fall, though, but kept coming, jerking his amphistaff up in an arc, then swinging down in a blow that would crush even Leaf's hard skull. Leaf coolly fired at point-blank range into the armpit thus exposed. Experience had taught that that was the most vulnerable point in such armor, and experience did not let the Dug down. The warrior collapsed, his weapon clattering away harmlessly. Leaf hopped up on the fallen body and whirled the blaster around his finger.

"Nice shooting," Uldir said.

"There's plenty more where that came from," the Dug said.

"That's good, because there's plenty more of them," Uldir noticed, firing down the corridor at another five warriors charging toward them.

'Good!' The Dug roared, and was suddenly off, holstering the blaster in his foot-hand and firing with the other two as he propelled himself along. Uldir followed more slowly, picking his shots, wishing the Dug had just a little more common sense and discipline.

A thudbug was suddenly right in his face. He jerked to dodge, and almost did, but it grazed his forehead. Blood exploded from the wound, and he cursed, his shots going a wild as blood blinded his left eye and his depth perception was suddenly grossly impaired. Ahead, Leaf and the warriors were in hand-to-hand range; the Dug was bouncing in and around three of them. As Uldir watched, he leaped high over an arcing amphistaff and the head of its wielder, sending a blaster bolt straight down through the crown of the Yuuzhan Vong's skull, whooping as if completely mad.

The other two were still coming for Uldir. Trying to wipe blood from his eye, he nailed one in the head, but the other threw a thud-bug. Uldir tried to shoot it but managed only to interpose the gun between the insect and himself. It struck the blaster and sent it skit-tering down the corridor. Howling in satisfaction, the warrior followed up, amphistaff held at the ready.

Uldir blinked once at the heavily armored warrior, then ran as fast as he

could after his weapon.

The amphistaff relaxed, whipped out, wrapped around one of his ankles, and yanked Uldir off his feet. He went down, face and belly slapping into the deck. Stunned, he clawed at the organic surface, but a viselike grip closed on his neck and lifted him off of the floor, turning him. He kicked feebly at the air as the Yuuzhan Vong warrior's face came into view.

'Pray to your infidel Force," the warrior growled.

Over the warrior's shoulder, Uldir saw Leafthorn was still busy. Blaster bolts were flying, and the Dug was a small cyclone, but there he still had two enemies left. No help was coming from that quarter.

'Put me down, now, and you might walk away from this alive," Uldir advised.

The warrior's eyes widened. He laughed harshly, and then began to close the space between his fingers. The only thing stopping him was Uldir's neck, which didn't seem to be much of an impediment. Uldir wrenched at the Yuuzhan Vong's massive hands, to no avail.

Or so he thought. But as the universe faded to black, the pressure suddenly let up. The warrior set him almost gently back on his feet, and then slowly toppled over. Uldir fell with him, noticing almost absently that the Yuuzhan Vong no longer had a head.

Leaf was bouncing down the corridor toward him, his remaining opponents prone and still. Uldir shook his head and stood groggily.

'You okay, Boss?' Leaf asked.

'Yeah. Thanks for the assist.'

The Dug cocked his head. 'What? What do you mean?'

'That one almost had me,' he explained, gesturing at the head-less warrior.

'Looks like you took pretty good care of him,' Leaf observed.

Uldir frowned. 'You didn't shoot?'

'Urr? Negative, captain.'

That's when Uldir noticed the hole in the ceiling, and a corresponding charred area on the deck. A moment before the Yuuzhan Vong's head would have been on the line drawn between those points. Leaf followed his gaze.

'Vook must have gotten a shot through the hull,' Uldir murmured. 'He wasn't supposed to fire at the transport.'

'You're kidding,' Leaf said.

'It's the only thing I can think of.'

'No.' Leafth said. 'Not in my universe. That's the craziest thing I ever heard of, even with your luck. I mean, I know he was the enemy, but that's just not fair.'

'Well, it's not like I had anything to do with it,' Uldir grunted, retrieving his blaster. Even as he said it, he had an uneasy, prickling feeling. His luck had always been strange and was frequently unlikely. Most people figured it had some thing to do with his Jedi training, but Uldir knew that couldn't be the case-he hadn't ever been able to lift even a pebble with the Force.

Still, he had to admit Leafth was right-this was ridiculous.

And not something he had the leisure to ponder, anymore than he had the spare time to think about Klin-Fa's lips on his, and those eyes, so near his own . . .

No pondering.

'Come on,' he said, 'We've got work to do. That must be com-mand and control up ahead.'

Vook flinched as the blast he had intended for a coralskipper went wide,

bending at a sharp angle as it passed near one of the small singularities the vessels generated to protect themselves, and punched through the transport's outer hull. He'd been trying to avoid actually damaging the vitals of the transport, since the others were aboard it. He took comfort in the statistical knowledge that the odds against one stray bolt hitting one of his friends were about the same as the blue-white star below him going nova in the next two minutes.

But he didn't have too long to dwell on the improbable. He'd sent one of the four coralskippers whirling off to the Cenotaph of Joor, but the other three were still coming strong.

So was he, though. The controls felt good beneath his hands, and he realized he hadn't flown enough lately. Flying made him feel good, yet he had been deferring that duty to others, wrapping him-self in his role of ship's mechanic.

Why?

He rolled the ship and hit reverse thrusters. One of the coralskip-pers trailing him came so close to his hull that it sang with magnetic resonance. He pulled some distance, fired a concussion missile, and cut in the forward lasers. Voids appeared, sucking the light into noth-ingness-then the slower missile caught up. A void appeared to gob-ble it, too-and the warhead promptly exploded, as it was pro-grammed to do. The coralskipper made a

dramatic and involuntary course change when the shockwave slapped it, and Vook fired the laser again. This time one of the beams sliced through, so that for a moment the irregular craft looked like a grilled_urt_ on a charspit.

"That's for my uncleTyro," he muttered. He swung the ship around. 'Come on, you two," he said. 'I have plenty of dead relatives left."

The 'door" to the bridge was dilated shut, but Leafth sliced it with his vibrodagger and hurled himself through the opening, blasting. They found two warriors on the other side-one sat beneath a cognition hood, obviously piloting the ship. The other was waiting for them by the door. He slashed at Leafth as the Dug rolled by, saw Uldir, and tried to hit him with the reverse end of the staff. Uldir shot him twice in the armpit. The Vong staggered back, looking offended, then started toward Uldir again.

Four bolts hit him at once, and he crashed, snarling, into the bulkhead.

The second warrior-the pilot-ripped off the hood and reached for his staff. He found himself confronting Leafth. The Dug was bal-anced on one foot-hand and had three blasters aimed at him.

'Do it," Leafth said. 'Please."

The warrior jerked up the staff and whir!ed it over his head, slicing through the cognition hood as he stabbed the sharp-headed end toward Leafth.

Leaf's blasters whined in unison.

'Leaf, watch the door," Uldir said, after checking to make certain neither warrior would ever rise again.

'Got it, boss."

He keyed on his comlink. 'Vega? What's happening?"

'No problem, boss-boy," the Corellian's tinny voice assured him. 'Not a scratch on the prisoners. Well, none dead anyway-you know how the Yuuzhan Vong treat their guests."

'That other Jed i there? Bey?"

'Our favorite girl is looking for him. No luck, so far."

'That's not good:'

'No, I'd say not. But I'm sure you're hopeful. I assume you've taken the bridge?"

'I'm master of all I survey," Uldir replied. 'Keep looking. And keep your eyes open. I think we got all the warriors up here, but this ship may hold a

few surprises yet."

'No doubt."

He changed frequencies and hailed the _No__Luck Required._ 'Vook?"

'Yes, sir."

'Are you busy?"

'No, sir. I finished off the last of the coralskippers a few moments ago. I assume you command the enemy vessel, as it has ceased fire."

'Yep, we've got the bridge. Good work, Vook. I knew you could do it"

'Thank you sir. It was a pleasure." There was a slight pause. 'Sir?"

'Yes?"

'Thank you. For the opportunity-and the advice."

'Any time, Vook."

'And sir?"

'Yes?"

'I'm sure you've noticed this and are working to correct-'

'What is it, Vook?'

'You might want to change your course. The transport is accelerating toward the black hole. You have plenty of time-15.02 minutes-but the sooner the better.'

'Oh, that's-thanks, Vook.'

'Did I hear something about a black hole?' Leafth asked, from the doorway.

Uldir stepped over the body of the pilot. 'Yes. The pilot must have aimed us at it. Leafth, what do you know about flying Yuuzhan Vong ships?'

'No more than you, probably. They link to their ships telepathically, with those hoods.'

'Is there any back-up system that you know of? Manual controls?'

'If there is, I've never heard about it. Why?'

Uldir lifted the remains of the hood the pilot had been wearing. It was sheared more or less in half, and the cable-or nerve cord, he supposed-had

been cut as well. Yellowish ooze leaked from both ends of the severed connection.

'Because if there isn't, we may be in a bit of a situation.'

'Nah. Let it fall-one less Vong ship is a good thing. We'll go back to the_No Luck.'_

Uldir tapped his comlink on. 'Vega, you there?'

'Of course I am. It's a party down here. We found the Jedi, too. He's in some sort of coma.'

'That's good. That you found him, I mean. I don't mean I'm glad he's in a coma-'

'Boss-boy, you sound like an idiot. What's the matter? You think this guy is competition for your suave good looks and smooth talking?'

'Vega, get serious for a second and tell me how many captives you have there.'

'Looks like around two hundred. Why?'

'That's about a hundred and eighty more than we can get aboard the_No Luck Required.'_

'Yes, surprisingly, I knew that," Vega replied. 'I thought our plan was to capture this ship and use it to get the captives to safe space."

'Right. It was." He rubbed his forehead. 'Why can nothing ever be simple?"

'I think you're pretty simple sometimes, boss," Vega said, sweetly. 'What's the trouble?"

'Nothing much. We're just falling into a black hole."

'We're what-"

Uldir cut her off, switched back to Vook.

'Vook? We have a small problem. We can't fly this thing. I need you to figure out if the_No Luck_ has the power to tow us. And I need you to figure this out quickly."

'Yes, sir. I think we-oh, no."

'Vook?"

'Sir, I may have a problem too. A Yuuzhan Vong ship just arrived." There was a moment of silence.

'Yes," Vook said after the pause. 'Definitely a problem. It's firing on me."

Tsaa Qalu allowed himself a grimace of pleasure as he turned his weapons on the transport. He had hunted often since entering the infidel galaxy, but never had there been a hunt like this. It was clear Yun Harla favored him.

The infidel began returning fire. That was even better, for helpless prey brought no glory.

And this hunt would bring him much glory, if it continued to go as he anticipated.

His smile vanished. Kills were counted after the battle, not before. A confident hunter was a stupid one, and Tsaa Qalu was not stupid.

VI: Emissary of the Void

'I ALWAYS FIGURED I WOULD SEE what killed me," Leaf said, scratching behind one ear with his right foot-hand.

'Well," Uldir said, absently, 'you can see where it isn't._ "

Leaf snorted. 'Human word games," he said. 'We not only won't see anything, we won't feel anything. No way for a warrior to go. My mother

always said I would come to a bad end, hanging around with humans."

"Well, nobody twisted your leg. Anyway, you were already destined for a bad end, no matter what company you kept." Uldir shrugged. "If it's any consolation, nobody knows exactly what you feel when you cross the singularity of a black hole. It might be extremely painful when every atom in your body collapses into neutrons. And since time virtually stops, it could last a really long time."

"You're trying to cheer me up."

"No, what I'm doing is trying to think of a way to keep it from happening at all, Leaft. There are over two hundred people on this ship. Maybe you should stop worrying about whether this is a worthy death for you and start-

He turned at a sound behind him, raising his blaster. After all, they were on an enemy vessel. He thought they had accounted for all of the crew, but with the Yuuzhan Vong you never knew. The ship, like all of their tools, was a living organism. It probably had weird pockets and chambers everywhere that they hadn't noticed.

But the woman shrugging through the shredded biolock of the slave transport's bridge was not Yuuzhan Vong; she was a short Corellian with platinum hair, a diamond-cutting gaze, and a blaster rifle.

'Hi, Vega,' Uldir said. 'Good work down there.'

'Good work yourself. Explain to me again how we're falling into a black hole?'

'The pilot aimed us at it, then attacked Leaf. Leaf had to kill him.' He gestured at one of the three mutilated bodies on the floor. The scars and mutilations were old ones - the Yuuzhan Vong cut themselves up as a sign of rank. What had killed the pilot were the three blaster bolts the Dug had put in him.

'So un-aim it,' Vega recommended. 'Change course.'

Someone else was coming through the ruined portal behind Vega - a young woman with dark hair with bangs. Half-supported on her shoulder was a tall human male with a shock of red hair and emerald eyes. Uldir knew the woman - she was a Jedi, Klin-Fa Gi, and she was directly responsible for the mission that had led them to their present situation. He didn't know the man, but from the way he and Klin-Fa were so chummy, he figured it was the Jedi they had come here to rescue.

'The pilot destroyed the cognition hood, too,' he explained, trying to ignore the sudden sinking feeling in his belly.

Vega's brow folded. 'There aren't any manual controls?'

'None that I know of. If you see any, be sure and let me know, though.' He turned to a Jedi. Klin-Fa, you've had a little more experience with Vong ships. What do you think?"

'The Yuuzhan Vong aren't much for back-up systems," she said.

'Probably think it's cowardly thinking, or some such idiocy," Vega snorted.

'How about we get a tow? Vook's still out there with the _No Luck Required._ He should have enough power to divert us from this suicide course."

'Yes, although with the gravity well that thing has, that window is rapidly closing. Unfortunately, it's not an option now - he's under attack."

'I thought he took care of all the coralskippers," Vega said.

Uldir shrugged. 'Something else showed up. I'm not sure what, he didn't really have time to talk. But unless he beats them in the next ten minutes, we're on our own."

Tsaa Qalu snarled with satisfaction as he put his ship into a roll and prodded the plasma nacelles to disgorge. Red gobbets leapt out toward the infidel ship, _No Luck Required._

'This pilot is quite good," he said. 'He knows our ways."

'He is an infidel, sir," his subordinate reminded him.

'You deny his piloting skills, Laph Rapuun?" Tsaa Qalu grunted, as the dim was suddenly banded by viridian laser fire. That was no worry, the_Throat Slasher_ defensive voids should stop them all, but something didn't smell right.

A hunter lived by instinct. He yawed hard to upper port.

The cognition hood through which he flew the_Throat Slasher_ made the ship seem as his own body, so when he changed direction violently he felt something akin to a twisted ankle. At the same time, he felt the surge of g-forces as the dovin basal taxed itself, unable to cancel all of the momentum from such an abrupt shift.

But it was a good move. Distracted by the laser barrage, he hadn't noticed the concussion missile falling in a long parabola from another quadrant. The infidel must have released it much earlier in the battle, instructing it in this delayed maneuver. Even with his sudden course change, the detonation was almost too close. The blow briefly stunned the Slasher, sending it off in a flat spin. Slices of enemy light followed him, nipping off cubic meters of yorik coral hull before he regained control.

'Well, Rapuung?" he sneered. 'Only the instincts given me by the gods saved us from that. Still you question his skill?"

'It is his machine, sir, not him.'

'Bah. Their machines are lifeless and vulgar. Do you truly suggest that a_machine_ nearly killed us? You would prefer_that_ explanation to the simple acceptance that some infidel pilots have superior skill?'

'That is heresy, sir.'

'It is_not,_ ' Tsaa Qalu roared. 'It is truth. Truth is essential to a hunter, Rapuung. If you underestimate the prey because you lie to yourself, you will become prey yourself. The infidels are corrupt, yes, and most are weak. But some are worthy, as they have proven time and time again. It is utterly foolish to say otherwise.'

'But the priests-'

'The_priests._ ' Tsaa Qalu spat the word out as if it were poison.

He had the_No Luck Required_ beneath his talons again. He gnashed his teeth and fired. This time a red flare of evaporating metal told him he had pierced the enemy shields.

'He may be a good pilot,' Laph Rapuung conceded. 'But he cannot match you.'

'Of course not. I am a hunter, chosen by the god for the cloak of the_nuun._

"

'And now you will destroy him."

'Soon."

The villip before him chose that moment to configure into the face of Viith Yalu, the master Shaper on Wayland, the planet where this hunt had begun.

'Tsaa Qalu!" The Shaper demanded, as the villip tried to imitate the writhing tendrils of his headdress and thus convey the Master's agitation.

'Yes, Master Shaper."

'If you are not alone, send your subordinates away. I have something to discuss with you." There was something deeply grudging in his voice.

'I am in the middle of battle."

'Break off immediately, in that case. I must speak to you_now._ "

'Very well," Qalu said, trying to keep his own rancor from showing. He changed the vector to take him farther from the infidel, firing a few parting shots. The ship did not follow but instead moved back toward the doomed slave transport.

'Leave us, Laph Rapuung," he said.

Uldir watched waxing nothingness with a growing sense of helplessness.

'Any ideas, people?" He asked. 'Speak up."

'There is a possibility," the red-haired croaked. They were the first words he had spoken.

'I'm sorry," Uldir said. 'You are...?"

Knowing full well whom it must be, the way he and Klin-Fa were playing cozy.

'Bey Gandan. A Jedi, like Klin-Fa."

Right. 'Y"ou know some way to fly this ship?"

'I think so." He said. He winced and closed his eyes for a moment.

'Well, don't keep us in suspense," Vega said.

'He's hurt," Klin-Fa snapped. 'Can't you see that? Give him a minute."

Nope. Uldir thought, _I do not like this guy._ He looked frankly at Bey. 'No

offense, but I thought you were in a coma," he said.

'He was," Klin-Fa explained. 'I snapped him out of it with the Force. Do you want to survive, Uldir?"

'Please," Bey said. 'Don't argue. I may pass out again, and I have to tell you this while I'm still coherent."

'Let him talk, Boss," Vega said. 'It can't hurt at this point."

'Go on," Uldir said, vaguely ashamed of his attitude. But this guy had been rubbin him the wrong way_before_ they met, and now...

'The coralskippers also have cognition hoods," Bey said. 'They're linked, networked with the central control of this ship. If there's still a `skip on board, you ought to be able to pilot the transport from there-remotely, so to speak."

'That's stupid," Leafth snapped. 'Any coralskipper pilot can take over the ship any time?"

Bey shook his head. 'No, not if someone is under the central hood. But if it's out of commission, then yes, I believe so."

'Urr." Leafth bared his teeth. 'And how is it you know so much about piloting Vong ships?"

'I've been their captive for a while," Bey said, mildly. 'And I'm still only guessing. But I think it's the best shot that you've got."

'It's worth a try," Uldir had to admit.

'Where are the `skipper bays?" Vega asked. 'I'll do it."

'They should be along the outer hull access corridor," Klin-Fa said. 'Go back to the axial corridor and take any major artery away from the center."

'Fine," Vega said. 'Wish me luck." She turned to leave.

'No," Leafth growled. ' _I'll_ try it. And if it doesn't work..."

'If it doesn't work, you'll think uncharitable thoughts for a few seconds, at best," Klin-Fa said.

'Don't tempt me, Jedi," Leafth returned, glaring.

Klin-Fa returned the angry stare dispassionately.

'Go, Leafth, if you're going," Uldir said. 'And may the Force be with you."

Leafth rolled his eyes and without another word loped out of the chamber.

'Are you sure it's wise to entrust him with this?" Klin-Fa asked, once the Dug was out of earshot.

Uldir studied the young Jedi. He noticed she was gripping Bey, almost as if she was afraid he might leave her again.

'You think you can fly better than Leaf?" He asked.

'No. But I think you can. And his anger-

'The Yuuzhan Vong are pretty angry," Uldir said. 'I don't think that will confuse this ship any."

'Six minutes, boss-boy," Vega said. 'Then it doesn't matter_who_ is flyin the ship-we'll be too deep in the gravity well to ever climb ou."

Uldir nodded and returned his gaze to the transparency. Leaf had been right-hey couldn't see the black hole and they never would. But as he'd said, you could see where it wasn't-a corona of luminescent gas and iron particles surrounded it in a bluish nimbus. It looked like the pupil of a giant large enough to swallow a star system.

He noticed Vega had edged a little closer. 'You think he can do it?" she whispered.

It sounded weird, coming from Vega. Vega never flinched. He had never imagined she even gave death a second thought. But then-like Leafth-she was used to facing down danger with a blaster. It was different to falling helplessly into nothingness. It was why he'd let Leafth be the one to make the attempt-another few seconds and the Dug would have made his own.

Leafth snarled and spat to himself as he ran through the living corridors of the Yuuzhan Vong ship. His anger beat in him like one of the old_Y'sd_ drums of the thorp elders, like an ancient Gran-killing song. Like sonic boom after sonic boom.

The boss had gone mad; there was no doubt about that. As revolting as the human female was, she had still managed to drive him mad-whether the cause was pheromones or the so-called Force, he did not know. And Vega, she was acting stupid too, like someone had taken her wilf-skimmer. If she wanted the boss, why didn't she just puff out her skin and_take_ him? She was strong enough.

Not that Leafth ever,_ever_ wanted to see a human female_or_ male puff out their skin.

Of course, they didn't do that, did they? No inflating for them. No decent, straightforward announcement of a desire to mate. Instead, they drove each other crazy wit words and then pulled idiotic stunts to impress one another. It was as if nature had turned on humans, favoring procreation of the

foolish over selection of the fittest.

And, yes, maybe there was some sort of threat to the galaxy, or whatever.

Did that justify this kind of behavior?

Even if he managed to pull them out of this-like he had back at Wayland, when he'd thought to go out and hook up the fuel line to that old ship-even if he did that, in under a standard hour they'd been deep in some_other_sarlacc pit, because every human on the ship was swept up in this_mating_frenzy.

He stopped, whipping around. Where were the stupid coral-skippers? He thought he was in the right corridor. They were on the outside of the ship, but there had to be some way in to them from here, some docking mechanism.

He started pounding on the walls. How much time did he have left anyway?

Maybe it wasn't the boss who was stupid. Maybe_he_ was. Maybe he should have gotten better instructions.

"Where are you?" He howled. He bounced farther down the corridor. Nothing.

In sheer frustration, he yanked out his blasters and started firing. Shreds of mycoluminescent bulkhead filled the air, along with a smell like burning meat and seaweed.

Panting, he sank onto his hands. They'd had it.

And then, quite silently, holes opened in the walls, each about a meter wide.

'Don't know what I'm about, eh?'" Leaft snarled. 'I'll show them.'

The holes were the mouths of tubes. Most didn't go very far and ended in opacity-after all, the transport had launched most of its skips to fight the_No Luck Required._ But after a frantic footfall of seconds, he found one that went back into a little grotto. He hastened down it and found something like a cross between the inside of a starfighter and the rotting carcass of a rancor. There was a seat, though, and he hopped in. The cognition hood dangled above him, and he grabbed it and pushed it down over his ears and head.

And it started talking to him. In Yuuzhan Vong.

He felt his ears flatten back. He wanted to yank the thing off, get those voices out of his head, but he had to do this, to prove-

Prove nothing. He was Leaft, a Dug, a warrior. He had nothing to prove. He just had to_do_ this, save the boss, save Vega.

He remembered hearing it was a lot easier to fly one of these things

if you knew the language, but it had been done before without that

knowledge, and by a human. For him it should be no trouble at all. He closed his eyes.

'Fly!' he said. 'Reverse engines!'

Nothing happened, except his legs felt funny and the voice was

growing louder in his head. 'Fly, you stupid thing!'

Nothing.

Frustrated, he stamped his foot.

G-forces smashed him back into the couch, and suddenly he saw stars- and the transport, receding.

That was a start. The wrong start.

'No!' He yelled at the hood. 'Not the 'skip, the transport!'

He fought down panic. The circle of nothingness was very near.

But then he understood. The 'skip wasn't obeying his thoughts-it couldn't

understand them. But it understood his body, his voluntary nerve impulses.

He closed his eyes again, flexed his manipulating digits, and the 'skip went into a spin. He grunted happily. He could control the 'skip. But how to take control of the transport?

"Well," he mused aloud, 'If the 'skip is like my body, what's the transport to me?"

_Another__body?_Right. And that voice. The one trying to talk to him-that would be the coordinating device or whatever they called it.

He focused on the voice, and began talking to it, reaching for it, stretching ...

He touched something, but it slipped away. Biting back another yowl of frustration, he reached again

And got it. Suddenly his body seemed bigger, and he could feel himself pushing, pushing toward the black hole, because the last pilot had left the drive on.

So Leaft needed to push away.

So he did, and agony tore at him. The momentum was too great to simply

check, even with the Yuuzhan Vong gravity drive. It would tear him-the transport-apart.

Of course, he was a pilot-he ought to know he couldn't just reverse his way out of a black hole. So he had to angle, keep going toward the hole but angle, just keep above the event horizon, stay away from where space curved into a perfect circle.

He was panting. At this range, even a small course change was hard. But it was happening, it was happening, but fast enough? He wasn't sure.

The sick thing was, he was starting to enjoy flying the thing. Controls couldn't move a ship like this, couldn't make it respond the way your very muscles would. He felt like he was running down a funnel, already so fast that if he tried to stop he would fall over himself and plunge to where the deepening slope of the funnel became a sheer drop. He had to run so his momentum carried him along the wall of the funnel, not down it. That would be an orbit.

He managed it, his muscles screaming, but it wasn't enough to simply orbit. He had to get away, to go back up to the rim, and over it without all of his limbs tearing from their sockets.

Gravity clenched at him, and he heard the dovin basal's silent scream of protest as they slowed, slowed

And sped up again.

Leafth howled with pain and joy. He howled at the dead star that could not beat him. He howled to live.

And because he had done it.

He relaxed, and his body felt small again. For a long moment he sat there, blinking and confused, because the black hole was still there, larger than ever. The transport wasn't there any more, though. Well, no, there it was, accelerating away ...

'Oh, flupp," Leafth groaned.

His mother had been right, after all.

'He did it!" Vega shouted. 'We're out! We're clear!"

Uldir realized he was shouting, too, and that his fingers had gone to sleep they'd been clenched so tight. He slapped Vega on the back, and in a woozy instant realized it had somehow turned into a hug.

Vega realized it too, and she stepped back, her eyes avoided his. 'Let's not get carried away, huh?"

'Yeah.' He cast a glance at Klin-Fa and Bey. He was sitting down, now, in one of the chair-things, and Klin-Fa stood by herself, her face flushed, relieved-and something else. Again, Uldir felt movement in the Force, something so big even his diminished senses could sense it.

Something_wrong_.

'What was that?' He asked, before he thought better of it.

'What was what?'

'Something in the Force.'

'I didn't feel anything.'

Uldir stared at her for a moment. 'I guess I was wrong,' he mur-mured.

'Must just have been the relief.'

'I thought the ship would pull apart for a while there,' Bey said. 'But I have to admit, your guy did it.'

'He couldn't have managed it off without your help,' Uldir said.

'Thank you.'

The Jedi smiled faintly. 'I hoped it would work. I felt it would.'

'Before this love fest goes to far, we ought to check on Vook," Vega reminded them.

I Oh, right," Uldir pulled out his comlink.

'Vook, you there?"

'Here, captain," Vook promptly replied.

'How's your situation?"

'Not bad. The enemy craft retreated a few moments ago. We've taken only minor damage. I see you got the transport working."

'Yep. Leaft's flying it. Can you meet us? '

'Yes, sir, I have you on scope. Distance-555,892 kilometers."

'I'll have Leaft alter course to meet you."

'Very good, sir."

'Leaft, you copy that?"

But from the Dug's comlink, there was no signal whatever.

'Boss, give it up," Vega said, her voice as soft as it ever got.

Uldir blinked his eyes at the stars. 'It's only been a few hours. He could be anywhere."

'It looks like the coralskipper he was in launched. Boss-Uldir- no way a 'skip had the power to escape the gravity well at that range."

Uldir felt his jaw lock. 'I should have done it."

'That's stupid, and you know it. He got the job done. The same would have probably have happened with any of us, except that if you had done it, it would have left me in charge. That wouldn't be any good at all."

'You did fine when you were in charge back in the Wayland system."

'Maybe, but I hated it. I don't like command."

'Really?" Uldir said, feeling very cold. "Well, neither do I. I like flying. I like the job. But being responsible ..." He gasped, fighting the tears back. 'I am responsible, Vega. I have to be. I'm in charge. I brought us here."

'Leaft was responsible too. He knew that. We all know it. Come on, Boss. Is

this really the first crewmember you've lost? The first friend?"

'No. No. Not by a long shot. I even had to kill one once-at least I thought he was my friend. But that was his choice. Leaft died because of my choices." He swung on her. 'And they've all been wrong, haven't they? Every decision I've made since meeting Klin-Fa Gi has been wrong."

'No."

'What? You've disagreed with me every step of the way."

'Yeah. But you were right, I was wrong. You've been so torn up about Leaft you haven't looked at what the Jedi found on Wayland. It's bad, and we have to stop it. We might not be able to as it is, but if we spend another hour looking for Leaft, that's an hour less we have to do what we can. You want Leaft's death to have meaning? Then quit moping and get us moving."

'To where?"

'Thyferra. They've found a way to destroy bacta-and worse."

Uldir stiffened. 'Right," he said, wearily. 'Let's go. But when this is over-"

'Save that for when it is over, Boss," Vega said.

'Sure." He glanced back at the stellar panorama, where their rotation was bringing the black hole back into view.

'I hope it hurt," he whispered.

'What?"

'He didn't like the thought of going out without feeling it"

She nodded. "That's Leafy."

He turned to go, and noticed that Vega's eyes were catching the light from the control panel. They glistened.

Relieved to be back aboard the *No Luck Required*, Uldir found Bey and Klin-Fa hunched over something that looked like a sphere with short, stumpy tentacles. The tentacles writhed, slightly. On the surface of the sphere itself, odd symbols formed and dissipated.

Klin-Fa looked up. 'Hi," she said, softly. 'Are you okay?"

'I'm fine," Uldir brusquely replied. 'I've laid in a course for Thyferra.

Now tell me why exactly."

'The slave ship?"

'Vook's flying it. He had the same problem Leaft must have had, but he figured out how to correct for it. When we finally raise someone, we'll have them taken off our hands. Now, what have you got there?"

Bey spoke up. 'What the Yuuzhan Vong found on Wayland was a biochemical sequencing of Bacta. At some point the Emperor must have been considering neutralizing it, but his sci-entists never got that far. The Yuuzhan Vong did." He pointed to the screen. 'They've developed an agent, something like a virus. It attacks the alazhi plant bacta is made from."

'It kills it?"

'No, something much more subtle. The virus mimics the active chemicals and bacteria in alazhi and then goes quiescent. Absolutely undetectable, unless you know exactly what to look for. It stays there when it's brewed with kavam to produce bacta. But when the bacta is introduced into a living subject, it activates at a low level. It's a sort of time bomb. A few weeks after bacta treatment, the subject drops dead in a few hours. They've tested it on a wide sampling of species already. There's no cure, and no reversing the process. Once infected, the alazhi plants will pass the virus on genetically. You see what this means?"

Uldir nodded. 'Everyone uses Bacta. We've been using it so long, it's replaced most conventional medicine."

'Exactly. If they had gotten away with this without anyone know-ing, imagine the number of injured who would have been infected.' 'Millions, maybe, if there's a new Yuuzhan Vong offensive,' Uldir said. 'Which the evidence points to,' Vega added.

'Yeah, this isn't good,' Uldir allowed. 'How is this virus being delivered?'

'That's a little fuzzy,' Klin-Fa admitted. 'But from what we've got here, my best guess would be an operative. The virus spreads very quickly. If it was introduced to one of the major alazhi plantations, it would infect the whole planet in days.'

'They might have already done it,' Vega observed.

'They might have,' Klin-Fa conceded, 'but I don't think so. There's s timetable here. It looks like we have about forty hours.'

'We can make Thyferra in thirty,' Uldir said. 'But then we still have o find the agent carrying the virus. Considering the Yuuzhan Vong ability to disguise themselves-it sounds impossible.'

'We start with the largest, most centrally located plantations,' Bey said.

'The only good thing about not being able to sense the Yuuzhan Vong in the Force is that it makes it easier to pick them out when they're disguised.'

It's like they're not there."

'It's worth a try*,'"Uldir said. 'Meanwhile, we get the word out. If we I,
at least they'll know not to use bacta from now on."

'The loss of bacta is going to be a hard blow to recover from, especially in
wartime," Vega observed.

'True," Uldir said. 'So we don't let it happen. We stop them. Keep on the
hyperwave and HoloNet. Let somebody know what's going on. We need help on
this, and if something happens to us, this secret can't die with us."

'Will do, Boss," Vega replied.

'Are you busy?"

Uldir turned from the controls and saw Klin-Fa standing in the entrance to
the bridge. She was just brushing her dark bangs from her eyes, and
something went odd in his chest.

'Where's your friend?" He asked.

'Sleeping. He's still not in very good shape:"

'What happened to him?"

'He's not sure. Something that hurt a lot, that's all he remembers.'

'Well, those are the Yuuzhan Vong we all know and love. `Life is pain.`

Sometimes I think they're right."

'Life is a lot of things," Klin-Fa said. 'Pain is certainly one of them, but it's not the sum of it." Her voice lowered. 'I'm sorry about the Dug.'

'His name was Leafth," Uldir said, more harshly than he meant to. 'And yeah, so am I:"

'It wasn't for nothing."

'Thanks, but that doesn't really help."

'I know. I lost a friend, too." she paused. 'There were three of us, originally. Bey, me, and Yabaley."

'I heard you say that name back on Bonadan. When you killed the Yuuzhan Vong warrior."

'Yes."

'You were angry."

'He was my friend. He...' Her gaze flicked off, as if seeking advice from someone in the corner. 'He was more than a friend, really. The Yuuzhan Vong killed him not long after we were captured. They tor-tured him to death. I felt him die.'

Uldir felt his cheeks grow warm with shame. 'I'm sorry. I knew something...'

'I know what you think. Back on Wayland, you made it clear you thought I had gone over to the dark side.'

Uldir nodded. He had studied at Master Skywalker's Jedi academy but had shown no real talent for the Force. Still, he sometimes has some sensitivity to the Force, and he had an odd sort of luck it was difficult to put down to mere chance.

'I sensed something dark on Wayland,' he said. 'And on Bonadan. I thought it was you.'

'Wayland's seen a lot of the dark side. I felt shadows there too.

Bonadan-well, I think I came close, Uldir. I felt it-the power of the dark side, the attraction of it. I wanted to kill them all. But I stepped away from it. '

'I'm glad to hear that.'

'You helped.'

'I don't see how.'

'You're a decent guy. You may not be strong in the Force, but there are more important things than that. You've got a lot of them. I was starting to go a little crazy. Everywhere I went, everyone I turned ended up being stupid or corrupt or an enemy. You didn't. I-ah-I guess you renewed my faith, or something.'

'I wish that had translated into trust a little earlier on,' Uldir said.

'I'm trying to thank you.'

'I know. I appreciate that. I just-' he pursed his lips angrily. 'Why did you kiss me?'

Her eyes widened, and then she chuckled. 'That sure came from a hidden vector.' She folded her arms across her chest. 'I kissed you because I wanted to.'

'Because I'm a decent guy.'

'Sure.'

He stood up and took a step toward her. She seemed to hug herself harder.

'And what if I kissed you?'

She looked away. 'That's not such a good idea, right now. Bey-'

'Right,' Uldir murmured, turning away.

'If you'll let me explain-'

'We're reverting to realspace,' Uldir said. 'It'll have to wait. And you don't owe me any explanations anyway.'

She was starting to say something else when the stars came back--the stars and more.

'Sithspit!' Klin-Fa gasped.

Uldir didn't say anything--he just punched the ion drive to maximum and put the ship into a spin to avoid the Yuuzhan Vong frigate he was about to smash into. He managed it, barely, but space was thick with ships, laser fire, and plasma trails.

'What's going on?' Vega came rushing in from the back.

'We dropped into the middle of a battle, looks like,' Uldir grunted,

unnecessarily.

'Where are we?'

'The Yag'Dhul system,' he replied, as the ship shuddered under the impact of a plasma projectile. 'I was staging our last jump from here. Looks like the ceasefire has been broken. We're at war with the Vong again.'

'I'd say so,' Vega said, dryly. She shot Klin-Fa a nasty look. 'Move over, sweetness. I need the copilot's seat.'

Klin-Fa moved silently away.

'Work out the last jump, before we get fried,' Uldir said.

'I'm working,' Vega said. 'Yag'Dhul is a complex system. All those moons. At least we don't have the transport to worry about any more.'

'True.' They'd left the transport and the refugees on it in what Uldir hoped was neutral space, fearing they might run into a situation like this.

Well, not like this. What he'd feared was an interdicator or something, not a whole vaping fleet.

Uldir opened up with the forward guns and keyed on the intercom.

'Leaft-'then he stopped cold.

'It's okay boss," Vega said, without looking up. 'I was wondering why he wasn't in the turret too."

But then the turret did begin firing. Not with Leaft's dead-sure accuracy, but a coralskipper exploded in incandescence.

'Who's down there?" Uldir asked.

'That would be me," Klin-Fa's voice came back.

'Good going. Keep it up. Uvee, how are things?"

_Systems deteriorating,_the astromech droid's translator screen read.

'Well, what else is new?" Uldir muttered, just as a Yuuzhan Vong ship swung into view. Upwards of fifty coralskipper detached and started their way.

'Vega?"

'Almost there," she said, distractedly.

The skips fell into several wedges. Uldir began to wonder who the Yuuzhan Vong were fighting exactly-at the moment he didn't see any ships that weren't enemies.

The skips approached firing range.

'Got it, boss. Go."

He went.

Their next reversion was entirely uneventful. They appeared a few hundred thousand clicks from Thyferra-right on the dot in galactic terms.

'There's still no word from Skywalker or anyone else," Vega told him.

'Small wonder. There's a war going on."

Vega shook her head. 'It's more than that. I did manage to get a news summary from the HoloNet. Master Skywalker was ordered arrested. He fled Coruscant and went into hiding."

Uldir whistled. 'I knew Borsk Fey'lya was stupid, but that's really stupid. How does he think the New Republic can possibly win this war without the Jedi?"

'The Yuuzhan Vong promised that if all of the Jedi were delivered to them the war would end, remember?"

'Yeah, right. That's why they're taking Yag'Dhul even as we speak."

A light blipped on the console. 'The Thyferrans are asking what our business in their system is.'

Uldir sighed. 'Tell them. Give them our highest priority clearance code. If that doesn't work, we go in without them. There's no time to lose. The operative is probably already here.'

An hour later they were planetside, in an old building that recalled Imperial architecture. The office they stood in had been opened to the air on two sides, furnished with potted plants and trailing vines and wickerwork furniture not designed for humanoid frames, but the harsh, industrial lines of the structure still peeked through.

'It's quite impossible,' Xeshen Kra was saying, clicking the three fingers of one hand and touching Uldir's shoulder with another. His skin had changed from a light gray to mauve since Uldir's arrival, and while he remembered that signified a shift in emotion, he had no idea what particular emotion mauve signified.

'Our intelligence was stolen directly from the Yuuzhan Vong,' Klin-Fa pointed out. 'They plan to destroy bacta-all of it-and they will if you don't take us seriously.'

The Xeshen Kra didn't blink-he couldn't, for there were no lids on his

bulbous black eyes-but Uldir got that impression, nevertheless.

'And yet how could this scheme be carried out?' Kra asked,mildly. 'We screen off-worlders carefully, and I do not think a Yuuzhan Vong could masquerade as one of us, no matter how clever the disguise.'

"True," Uldir agreed. Their host was a Vratix. His body washook-shaped, his insect-like head set on a long slender neck on the long end of the hook He looked down at Uldir from a height of nearly two meters. His two back limbs were enormously muscular and bent the wrong way-twice. The spiked forelimbs were also twice jointed. 'But Yuuzhan Vong biotechnology-'

_'Might_be able to produce our form, though that is highly doubtful. But we also communicate by scent and touch, and by the mind-to-mind. Could all of this be convincingly duplicated? We would know. Our bacta production is not without security precautions. Saboteurs have come here before.'

"They might be using a Vratix," Vega pointed out. "They could have captured one of your people and brainwashed him."

'Even less likely that we would not notice such a thing. His intentwould be known by the mind-to-mind.'

'But you do have humanoid employees, don't you?'" Uldir persisted.

'Not many. Since we expelled the off-world cartels many yearsago, we have

employed mostly our own people."

"That might actually make it easier," Bey put in. "You're right, the Yuuzhan Vong agent is almost certainly disguised as a humanoid. If there aren't many humanoids working in Bacta production, it makes our job of checking them much simpler."

The Vratix considered that for a moment, continuing to paw Uldir's arm.

"Very well," he said at last. "I still doubt this threat, but it will do little harm to do as you propose."

"Good," Uldir said. "Where should we start?"

Xeshen Kra turned to her assistant, who had a portable database.

"We should check the most recent arrivals first," Vega said. "Anyone who was just hired or has recently returned from off-planet."

The assistant consulted the pad for a moment, then looked up.

"The alazhi fields at Vrelnid are nearby. They are vast, and there are a number of humanoid technicians there. Two have begun work there in the past week." He released Uldir's arm. "We can take my flier," he added. During the flight, Uldir distractedly watched the alternation of jungle and field.

Vega moved near. 'What's wrong?' She asked.

'I don't know. Something seems wrong about this.' 'Such as?'

'If our hypothetical saboteur is already here, his work is already done-the bacta is infected.'

'Right, but maybe not all of it. They can burn the infected fields.' 'True.

It's just ...' He shrugged. 'Just a feeling.'

The fields at Vrelnid were indeed vast, though Uldir wouldn't have really called them fields, just a lower sort of jungle, rambling off from the base of a small mountain range. The processing plant was mod-est, a few buildings outside of a ring-walled Vratix village. Hesaw that the humanoid workers were already assembled near

the landing pad.

'This bio-weapon,' Xeshen Kra asked, as they circled in. 'Do you know the mode of delivery?'

'Not the primary mode, no,' Klin-Fa said. 'It might be in some sort of aerosol container. Once introduced, the plants themselves begin producing it in the form of spores. The spores are not only

airborne but also self-motivated. They'll seek out the chemical signature

of alazhi plants."

'It would spread very quickly, then?'" The Vratix asked.

'Very," Bey said. 'That's why we need to catch the agent before he can begin the introduction."

The flier touched down and its landing ramp extended. The four humans and two Vratix descended to the packed brown earth. Three humans, a Twi'lek, and a Neimoidian watched them approach with puzzled expressions.

'What's this all about?'" One of the humans-a small woman with blond hair asked.

'Yes," the Neimoidian said. 'Why is our time being wasted?'"

'And why the security troops?'" A second human-a sandy-haired man-said. 'We aren't criminals."

'We apologize for the inconvenience," Uldir said, 'but it's necessary. And it won't take long. Klin-Fa? Bey?'"

The two Jedi nodded and stepped forward.

'Really," the Neimoidian said. 'Aren't we even due an explanation?'"

Xeshen Kra waved his hands. "These Jedi believe there is a threat to the bacta. All will be explained in time."

"He's not there," Klin-Fa said, pointing at the man who had just spoken.

Before the words left her mouth, the fellow was already in motion, leaping straight for Uldir's throat, shouting something in the all-too-recognizable Yuuzhan Vong language.

He was fast. Vega was faster. Her blaster rifle came up and whined. Uldir's attacker snarled and staggered as a bolt struck him in the sternum, but he did not stop. Uldir raised his hands to defend himself and tried to step back, but he bumped into Xeshen Kra. A fist slammed into his guard and through it, catching him hard on the side of the jaw. Then the hands were on his head, and he felt his neck twist. He vaguely heard the snap-hiss of a lightsaber, and was suddenly free as the hands and the arms they were attached to fell away. Klin-Fa stood there, her yellow lightsaber held at guard. The man—Yuuzhan Vong, rather—fell to his knees, gaping at the stumps of his arms.

"Infidels," he snarled. "You are too late. The hinges of this fortress are already weak. Our fleet sweeps through it like flame."

"Fleet?" Uldir said. "The fleet we saw back at Yag'Dhul? It's staging for an attack on Thyferra?" He frowned at Klin-Fa. "Then why would they send someone

to poison the bacta?"

"The bacta plague is a Shaper initiative," Klin-Fa said. "Maybe they didn't know about the military invasion-the warriors would plan that. Or maybe it's a back up, in case the fleet is defeated at Yag'Dhul."

The kneeling Yuuzhan Vong collapsed, finally overcome by shock.

"Wait," Uldir said. "That means this guy isn't-"

"Where did Bey go?" Vega asked.

"What?" Uldir swung his head around, looking.

"Oh, no," Klin-Fa said. "Oh, no."

"Vaping Moff's," Uldir said. "It's Bey, isn't it? He's the agent."

"I-the Vong must have done something to him."

"You suspected this?" Vega snarled.

"No-I mean, I knew there was something wrong with him. He kept closed to me.

But sometimes I felt-"

'Something dark," Uldir finished. 'It was him, not you."

She closed her eyes. 'it must be true."

'Question?" Vega asked. 'Why are we still discussing this?"

'You're right. We have to find him, and fast."

'The fields," Klin-Fa said. 'He can't have gone far."

'Split up," Uldir commanded.

Klin-Fa had already started off at a dead run. Uldir chose another direction, but Vega tugged at his sleeve. 'You still trust her?" she asked. 'What if she's just going to help him?"

'Then we're in very deep trouble," Uldir replied. 'Now go. And be careful.

If he is what I think he is-

'Yeah." Vega started off, too.

Leafth woke in a foul mood. His head hurt, his nose itched-and, oh, yes-his limbs were glued to a wall with some kind of goo.

Bloorashjelly, he figured, because that's what the Yuuzhan Vong used to hold captives, and he was clearly still on the Yuuzhan Vong ship.

What had happened to the Boss and the others? Had they been captured? Had they left him here? He yanked at the jelly until his limbs started to spasm, and then tried to quiet himself. It wasn't easy, but he had to think.

He'd been in a coral skipper. He'd been falling into a black hole, and then something had grabbed the 'skip, a counter-force pulling it back-then nothing.

But he didn't think this was the slave transport either. It was another ship; maybe the one Vook had been fighting.

'Where are you cowards?' He shouted at the top of his lungs.

'Where are you, you brave Yuuzhan Vong? I've killed a thousand of your kind and never seen one's face yet-' he took wind for more air, '-because you're always running the other way!'

Then he jerked at the jelly some more.

A few moments later, someone came into the room. He was Yuuzhan Vong, of course. A black web tattoo covered his face, centered on the two holes that passed for a nose. His ears had been sliced into three lobes, and he had three holes in each cheek. He was rangy, almost wiry for a Yuuzhan Vong, and tall.

'Pray," he said, in Basic.

'I'm not religious," Leafth informed him. 'But you ought to take your own advice and ask your mangy, mother-beating coward-gods to have pity on you, because once I'm free of this stuff-"

The Yuuzhan Vong smiled and raised some sort of staff. It spat at Leafth's wrist and ankles, and the stuff holding him suddenly dissolved. With a yowl, Leafth leapt at the Yuuzhan Vong, swinging up for a powerful kick.

But when his hand-feet got there, the enemy wasn't. He'd moved aside, blindingly fast. Or, no, he wasn't there at all. Leafth turned this way and that, snarling.

Then the wall punched him in the head so hard that for an instant he thought that his eyes had been pushed together. He stumbled, and the Yuuzhan Vong was there again, swinging, hitting him in his dorsal diaphragm so he suddenly had hard vacuum in his lungs. A final kick sent him into the wall, where all sorts of things seemed to snap.

Wheezing, Leafth tried feebly to rise.

'_Prey_, not pray, infidel," the Yuuzhan Vong said. 'You are my_prey,_ nothing more. I honored you by giving you the opportunity to attack me. It was clearly more honor than you deserved:"

Leaf tried to retort, but he was still failing to breathe.

'I am Tsaa Qalu, a hunter," the Yuuzhan Vong went on. 'Do you understand? I have tracked you from Wayland. I am still tracking the rest of your pack.'

'Why?'" Leaf managed to cough out.

'Get up. I will show you.'

'I can't. You've broken one of my arms.'

'Ah. Is that so?'" He took a step closer and pointed. 'This one?'

'Yes.'

He kicked it, hard. Leaf screamed what he thought was a suitably loud scream. It wasn't that difficult, since it really was broken.

'Embrace the pain, infidel, for you will never draw breath again without it.'

'Eat mynock dung," Leaf suggested.

'Come.'" The Yuuzhan Vong grasped him by his good arm and yanked him up as if he were made of pfith-thistle. He dragged him from the cell and into a

corridor, hustled him past a couple of coralskipper docks, through a dilating membrane and into another hall. They passed one more door and entered what Leafthorn recognized as a bridge. Another Yuuzhan Vong sat with a cognition hood on his head.

Through a transparency, Leafthorn could see the curve of a large green-and-blue planet.

"Your nestmates are down there," Tsaa Qalu said. "They have with them one who has seen the wisdom and rightness of our ways."

"A traitor? The girl?"

The Yuuzhan Vong dismissed the question with the back of his hand against Leafthorn's face. It stung, but next to his other pains, it was nothing.

"I am speaking, infidel. He has embraced the Truth. The Shapers sent him here to do a thing, a thing that will hasten our victory. I do not know what. I do not care." He snarled and clutched his hands behind his back.

"The Shapers did not bother to inform me of this thing. Two of you invaded our territory on Wayland. I followed, sensing a good hunt. Only when I had your ship in my claws did the Shapers tell me their plan, knowing that I would spoil it by killing you all." He grimaced. "Shapers. They know nothing of honor. They should have given this task to me to carry out, but they prefer to work in secret, to keep things from the other castes and even other Shaper sects so they do not have to share the spoils of battle. Many

are heretics, as well." He shrugged. 'But no matter, the hunt was begun. I merely altered the time of the kill. I had to stop you from plunging the slave-ship into the singularity so that the Shaper agent would not die."

'What are you talking about?" Leaft muttered. 'I saved the trans-port."

His arm was really hurting now. He was starting to worry he might black out.

'A near miracle," Tsaa Qalu said. 'I gave you the knowledge. The Shaper's agent has a small villip implanted in his skull. Through it, I told him what to do. And yet still you almost failed:"

The planet below was growing larger. 'So what now?" Leaft asked, wearily.

'The agent's task is complete," Tsaa Qalu said. 'But he has been dis-covered. So, I will now kill everyone who has learned of the Shaper plan. According to the agent, most such are all in one place. It should not be difficult to track those who remain. We will be there in a few moments."

'Hah. You and this guy are going to beat the boss? Think again."

'I won't fight them hand-to-hand, though that would be glorious. No, I must be efficient and certain. I have weapons that can easily neutralize any sentient in the area. It will be no trouble at all."

'You forgot one thing," Leaft said.

'What's that?'

'You have to kill me first.'

And ignoring the pain, Leaf gathered his three functioning limbs and sprang.

Uldir felt something in the Force: A shadow, but a familiar one. He was certain it was the same dark presence he had sensed several times before. He imagined if he had real Jedi potential it wouldn't be so intangible but like a giant laser display pointing the way. As it was, it gave him only the vaguest sense of direction. Bey could be a meter away, hidden in the undergrowth, or half a kilometer away.

Was it Bey he sensed? The Jedi hadn't been on Bonadan, had he? Well, maybe he had. How long ago had the Yuuzhan Vong broken him?

But the only Jedi he knew for sure had been on Bonadan was Klin-Fa. What if Vega was right? What if they had both gone dark? It made a certain amount of sense-if the Yuuzhan Vong

could break one of them, they could break both.

He heard something up ahead and moved even more cautiously.

The sound was gone, now, though. So was his sense of a dark presence.

Then he heard the hum of a lightsaber igniting, only a few footsteps away.

He whirled and saw Klin-Fa, her face set in grim lines. Her blade cut toward him. With a yelp he dropped and rolled. She flew past, her blade shearing through undergrowth. He came up on one knee, brought his blaster to bear-

-and saw her real target as her amber blade met Bey's crimson one in a shear of sparks. Bey must have been hidden less than an arm's length from Uldir.

He pulled out his comlink with one hand and tried to draw a bead with his blaster with the other.

'Vega, I found him. Hurry!'

Klin-Fa was a whirlwind. Bits of alazhi plants flew everywhere, and her blade was an arcing blur. Bey seemed unconcerned, parrying easily and returning blows that missed Klin-Fa by quantum increments. He was clear for a moment, and Uldir snapped off a shot. The Jedi parried it without even glancing his way, sending the bolt burning off through the underbrush.

'It's too late,' Bey informed them. 'It's already done. The spores were in me. They were released from my pores. It's all around you, now.'

Klin-Fa drew back to a guard position. Uldir could see tears streaming down

her face.

'What did they do to you, Bey? How did they turn you into-this?'

The redheaded Jedi laughed. 'You think the Yuuzhan Vong did this to me?'

'You were their captive for-'

He grinned. 'I was never their captive. You were.'

'What do you mean? We escaped, and then-'

'All part of the plan,' he said. 'Everything that's happened up until now, all planned.'

'I don't understand.'

'Well, I didn't understand you and Yabaley. What did you see in him? I was always stronger, smarter. He didn't deserve you.'

'I loved him.'

'And not me. And in my whole life, that's all I ever really wanted. And I'll never have it, will I? So I'll settle. I'll settle for helping the Yuuzhan Vong burn this all down, and then maybe I'll kill them too. Or maybe I'll rule them.'

'Wow," Uldir said. 'You have the most amazing mental image of yourself. Too bad it has nothing to do with reality."

'You're an insect" Bey sighed. He flipped his hand casually, and a searing pain struck Uldir between the eyes.

'No!" he heard Klin-Fa shout. She leapt at Bey, blade cutting down. Through a fog of pain, Uldir saw Bey parry, and then somehow Klin-Fa's weapon was flipping end-over end through the air. She gasped in pain and clutched at her right hand, which seemed to be missing several fingers. Bey had his weapon cocked for the final cut. Klin-Fa drew her shoulders back and looked him in the eye.

'I admired you once, Bey," she said. 'I thought you were the best of us."

'I am the best of you," he sneered. 'Goodbye, Klin-Fa."

Uldir clutched for his blaster, but it wasn't near his hand.

The blade whipped out, and Uldir choked back a scream of frustration, but the red blade went up in a parry, not an attack, and several blaster bolts went searing off at odd angles.

Vega.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Klin-Fa spun to kick Bey. She connected, and he staggered, turned, and clubbed her in the temple with the butt of his saber. She dropped. Uldir grunted, stood, looking for the blaster, but it was nowhere to be seen.

But a few meters away, smoke was rising.

Klin-Fa's lightsaber. He ran toward it.

He picked it up and turned in time to see Vega go down in a rain of stones and branches propelled by the Force. The bushes were on fire, and he got a lungful of smoke that dizzied him, but he saw that Bey was once more lifting his weapon over the fallen Klin-Fa.

He would never make it in time. He did the only thing he could--he threw the lightsaber.

He watched as it flipped end-over-end toward Bey. Bey held up his hand, and it made a sudden drastic course change, veering high and to the right. Bey started his swing.

'No!' Uldir shouted.

The lightsaber hit a tree by the pommel, bounced weirdly, and sheered through Bey from shoulder to hip. He turned to stare at Uldir in utter

disbelief for an instant before his body slid apart.

Uldir stood there for twenty seconds, trying to absorb what had just happened. Then he ran to see how badly Klin-Fa and Vega were hurt.

Overhead he heard thunder, and looked up. It was a Yuuzhan Vong war vessel, descending like a meteor.

Leaft would have howled with satisfaction if he hadn't been howling in pain.

Tsaa Qalu braced to meet his attack, almost casually, knowing what the outcome would be. But Leaft knew that too. Everyone thought Dugs were stupid, headstrong, emotional-that they couldn't learn.

But he'd learned pretty fast. His leap carried him not toward the Yuuzhan Vong hunter, but to the pilot, and with a single brutal yank he ripped the cognition hood free of its tether and then just ran, back through the door he had come in by. Tsaa Qalu was right behind him, of course, and gaining, when the ship suddenly flipped upside down. The Yuuzhan Vong, with his grotesquely high center of gravity and silly upper limbs landed badly.

Leaft, even with a limb broken, still managed to land better. Of course it hurt, and he nearly blacked out again, but he was up before Qalu, and as the ship continued bucking and jerking about, Leaft's low-built scramble gained him even more ground.

Enough to get into one of the coralskipper, seal it with an order through

the cognition hood, and watch Tsaa Qalu pound on the hull in terrific and entertaining frustration.

Which he should not have done. If Tsaa Qalu had spent that time getting into the other coralskipper, he doubtless would have been better able to seize control of a system which-after all-was built for his chemistry and physiology, not a Dug's.

But before Qalu could think of that, Leaft's borrowed coralskipper shot from the docking nacelle with a jolt. This time he'd launched the 'skip on purpose.

The Dug wasted little time taking control of the_Throat Slasher_ while steering his craft away from the larger ship. A mental image of the fast approaching landscape from the_Throat Slasher's_ point of view coalesced in his mind's eye, and the Dug allowed himself a victorious smirk. He watched from his vantage point a few hundred meters away as Qalu's ship left a nice red smear on the side of a mountain.

'It's good to hear your voice, Master Skywalker," Uldir said.

'Congratulations on the birth of your son."

'Thank you, Uldir," Master Skywalker replied. 'How are things there?'"

'The Vratix can move really fast when they need to. They torched the field and aerosoled the surrounding area with fliers. They're still doing it, even

though worst-case scenario had the virus spreading only half a kilometer during that time. They got a sample of the plague so they can test for it, and it looks like the danger was contained."

'Good. That was good work, Uldir. I'm proud of you and your team. You really went above and beyond the call of duty. And the Force was with you."

'Master, about the Force. I know my training was sort of a bust-"

'The Force is with you, Uldir," Skywalker said. 'You just have a peculiar relationship with it. I missed that, back when you were at the academy, though I think Master Ikrit understood. Recent . . . _debates_ within the Jedi, and the things you've told me lately have forced me to reevaluate."

'I don't understand."

'You don't command the Force, no. You don't use it as a tool. You aren't built that way, somehow. But you are a part of the living Force in a way which few Jedi ever manage to be."

'I don't think there's anything so special about me," Uldir said.

'You thought so when I first met you," Skywalker said. 'You thought the universe of yourself, and mostly _about_ yourself. But you changed." He smiled. 'And that's when your luck started, isn't it? When you let go. When

you .released your desires and found your true path."

'I guess. Master lkrit did say something like that, right before I left the academy."

'He was wise," Skywalker said. "Take that crew of yours and have rest, will you? There are still a few free worlds where you can relax."

'I'll do that," Uldir replied.

'May the Force be with you, Uldir."

'And with you, Master."

He keyed off the hyperwave transmitter and went back to the common room, where the others waited.

He grinned when he saw Leaft with a big air splint on his arm.

The Dug's eyes narrowed. 'You aren't going to kiss me again, are you?"

'I ought to. Not only are you still alive, but you saved us all."

'I'll vomit this time," Leaft warned. 'Do I need to tell you what I just ate?"

'No." He turned to Vega. 'Set us a course for someplace relaxing. Master Skywalker's orders."

'Right, boss-boy."

Vook cleared his throat. 'The abandoned Hxil launch platform in the Sluis Van system would be nice. It has the most beautiful pre-- Republic accelerator towers--"

'An airless piece of space junk?" Leafth snarled. 'What kind of a vacation is that? I say we hit the casinos in Cloud City. That's a good time."

'Boss-boy?" Vega asked.

'You settle it, Vega," he said. 'You're temporarily in charge."

'Boss--"

'Sorry Vega. I need a rest, too."

He found Klin-Fa sitting in the gun turret, staring out into space. Her bandaged hand rested on her knee.

'It wasn't your fault," he said.

'It was, it wasn't," she said. 'I know I have to let it go. But they were my friends. Both of them. And now-"

'I know." He put his hand on her arm. To his surprise, she took it.

'What I was trying to tell you before," she said. 'Before I knew Bey had turned dark."

'I know you had feelings for him," Uldir said.

'Yes. Friendly ones. But I knew my feelings for Yabaley had hurt him. I didn't know how badly, but I knew it. I didn't want to hurt him again so soon."

'What do you mean?"

She stood and stared into his eyes. 'Are you really that big a fool, Uldir Lochet?"

'Well ..."

'Hush." She covered his mouth with her hand, and then with her lips. They stayed that way for a long time.

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