

Star Wars

The Hive

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FOR NICKI, STEVEN AND SHARLEEN CHIYEKO

Happy birthday, kids!

Chapter 1

G'Mai Duris, Regent of the planet Ord Cestus, formally folded the fingers of her primary and secondary hands. She was an X'Ting, of segmented, oval, dull gold body and gentle manner, one of the insectoids who had once ruled this planet. Before the coming of Cestus Cybernetics, X'Ting hives had thronged this world, but now the soulless industrial giant not only dominated the planet but also threatened the safety of the Republic itself.

Obi-Wan Kenobi watched as Duris prepared to address the hive council, the last humble remnant of X'Ting power. Like the offworlder capital of Chikatlik, some hundreds of meters above their heads, the council room was nestled in a natural lava bubble. The walls of the egg-shaped, fifteen-meter-high chamber had been glazed burnt sienna, but most of that original color was covered with handwoven tapestries. Three doorways, each guarded by two members of the X'Ting warrior clans, led out of the room-one to the surface, the others to deeper, less traveled places within the hive.

The twelve councilors seated at the curved stone table were a mix of relatively youthful X'Ting, their carapaces still brilliant, and elders showing gray and white splotches amid their bristling thoracic hair. Their vestigial wings fluttered in distress. From time to time their primary or secondary hands would smooth their ivory ceremonial robes. Every red or green faceted eye studied her carefully; every auditory antenna was tuned to her words.

Duris hunched her thorax and cleared her throat, perhaps gathering her thoughts. She was almost as tall as Obi-Wan, and her broad, segmented, pale gold shell and swollen egg sac gave her considerable gravitas.

At this moment, G'Mai Duris needed every bit of it.

"My peers and elders, " she said. "My dear friend Master Kenobi has told me an astonishing thing. For centuries we have known that our ancestors were cheated out of their land-land purchased with worthless baubles we believed were legal tender.

"For years we had no means of redress, save to accept whatever sops Cestus Cybernetics threw our way. But that has changed. " Her eyes gleamed like cut emeralds. "Master Kenobi brought with him one of Coruscant's finest barristers, a Vippit who knows their laws well. And according to the central authority, if we should choose to press our suit, we can destroy Cestus Cybernetics. If we own the land beneath their factories, we can charge them whatever we wish for land usage, possibly even take the facilities themselves. "

"What? " exclaimed Kosta, the council's eldest member. All X'Ting cycled between the male and female genders every three years, and Kosta was currently female. Although too old for egg bearing, her sac was still swollen to impressive size. She looked shocked. "Is this true? "

"You would do nothing except destroy the planet! " Caiza Quill sputtered. Only minutes earlier Duris had deposed him as head of the council. His rage and surrender pheromones still spiced the air. "Destroy Cestus Cybernetics, and you destroy our economy! "

Kosta's expression bristled with naked contempt for Quill's transparent half-truths. "The hive was here before Cestus Cybernetics. It is not the hive that will suffer if this company changes hands . .

. or even if it dies. It will be those who have sold themselves to offworlders for a promise of power. "

"But my lords, " Duris said, drawing their attention back to her once again. "I have obligations to the offworlders, people who came to Cestus with skills and heart, wanting only to build a life here. We cannot use this opportunity to destroy. We must use it to build, and heal. "

The X'Ting hive council members nodded, perhaps pleased by her empathy. Although she was new to their ranks, they seemed satisfied with her grasp of the responsibilities.

But Quill was in no way mollified by her words. His stubby wings quivered with rage. "You have won nothing, Duris! I will block you, I swear. Regardless of what you think you have, what you think you know . . . this isn't over yet. " He stormed out, humiliated and enraged.

Obi-Wan had watched the proceedings, withholding comment, but now he had to speak. "Can he do that? "

"Perhaps, " Kosta replied. "Any member of the Families can veto any specific business deal. " She was referring to the Five Families, who ran the mines and factories that fed the droid works. Once there had only been four, but Quill had wormed his way into their midst by delivering labor contracts and quelling dissent, selling out his own people in the process. "If he believes it is in his best interest, or just for the sake of hatred, he will try. " An alarming thought seemed to occur to her. "He might try to keep you from sending the Supreme Chancellor this information. Perhaps you should send it immediately. "

Reluctantly, Obi-Wan shook his head. "The Chancellor will use it as legal pretext to shut down Cestus Cybernetics. In that case, no one wins. Your best bet is to use this information as emergency leverage. "

Only days before, Obi-Wan had arrived on Cestus to stop the planet from selling its deadly bio-droids to the Confederacy. By means of a unique "living circuit" design, the droid works had created a machine that could actually anticipate an attacker's moves. Understanding their potential, Count Dooku had ordered thousands of the devices-originally designed for small-scale security work-with every intention of converting them to battle droids.

The thought of such an army, marching in the thousands, chilled Obi-Wan's blood. In the face of such a juggernaut, both the Jedi and the Grand Army of the Republic might fall. The spread of such lethal devices must be stopped at all costs!

The favored means of deterrence was negotiation, but bombardment was not out of the question. Initial contacts had not been promising: Cestus Cybernetics was loath to cease production of such a valuable commodity, and believed Chancellor Palpatine would never order the destruction of a peaceful planet selling a legal product. With the X'Ting as allies, Obi-Wan's assignment would be far simpler.

Over the last days he had gained the trust of G'Mai Duris, Cestus's puppet Regent, and taken the first steps to furnish her with real political authority. If he could win over the hive council, as well, there might be serious cause for optimism.

The council members listened to him speak of politics and finances, swiftly comprehending the reasons it might profit them to side with Coruscant. But after expressing confidence in his assessment, they swiftly changed the subject. "There is another matter to discuss, Master Jedi. "

He glanced at Duris, seeking a clue about the new concern. The Regent turned to face him, moving one portion of her segmented body at a time. Her primary and secondary arms spread, empty palms extended, X'Ting body language indicating confusion. "I know nothing of this, " she said.

Kosta drummed the fingers of her secondary hands against the table. She consulted with the other members of the council, speaking in clicks and pops, and then addressed Obi-Wan. "It is possible, Master Jedi, that you can perform a great service for us this day. "

"In what fashion? " he asked.

Again the council members glanced at one another, as if measuring the wisdom of speech. Then, after a brief conference, Kosta began.

"There is one other way that Quill might hurt us, if he decides that the hive is no longer

deserving of his loyalty. "

That was a possibility. Certainly, Quill's addiction to power and naked self-interest might trigger betrayal.

Obi-Wan felt an emotional charge building in the chamber. He knew that sense: fear of approaching a threshold. The hive council was about to do something that could make the X'Ting deeply vulnerable.

Kosta continued. "What we are about to tell you is known only to members of the council, and to elite members of the hive's warrior clan. Even G'Mai Duris did not know this, although her partner, Filian, did. " She bowed respectfully. "Filian was forced to conceal this knowledge from you, by oath. "

It was clear this revelation was painful to Duris. Until now, she had clung to the illusion that she had known her deceased mate completely. "What is it? "

"There is much about the history of our planet that you could not know, Master Jedi. Much that is not in the fabled archives of Coruscant. "

"Regrettable, but always true, " Obi-Wan said. "Please illuminate. "

"Once, " Kosta explained, "the hive was strong. We had defeated the spider people in a great war, and brought the entire planet under the rule of the hive and our queen, who was wise and just. We believed that it was time for us to enter the galactic community. But this was not merely a matter of gaining political recognition. We coveted the role of trading partner, but what resources might we offer to become so?

"What products could we produce? What minerals might we have? We searched, and found nothing that was not available on worlds nearer the galaxy's central hub. Nothing that would give us the advantage we sought.

"Then we heard a rumor that Coruscant was planning to expand its prison system, and was looking for host worlds on the Rim that might be willing to lease or sell land for such facilities. Land was one thing Cestus had in plenty, and it seemed an admirable opportunity. Overtures were made, and we won a contract. "

She sighed. "At first, all seemed well. Several facilities were constructed, and the scum of the galaxy were safely quartered in reconstructed caverns beneath our sands. "

All of this Obi-Wan knew, of course.

"Once the deal was struck, we swallowed our pride and accepted a position on the Republic's bottom rung. Many of our workers were hired for the mines and factories. We learned to negotiate, so that future leaseings and sales were more favorable. We were paid our rental fees, with which we hired surveyors to more carefully examine our resources with a mind to expanding trade.

"Then something completely unexpected happened. Executives from Cybot Galactica were convicted of fraud and gross negligence and sentenced to prison here. These former beings of power were forced to dig in the depths of the caverns. Some of the work was useful: enlarging their living spaces, building shops and offices. Some of it was mere make-work, the time-honored prison task of turning big rocks into little ones. But during the digging, the executives discovered minerals used in advanced droid fabrication. A treasure, floating unsuspected in the Outer Rim!

"The executives hatched a plan to free themselves. In meetings with the prison authorities, they proposed to make the guards and warden wealthy beyond their dreams. The essence of the proposal was that the pooled talents and contacts of the various prisoners might well create an endless stream of first-class droids. Here on Ord Cestus there was labor aplenty, mountains of raw material, skill, and savvy. They needed only permission.

"The deal was struck, the stage set for the creation of Cestus Cybernetics. The executives put out the word to former customers and employees, and immigration to Ord Cestus began in earnest. The first factory was in operation within a standard year, producing a modest repair droid that received favorable reviews and respectable orders. They were up and running. "

Kosta raised her voice. "But as the fledgling company grew in power and wealth, it came

into conflict with the queen and king. First, managers purchased additional land with worthless synthetic gems. The royals were forced to swallow this humiliation, but they did attempt to negotiate larger shares of wealth for the hive, for the education of our people, for healthcare. "

"Healthcare? "

"A necessity. Since the founding of the prison there had been numerous strange and damaging ailments spreading through our population. The inmates, from every corner of the galaxy, brought countless diseases with them, creating wave after wave of illness. We sickened by the thousands.

"The negotiations were fierce. Our rulers threatened to withhold X'Ting labor and to refuse to allow Cestus Cybernetics to expand its mining operation.

"Then the Great Plague hit us. " Kosta leaned forward, emerald eyes gleaming. "I know that it cannot be proved, but we knew, knew that this plague was no accident. It was unleashed upon us to destroy the royal family, to splinter the hive so that there would be no effective opposition. Perhaps even to exterminate us. "

Obi-Wan flinched at the passion in those words. Was such villainy possible? Foolish to ask: of course it was. Coruscant knew little of what happened on the Outer Rim. And since Cestus Cybernetics controlled the official information stream, any conceivable perfidy might have been concealed.

"And this genocide almost worked. But as the plague swept through the hive, a frantic plan was put into action: to place several healthy eggs in suspended animation and to hide them in a special vault deep below Cestus's surface, where only a chosen few would know the truth, the path, and the method of opening.

"The vault was constructed by Toong'l Security Systems-a company in competition with Cestus Cybernetics, and known to be trustworthy. The workers were blind-shuttled to the site and never knew the location. When it was completed, we knew that whatever happened to the rest of the royals, there would be at least one fertilized egg pair that was safe-royals, who could mate and create a new line. "

Instantly, Obi-Wan grasped the significance. After the plague, the surviving X'Ting had scattered across the surface of Ord Cestus. But a new royal line might draw them back together again, unite them. G'Mai Duris was but Regent, holding the power until the return of a new royal pair. Under her capable hands the power transfer might rejuvenate this unhappy planet. A promising idea!

Obi-Wan organized his thoughts carefully, and then spoke. "So . . .

. with this news about the ownership of the land beneath Cestus Cybernetics, a pair of royals to unite the planet might give you greater voice on Coruscant, and build your people a better future? "

"Yes, " Kosta agreed, eyes sparkling. "There are problems, though. First, the plague was deadlier than we expected. After the royals died, several X'Ting clans chose to stay deep below the surface, to seal off all contact with offworlders. They became almost a separate hive: there has been virtually no contact with those clans for a century. Worse still, every X'Ting who knew the secret of the vault died in the plague. All that remain are keys to open the outer door. Lastly, Toong'l Security Systems was destroyed when its planet was struck by a comet. Its leaders might have told us how to open the vault, but . . . " Kosta made a resigned shrugging motion.

Obi-Wan squinted. "But certainly you can still use other means to retrieve the eggs. "

The old X'Ting female sighed, nervously knotting the fingers of primary and secondary hands. "You don't understand the status of royals. By breeding and culture, every X'Ting must obey them. It is our way, and it is in our blood. Therefore, they are both the greatest treasure, and the greatest threat. An X'Ting royal pair in the hands of Cestus Cybernetics would reduce every X'Ting on this planet to slavery. Rather than have that happen, a tamper detector was built into the vault. We are not certain as to its details, but we have reason to believe that after three unsuccessful attempts to open the chamber, the eggs will be destroyed. "

By the stars! These people had been so desperate?

"So..." he began cautiously. "What service do you wish of me? "

"Twice in the past we tried to regain the precious eggs. Twice our bravest have tried to reach the vault. Twice they perished before they could reach it. " A pause. "There is a story whispered among our people. It is said that a hundred and fifty years ago a visitor came from the center of the galaxy. A warrior with powers beyond any the X'Ting had ever seen. He called himself a Jedi. It is said his courage and wisdom saved our people. I think it no mere coincidence that now, in our hour of need, another Jedi has appeared. "

Obi-Wan felt a thrill of alarm. He had not anticipated such a situation. "Madam, " he said, "it is a great weight you wish me to carry. "

"We believe you capable of withstanding it. "

He had heard no story in the Jedi archives about a visit to Ord Cestus, but it was certainly possible. Many Jedi avoided acclaim; they were capable of stunning feats of valor, followed by such modesty that they might decline even to give their names. "And you fear that Quill, angry with the Regent, might betray these secret eggs to the Five Families. And that they might launch their own effort to recover them, and use them against you. "

"You see our situation, yes. "

He did. Coruscant wanted something: the cessation of droid production. The X'Ting, indeed all beings on this planet, were more or less dependent on a continued income stream from Cestus Cybernetics. Obi-Wan was asking them to side with him, to trust him. He had thought to do this through diplomacy, but providence had given him a means of winning their trust more directly, had he sufficient courage. "I accept your request. I will attempt to recover your eggs, " he said.

Kosta sighed in relief. "You will need a guide. A small cluster of X'Ting warriors have studied the original maps through the deep hive. Originally there were five broodmates. Only one survives. " She turned to the others. "Call Jesson. "

The council members leaned their heads together, touching antennae as they buzzed and clicked in X'Tingian. After a few moments a small male left the table and scuttled off into a side tunnel.

"G'Mai, I am in your hands, " Obi-Wan said quietly. The elders had carried themselves well, but the Regent was the only X'Ting he could claim to know. If anyone here could be relied upon for full disclosure, it was she. "Is there anything else that I should know before setting out on this mission? "

"Jedi, " Duris said. "I know only the whispered rumors about the visit of a Jedi Master. I'd never heard of the royal eggs before this day. "

The council members turned as the small male councilor returned. Behind him, in a gray tunic with a diagonal red stripe, marched a larger male bristling with red thoracic fur. His red, faceted eyes took in the entire room at a glance, scanning Obi-Wan and making an instant, positive threat assessment. The newcomer's primary and secondary arms bore numerous pale scars: this was an experienced warrior, probably a member of some elite hive security unit. A triple-sectioned staff hewn of some clear material lay diagonally across his back.

The newcomer put the palms of his primary and secondary hands together, then spoke in a series of clicks and pops.

Kosta raised her left primary hand. "It is requested that you speak in Basic when in this human's presence. "

The X'Ting soldier turned to regard Obi-Wan. His first scan had taken a fraction of a second. The second took longer, long enough for Obi-Wan to sense the intense disdain in the X'Ting's eyes. "My pardon to our honored guest. My words were: 'First Rank Jesson is present and ready for duty. ' "

"I should go with you, " Duris offered. "This is my job, my planet. If we fail, and Quill betrays us, we are all undone. "

"But you are your people's leader, " Obi-Wan said. "You are needed here. "

Duris protested, but the other council members voted her down. She seemed as distressed as Obi-Wan had ever seen. "You came here as a friend, and helped me more than words can say, " she said, taking his two hands in her four. "I hope that I have not brought you to your death. "

"Jedi are not so easily killed, " he said.

"If you are half the warrior Master Yoda is said to be, you will prevail, " she said.

Jesson's eyes narrowed at that. If Obi-Wan had felt more confident in reading X'Ting facial expressions, he would have said the soldier's dominating mood was one of contempt.

"Well, let us begin. " Obi-Wan turned to his guide. "We descend into the bowels of the planet together, " he said. "Will you tell me your full name? "

"First Rank Jesson Di Blinth, " the other said, and bowed formally. "Of the volcano Di Blinths. "

"Well met, Jesson, " the Jedi replied. "Obi-Wan Kenobi, of Coruscant. Are we ready to leave? "

Jesson conferred swiftly with the other members of the council. Two members touched scent glands at the sides of their neck, and with damp fingers made a series of dots on the table before them. Jesson made moist markings of his own in a similar fashion.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow, and Duris explained: "Much of our information is stored in scents. "

"These contain most of what we currently know or remember about the path, " Kosta said. "No one has taken it in so long . . . "

"I thought you said that four of your number tried, and were slain in the process, " Obi-Wan said.

"Not completely accurate, " Jesson said, studying the tabletop. "The first attempt was through the direct opening to the egg chamber, which buttresses a lava tube. My brother never returned, and we know that defensive mechanisms were triggered. A backup entrance was tried next. My second brother never returned, and the door was jammed. "

"Did you attempt to open it? "

Jesson regarded him with scorn. "Whatever happened there cost the life of a brave warrior. We will not disrespect him by assuming we can succeed where he failed. "

"What, then? "

"There is another way down, through the old tunnels. "

The mention of that word quieted the room for a long moment, and again G'Mai Duris raised an objection. "I should go. Obi-Wan risks his life because of me. "

"Later, perhaps, when you have shifted back to male, " Kosta said, her emerald eyes flashing with compassion. "But now you are not as strong and light as you will be. We cannot risk you. You are our face with the offworlders. "

Duris took Obi-Wan's hands in hers. "Then go with luck, " she said.

Obi-Wan nodded. "The Force is what we will need. " He turned to Jesson. "Well, if it is to be done, it is best done swiftly. "

And together they left the chamber.

Chapter 2

Above them stood Ord Cestus's capital city of ChikatLik, a metropolis of six million citizens built into a natural lava bubble modified by the hive. The bubble's natural gray glaze was a rainbow of reflected colors from the city lights and holoboards. ChikatLik

boasted the architecture of a hundred cultures, was a forest of twisting spires and elevated tramways, airways filled with droid shuttles, taxis, personal transportation and trams of all kinds. The bubble walls concealed a network of transport systems within the ground itself: subways and magrails and lev tracks, technological wonders ferrying workers, executives, ore, and equipment.

But down here, far below Chikatlik's streets, there was only the hive. Generations of hive builders had chewed and burrowed through the ground. The texture of the walls had a chewed duracrete appearance that Obi-Wan had noted elsewhere in Chikatlik, clear evidence of X'Ting construction.

Down in the lowest tunnels the walls were coated with rectangular patches of manicured white fungus that emitted a steady bluish glow. "Is this your form of illumination?" Obi-Wan asked.

Jesson nodded. "The fungus is well maintained here, fed and trimmed. Farther back it grows wild, and the fungus eats into the walls, slowly widening the tunnels."

The fungus had etched the rock until it seemed like the surface of some ancient sculpture. Obi-Wan ran his fingers over it as they walked, felt that he was reading an ancient book of X'Ting secret history. "How many outsiders have been here?" he asked.

"You are the first," Jesson told him.

Obi-Wan sighed. Jesson's tone had been flat and cold. He and the X'Ting would have to come to an understanding, but he hoped to delay it until they had spent a bit more time together. "Where does this come out?"

Jesson turned to him, sneering. "Listen, Jedi. I will follow my orders and take you along with me, but I don't have to like it. You offworlders ruined our planet. You cheated and brainwashed us and corrupted our leaders-

"If you're thinking of Quill, I believe he's been removed from the council."

"And replaced with Duris," Jesson said. "I doubt she's much better."

"If you think so little of your leaders, why do you obey them?"

Jesson drew himself up to full height. "I obey my training, and the rules of my clan. I am loyal to the hive, not merely the council. And now the council wishes the return of the royals. This I will help them do." His wings fluttered a bit. In the glow of the fungus they seemed like sheets of pale blue ice. "Make no mistake, Jedi. I will take you with me. But fantasies about your great powers won't save you in the deep hive. Maybe Duris believes that some sorcerer from Coruscant once saved the poor ignorant X'Ting, but I am no mewling grub, to believe such tales."

"Fair enough," Obi-Wan said as they continued down the tunnel. "I'd never heard of it myself, so I'm not asking you to believe."

Jesson shrugged, although he seemed satisfied that Obi-Wan was not trying to convince him. "It is typical for a colonized people to identify with their oppressors. This yearning for an alien rescuer is pitiable. It is hive-hatred."

Obi-Wan was about to speak when Jesson raised his primary arms. "Be very quiet." The X'Ting brushed past a curtain of hanging moss. Curiously, once on the other side Obi-Wan heard a steady droning sound. The moss seemed to have functioned as some kind of damper.

Then Obi-Wan gasped. He felt he had walked into a fantasy realm, where gravity itself was suspended.

Hanging from the ceiling was a series of swollen blue spheres attached as if by an invisible adhesive. No legs or arms or anything resembling faces were visible. He reckoned that these creatures were the same species as Regent Duris's assistant Shar Shar, but much larger. They were vaguely translucent, with thin blue veins. By the dim fungal light he could see organs pulsing slowly, as well as some kind of distended stomach or bladder.

"What are these creatures?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Their species are Zeetsa. We feed them, and they produce a food called Lifemilk. Once our

people depended upon them, and we lived together. But over time they developed more mind and will. Those who wish to join our society are allowed to do so, while those who choose a more peaceful, quiet existence can have that, as well. "

He sighed, and for a moment seemed to forget his antipathy toward Obi-Wan. "Lifemilk is a great delicacy. " He turned to the Jedi. "As an offworlder, you can afford it more readily than most X'Ting. "

The bluish surfaces of the Lifemilk creatures gave off a calming, peaceful radiance, but even had Jesson been more sanguine, Obi-Wan would not have chosen to sample at this time. One never knew the effects of alien foods, even benign, and he had to rely upon all of his senses in the coming hours.

The room was warm, almost uncomfortably so, and Obi-Wan swiftly determined that the heat emanated from the many bodies crowded together.

As he watched, the smooth surface of one of the globes began to roil. A bulge recognizable as a nose appeared, followed by two eyeholes, emerging from the surface almost like a creature floating up through a pool of oil. Obi-Wan blinked, startled, as similar faces grew on two of the other spheres. Generalized faces, something between an X'Ting and a human, almost as if the Zeetsa had no real form of its own, instead borrowing appearance from its neighbors.

The three spheres with faces pivoted to watch the intruders who had awakened them from their long, productive slumber.

He heard something gurgle in the room, and thought that it was the Zeetsa version of speech. They were speaking to each other, wondering, perhaps, who this offworlder was . . .

No . . . not who, but what. If Jesson was accurate, no other offworlder had ever come this way, and that meant that in all probability they had never seen a human being at all.

The room was the size of a star cruiser docking bay: immense, and silent save for that constant murmuring. Obi-Wan had the feeling he was walking through a room of sleeping children, except for the disquieting faces that appeared on the smooth surface of the dangling, gravity-defying bulbs. One of them formed lips and a recognizable mouth, and he stopped for a moment, transfixed. As he watched, his own face appeared, complete with beard, etched into the surface of the blue sphere.

And then the corners of the mouth lifted. "It's trying to communicate, " he whispered, astonished.

"It is dreaming, " Jesson said. "And you are a part of the dream. "

The bulb pivoted to follow them as they reached the far side of the cavern. The tunnel there was darker than the Lifemilk creatures' place of resting, and Obi-Wan took that final image, the smile of a sleeping, mindless creature, with him into the darkness.

Chapter 3

The tunnel leading away from the Zeetsa chamber was narrower. If he had wished, Obi-Wan could have scooped blue-white fungus off both walls with his elbows as they walked. The mold here grew in wild patches, some of them slippery splotches underfoot, slick enough to make an unwary explorer turn an ankle. The wild moss gave a fainter light here, and from time to time Jesson used a glowlight to lead the way. The air itself felt musty and close. Obi-Wan guessed no one had been here for years.

"Where are we now? " he asked.

"Beyond where I have gone, " Jesson replied. "But I know what lies ahead. "

"And that is? "

"The Hall of Heroes, " Jesson said. "This is where the greatest leaders of our people were honored, long ago, before the clans split after the plague. In that world, every warrior strove to perform great service for the hive, that his image might one day appear in the hall. "

"And what of the people who remained down there? " Obi-Wan asked.

"They are the true X'Ting, " he said, a hint of pride entering his voice for the first time. "Perhaps when this is over, I will stay with them. It is said they believe we 'surface' X'Ting have forgotten the old ways. This is truth. "

"Will they try to stop us? "

"I think not. They, even more than those on the surface, have awaited the return of the royals. In fact, " he added, "once we have opened the vault, I can think of no safer hands in which to place the eggs. "

Obi-Wan stopped. "The eggs are to be taken to the council, Jesson. "

The X'Ting's eyes sparked. "Yes. Of course. "

Obi-Wan didn't trust that answer. Might Jesson turn the eggs over to the X'Ting who lurked in the lower hive? And if he did, how should he, Obi-Wan, respond?

One step at a time, he thought. They had much to overcome before that became an issue.

The tunnel came to an end at a massive metal door, bolted and barred, and so rusted that it seemed almost a part of the natural wall.

Jesson traced his hands over its surface. "This is the back way into the vault. We must go through the Hall of Heroes, where the old X'Ting still live. Many years ago they erected this door to seal out the plague. To seal us out of their lives. " He looked back at Obi-Wan. "We will have to open the door. "

"This I can do, " Obi-Wan said. He drew his lightsaber and triggered its emerald beam. Then he took a deep breath and slowly began to press his blade into the door. The hissing sound filled the darkness. Liquid metal sizzled into steam. Within a few moments he'd burned a fist-size hole in the door. Obi-Wan stopped and peered through. Nothing but darkness beyond. He listened. Nothing.

No. Not nothing. Something scuttled on the other side of the door. But it was something distant. Claws on metal and stone. Other than that, silence.

The fingers of Jesson's secondary arms twined with tension.

"Is there anything you're not telling me? " Obi-Wan asked.

"There are stories, " Jesson admitted. "Five years ago when we tried to free the eggs, one of my brothers went through another opening. I know he made it as far as the Hall of Heroes. But after that . . . " He shrugged. "We lost communication. "

"I see. " Obi-Wan didn't like the sound of that. It could imply entirely too many things.

He widened the hole, then waited for the metal to cool so that they could wiggle through. "I'll go first, " he said. The mold in the next chamber was just barely bright enough to reveal a large empty space with a rock floor. The room was perhaps twenty meters across, with gently convex walls. "Looks clear, " he said, and then slipped through, instantly alert.

By the glow of his lightsaber he saw that the floor of the roughly spherical chamber was of level stone. In the center was a descending stone stairway. Obi-Wan supposed that it led to another chamber below them.

Jesson crawled through the burned hole nimbly and stood, holding up his glowlight.

"You've never been in here? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Never. And neither has any living member of the upper hive, " he said. "I believe we are now inside the largest statue in the X'Ting Hall of Heroes. "

They began down the stairs, turning in a spiral as they descended around a single rock column in the midst of a chamber hewn from stone. Hewn? Chewed, Obi-Wan thought.

"Something is wrong, " Jesson said. Caution had crept into the X'Ting warrior's voice.

"What? "

"I smell much death, " he said.

The silence itself was so oppressive that it was impossible for Obi-Wan not to agree with him. Something was wrong-he could sense it as well. Halfway down the stairs, Jesson aimed his light at the floor below them.

For a moment Obi-Wan couldn't believe what he was seeing. The entire floor of the chamber was covered with empty, shattered carapaces. Countless heaps of them, scattered about like bones in some large predator's lair.

"What happened here? " Jesson whispered.

"What would you think? "

The exoskeleton fragments, the skulls and legs and chestpieces, seemed to stare back at them, simultaneously mocking and warning. "Either they crawled into here by the thousands and died, or . . . "

"Or what? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Or something dragged them in here. "

Obi-Wan crouched, running his fingers along the broken edges of a carapace. There was no moisture in the remaining flesh at all. This had happened years ago.

He rose and led the way to the descending stone stairway in the room's center. The twisting exit had no guardrails, and it would be a nasty spill if taken unexpectedly. The dusty smell of old, forgotten death rose up to enfold them.

When they reached the bottom, his foot crunched on a leg carapace. "Light, " he said simply, and took it from Jesson's hand.

The carapaces had been cracked open. No withered flesh remained to be seen. Devoured? Everywhere he looked, there was nothing but the cracked, violated exoskeletons of dead X'Ting.

Jesson went to his knees behind Obi-Wan, examining the remains. "I . . . I don't understand, " he said as Obi-Wan returned the glowlight.

Something in his voice chilled the Jedi. "What is it? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Look at these bite marks. "

Obi-Wan inspected. The carapaces had indeed been chewed open, not pried apart with tools. "Yes. Savage. "

"You don't understand, " Jesson said. "These are X'Ting tooth marks. "

And suddenly the horror that had gripped Jesson brushed against Obi-Wan's spine. Here in the depths, where X'Ting had tried to maintain the old ways, something had happened. Clan turning against clan? War? However it had begun, what was clear was the way it had ended:

Cannibalism. These X'Ting had eaten their own. There was no lower behavior, no more loathsome foe. The fear of being slain by an opponent was always present, a natural part of a warrior's life. But the idea of being killed and then devoured . . . that was something different.

"I suggest we keep moving, " he said.

"I agree, " Jesson said, biting at the words. And they continued across the room.

Something moved. Obi-Wan couldn't see it, or hear it-he felt it, a displacement of the air around them, a perturbation in the Force.

"I don't think we're alone, " he said.

Jesson reached for the three-sectioned staff slung across his back. The sections were of

clear crystal or acrylic, connected by short lengths of chain. A club and a flail in one, Obi-Wan thought. He hoped the X'Ting used it superbly.

"That door, " Jesson said, indicating an opening on the far side of the room. This room, like the one above it, had a concave wall, but less sharply angled.

"Let us make our way there, " Obi-Wan said. "Swiftly. But I suspect that that is where our company awaits. "

Jesson's lips pulled back from his teeth, displaying small, sharp, multiple rows. Obi-Wan would not care to have his arm caught in those jaws. "Let them come, " the X'Ting said.

Step by step they progressed across the floor. They were almost to the doorway when the air's scent changed. Just a bit, a nose-wrinkling aroma drifting to them on the weakest of breezes. Something that dried tongue and throat, an acid tang reminiscent of stomach gases. Before he could consciously identify the smell, the first glowing eyes appeared. Glittering. Faceted, blinking at them from the darkness.

Then they were under attack.

Jesson dropped his lamp almost at once, and although it didn't extinguish on hitting the ground, the light it gave was slanted and partial. The sparkle of Obi-Wan's lightsaber was more brilliant, increasing with the hum and flash when he met an opponent's weapon or body.

These were X'Ting-the Jedi was sure of that-but X'Ting of a different variety than those he had seen until now. These were not specialized for combat: they were diggers, workers. The oversize jaws implied that they might have been the ones who produced the chewed substance that characterized the hive.

Most of them carried hefty metal pry bars. Weapons? Tools? For whatever purpose they had originally been intended, the bars would crack any bone they struck.

There was no more time for thought. The song of Obi-Wan's lightsaber was long and sour. X'Ting diggers fell before him like scythed grain. They hissed and came on, howling.

Obi-Wan measured his response, allowing them to come to him, then taking the aggressive posture when advantageous. Ferociously fast, the cannibal X'Ting attacked in a frightening wave, simply wading in swinging their metal bars, trusting in numbers to carry the day.

Against a Jedi, that was not enough.

The air around Obi-Wan hissed as his lightsaber swooped and twisted. After the first few moments he had adjusted to the pace and style of attack, and was able to determine a bit more about their adversaries. The first thing he realized was that they were nearly blind from years of groping in darkness, doubtless hunting by smell or hearing. His lightsaber's flare frightened some of them, freezing them in place, making some hesitant to attack. Those who did not hesitate died hissing their hatred and fear.

Between strokes, between breaths, Obi-Wan spared fragments of attention to see how Jesson was faring.

The X'Ting warrior needed no assistance. He performed with a fearless, aggressive, almost weightless agility, kicking and punching in all directions with all six limbs. His weapon whirled like a propeller, almost invisibly fast. He held the three-sectioned staff first by one end, then by the middle, then by the other, swinging it and twisting it into defensive and attacking positions, and every time he moved, one of his enemies fell to rise no more.

He crouched, sweeping the feet of several creatures from underneath them, and when he came up, Jesson coiled into a ferocious attack position that mimicked a spider stalking the strands of its web.

Their attackers circled them, hissing and coiling as Obi-Wan and Jesson put their backs together and surveyed the horde.

"We can't kill them all, " Jesson said.

"No, " Obi-Wan agreed. "But we don't have to. Follow me! "

Without another word the Jedi plunged into the mass of cannibals, plowing toward the door. He struggled not to think about what would happen to them-or to Jesson, at least-if they were overwhelmed. It was better to stay in the realm of Form III, the lightsaber combat he had practiced for so long. It was better, and no less effective, for one who understood that defense and attack were two sides of the same coin.

Left, right, left-he deflected blows, shattered weapons, and severed limbs in a blinding, dazzling display that singed blazing lines in the darkness. Their enemies, though ferocious, were hampered by their near blindness; only an unnatural hunger drove them forward.

They seemed to be awakening in waves, crawling out of whatever dark holes they had entered. Had these things scavenged in the darkness, on the waste and garbage that every great city produces? Even Coruscant had its ghouls, gangsters and homeless creatures who had abandoned the light to live in the fissures between social tissues. But the creatures swarming them now matched the worst that great world-city could offer.

"Run! " Jesson called, and they sprinted toward the doorway. The passage narrowed, and it was a bit harder for the cannibals to reach them, making defense that much easier. He could see the stairway now, only a dozen meters farther away.

Obi-Wan whirled 360 degrees; he glimpsed Jesson as he deflected and attacked, his three-sectioned staff cracking heads and sending their enemies scurrying for safety.

But then a mass of wriggling bodies threw themselves at Jesson all at once, and the warrior went down. Obi-Wan arrived just in time to stop a jagged spear from descending into his guide; his lightsaber flashed, leaving the attacker howling with a missing limb. Using the Force to hurl another aside, the Jedi Knight bent swiftly, helping Jesson up from the ground.

He did not know what fear looked like on the face of an X'Ting, but he was fairly certain that that was the dominant emotion in those faceted red eyes. Fear and certainty of death, and perhaps something else.

Obi-Wan released his grip and Jesson ran at the enemy, leaving his triple staff behind. At first Obi-Wan's heart sank; then, as the Jedi watched, the X'Ting warrior disarmed the first cannibal who struck at him, wrenching a spear from the creature's hands. Jesson whirled the javelin until it was nothing but a lethal blur, sending cannibals howling and scrambling into the shadows. He kicked and punched, fainted with his stinger, and then broke heads with his spear. Soon he had broken free and he and Obi-Wan were heading down a ladder, down a long narrow tube, into darkness.

Chapter 4

Hand over hand, Obi-Wan and Jesson climbed down a hollow stone tube barely as wide as their shoulders. As he gripped each rung of the ladder in turn, Obi-Wan wondered: what would they do if the bottom was sealed? Or blocked? In such a terribly constricted space, there was no room to maneuver. The cannibals could simply drop rocks down on them until-Then his foot touched the ground. Jesson reached the bottom a moment later, and they were out in a large rocky chamber.

Using his captured spear as a staff, Jesson led Obi-Wan away from the ladder, across a chamber as broad as a Chin-Bret playing field. Dim wreaths of mold illuminated some of the walls: immense statues lined the room, images of gigantic, regal X'Ting in various imperious poses, each of them at least thirty meters in height, some twice that size. He could just barely make out the insectoid features. Most were built into one of the walls in apparently endless array. A few were freestanding.

Despite the spear, Jesson was limping, the Jedi noticed, and seemed winded. "We can rest, if you need to, " Obi-Wan said.

"No, " Jesson gasped. "I want to get as far away from the entrance as possible. "

Obi-Wan looked back. "They don't seemed to be following us, " he said.

Jesson stopped, his brow furrowed. "You're right. I wonder why? "

Obi-Wan considered the possibilities, and didn't like what came to mind. Under what circumstances did predators fail to pursue fresh meat into the open? "Are these other

statues hollow? "

"Perhaps. " Jesson paused. "I think I have heard of this, yes. "

"Perhaps they live there. They could be watching us now. "

"But why don't they pursue us? "

"Fear. Of us, or . . . " Suddenly, the cavern's open floor seemed far too exposed and vulnerable for Obi-Wan's taste. "Let's keep moving, shall we? "

Jesson nodded agreement and led the way across the wide-open space between the ladder and their destination, a cavern wall some hundreds of meters distant. The ground beneath their feet was spongy, more like farm loam than rocky cave soil.

"This way, " Jesson said, and when they had crossed the cavern, he leaned against the wall, gasping for air.

As they took a breather, Obi-Wan looked back the way they had come. The vast statues were so shrouded in darkness that he could barely make them out. What a sight this chamber must be with full illumination! The one statue that had led them down into the chamber was largest of all, its outline fading into shadow. Was this an image of some great leader or warrior, perhaps the last, great queen who had swallowed her pride to bring her people into the Republic's arms . . . ?

Jesson paused, taking a sip from a small flask of water. He shook his head, and drops of water flicked from the tuft of fur at his thorax.

"Are you all right? " Obi-Wan asked.

"No, " Jesson replied. He paused, then added, "Thank you for saving me. " He said it grudgingly, as if the words hurt his mouth.

"We are companions, " Obi-Wan replied simply. "Which way, now? "

"Well . . . the other entrance, the one that became sealed after a failed attempt, would be through these tunnels. " He pushed himself away from the wall, and they walked along the cavern's far edge. Obi-Wan's feet sank into the flaky soil with each step, a not entirely pleasant sensation. The soil grew harder, and suddenly they were on a meter-wide strip of rock climbing along the wall.

Obi-Wan was happy to be away from the soft cave floor. Something about it disturbed him. What exactly had happened here? His puzzle-solving mind worried at the problem from varied directions as the ground beneath them began to tilt up into a steeper incline.

They climbed along the ascending path for several minutes, finally reaching a tumble of rocks that buried the footpath. There was no way around it. Obi-Wan peered over the side: they were now so far above the ground that his glow rod's beam simply dissolved into darkness. Jesson poked and prodded at the rocks with the spear. "My brother must have tripped a deadfall here, " he said. A miniature avalanche, designed to protect the secret path. Jesson's brother had followed a faulty map, or perhaps just made a mistake. Obi-Wan and the X'Ting scrambled up over the rocks and gazed down the other side. Jesson pointed up along the path. "That's where the other door is. From here, everything looks all right. "

"I hope so, " Obi-Wan said soberly. "I don't relish the idea of going back up through the statue. "

"Nor do I. All right. Good. We have our path of retreat secure . . .

. I think. Let's follow the map. "

They went back down over the rock tumble, and then farther down the ramp. Gleaming in the lamplight were more statues of various X'Ting in heroic poses. Jesson studied them carefully.

"This is what we need, " he said. Then he began muttering to himself in his people's clicking, popping speech.

Several of the engraved images depicted X'Ting with primary and secondary arms crossed, legs spread. Some were in male mode, and some in female. Around the heads of these full-size images were clusters of miniature engravings of similar design.

Suddenly Obi-Wan realized what he was looking at: hieroglyphs, images extracted from pictographs of X'Ting and Cestian environments. This was very old, the beginnings of written language. Jesson was reading the wall.

"Sounds and smells, " Jesson said. "Our culture is based on both. There is a code at work here, and if I can only remember my Old X'Tingian will we be able to find the next passage. "

He sniffed along the wall, studied, backed up almost to the edge of the ramp. Obi-Wan looked down into an inky void. They were fifty meters from the ground below. A bad fall.

"Shine the light higher, " Jesson whispered.

Obi-Wan did. There was another level of images up above the lower, and Jesson smiled. "Do you see these images? This says: We are not individuals, but of the hive . We are not to struggle alone, but shoulder to shoulder, and upon the shoulders of past hive heroes . "

Obi-Wan nodded. A fine sentiment.

"Please. Elevate me, " Jesson asked, setting his spear aside

For a moment Obi-Wan assumed that this was a request for enlightenment, but then realized Jesson was being quite literal. He cupped his hands, and the X'Ting climbed up, balancing himself with all four hands spread against the wall, feeling around. Then his fingers found their objectives, and Obi-Wan heard a sharp clicking sound.

The wall slid back, and an opening appeared. Jesson boosted himself up and disappeared into the hole. For a moment Obi-Wan was worried; then Jesson's head reappeared. "It's all clear. A passage between chambers. " He held an arm down, and Obi-Wan passed him the spear. Jesson gripped its shaft as Obi-Wan gathered the Force around him and leaped up to the opening. Then the X'Ting disappeared into the hole.

The hole was less than a meter wide, just large enough for crawling, but not much more. Darkness swallowed them completely, but Jesson shuffled ahead of him, and Obi-Wan had no option but to follow.

They were deep in the hive. The walls and ceiling were all of chewed stone. The roughly pentagonal tube branched off into numerous side tunnels. Again and again Jesson sniffed the path and found an old scent marker telling the way.

The roughness of the chewed surface threatened to abrade Obi-Wan's hands, and the strain of staying up on his toes as they crawled was slowly burning the muscles in his calves and shoulders. The rasp of his breathing echoed in the tube, making the close spaces seem closer still.

Then Jesson sighed, a long, low sound. The X'Ting warrior was outlined by a dim radiance coming from somewhere ahead of them. He made a contentedclick-pop mutter, and dropped from sight.

Chapter 5

Cautiously, Obi-Wan crawled forward until he reached the end of the tube, and looked out.

"Come down, " Jesson whispered.

There was no need to whisper. Nothing lived in this chamber. Its walls were crowded floor to ceiling with empty little pentagonal chambers, each just under a meter in diameter. An X'Ting larva hatchery? Obi-Wan crawled out and jumped down to another inclined ledge.

Jesson's faceted eyes shimmered with tears. "This is one of the old breeding chambers, " he said. "We changed in so many ways after the Republic came. The hive was never the same. But this is as it used to be. "

Here the luminescent fungus was bright enough to give a misty view of the floor twenty meters beneath them. It was covered with broken chrysalis shells, some of which might have

lain there for a thousand standard years. Had this place ever known brightness or the shining of a star? As Obi-Wan's eyes adjusted to the light, he could see spires of rock that rose up irregularly through the soil beneath the cast-off X'Ting shells. Stalactites depended from the cavern's roof.

"Is this the chamber? " Obi-Wan asked.

"The other side, " Jesson said, pointing across the way. "Through the next wall. "

Astounding. Clearly, only an X'Ting could find his way through this labyrinth. The royal eggs had indeed found safe haven.

The chamber was similar to that of the Hall of Heroes: created by water erosion rather than by machines or the flow of lava. Despite its origin, the cubicles chewed in the rock walls implied that it had been modified by countless eons of hive activity, countless millions of willing workers. A thin, milky fog wreathed the floor, but through it he saw vast heaps and furrows of plowed dirt.

"How was the soil deposited here? " he asked. Usually soil was the result of plant and animal action degrading rock over time. Obi-Wan was surprised to find so much of it underground, away from a nurturing sun.

"Remember, " Jesson said, pointing at the walls with his spear, "thousands of generations of us lived down here. Just as we had builders, and warriors, and leaders, there were also those who chewed rock, their digestive systems creating soil in which we could grow our crops. For eons we lived here, and the interior of Cestus was kinder to us than the surface. "

Thousands of generations. A planet whose surface was sand and chewed rock, its interior rich soil.

Truly, the galaxy was beyond imagination in its variety.

They descended along this second ramp, and Obi-Wan found himself lost in thoughts of what all of this might have been like, back before the time of the Republic. He imagined the hive swarming with life, the royal pair presiding over . . .

Then Obi-Wan's skin tingled, and he became instantly alert. A ripple in the Force, warning him. "On your guard, " he whispered.

Jesson's primary and secondary right hands gripped his spear fiercely. "What is it? "

Obi-Wan held up his right hand, demanding quiet. He felt something, a tremor in the soft soil beneath their feet.

Soft. As it had been in the previous chamber.

Soft. As if it were constantly plowed up.

"I've got a bad feeling about this, " Jesson said.

"Let's go on to the other side, " Obi-Wan said.

"I don't think we'll make it. "

The ground trembled. A quake? "What is it? " the Jedi asked.

"Worms, " Jesson said, his shoulders quivering, his four hands knotting into fists. "I should have known. They were thought to have retreated deep into the ground since the time of . . . " He seemed reluctant to speak. "Well, that supposed Jedi, at least. "

"Was that the service this Jedi Master performed for your royals? " Obi-Wan asked, drawing his lightsaber. The soil beneath them continued to heave.

"I don't know, " Jesson said, then added, "Perhaps. No offense, Master Jedi. You are indeed a mighty warrior, but if I know politicians, nothing much actually happened-he was just honored for being from Coruscant. "

Despite their danger, Obi-Wan had to chuckle. "My opinion of politicians is much like

yours, " he confessed. "But I must say that G'Mai Duris seems better than most. "

An abrupt tingle in the Force-and Obi-Wan grabbed Jesson and jumped back just in time. The soil beneath them burst, and the mouth of the first worm appeared. It was dark brown, its skin covered with countless small spikes, every three or four meters marked off with a segmented ring. If the proportions were similar to other such beasts that Obi-Wan had seen, then it was thirty meters long at the least.

And the worm was not alone. Two more burst from the ground, their mouths gaping hungrily. It was too late for Obi-Wan and Jesson to run back to the ledge, and too far make it all the way to their destination. All they could do was find a place to make their stand.

Obi-Wan spotted the first of several limestone spurs poking up through the soil. "Get to the rocks! " he shouted, and they dashed for the only visible safety. One of the worms humped along right behind them, moving almost as fast as a human could run.

Obi-Wan took the rear guard, letting his companion reach safety. The Jedi scrambled up the rock with barely a moment to spare. One of the worms tried to crawl up after them, but now Obi-Wan turned and fought. His lightsaber flashed, and the worm screamed. He couldn't actually hear the sound, but he felt it clearly through the Force.

Jesson's grip slipped. The spear rattled to the dirt, and Jesson slid down the rock toward the worm's cilia-ringed mouth hole. Its razor teeth clamped down on the X'Ting's right leg, sawing. Obi-Wan was there in an instant, and sliced the creature's head off. Severed, the head flopped back to the sand . . . the remaining body still alive and writhing.

Jesson scrambled up, leg lacerated but still functional.

"Thank you, Master Jedi, " he said, shivering. Obi-Wan inspected the wound: the chitinous shell was splintered, exposing the tender pink muscle beneath. He bound it as best he could, and to his credit Jesson made not a single sound of pain, although it had to be brutal. When he was done, Obi-Wan looked down below them. Four worms crawled atop and beneath the soil now, and they showed no signs of abandoning pursuit.

So. This was what had happened to the "true" X'Ting, those who had remained behind. The soil they had built up over ages to grow their crops-burying their dead, fertilizing with their wastes-had finally become deep enough to conceal predators. The X'Ting in that first cavern had been caught unawares, driven into the hollow statues. And once there, they had been unable to open the sealed metal doors. There in the darkness, they had become desperate enough to resort to cannibalism. There they had been trapped.

As Obi-Wan and Jesson were trapped, here on one of the few rock spurs on the floor of this second cavern. Obi-Wan felt the first tiny whisper of despair and bared his teeth. He would not fail. Not die. Not here in the dark. He had a job to do; he would find a way to do it.

The worms hissed at them, their cilia wavering back and forth with a chilling, unnatural appetite.

Jesson grimaced and climbed a little higher as another worm tried to ascend the spur. Obi-Wan seared it with the lightsaber, and it retreated without a sound. Again Obi-Wan could sense its shriek through the Force.

The soil humped up in furrows. From both far ends of the cave additional worms appeared, plowing up the ground and gnashing at them. There had to be ten or fifteen in all by now. Some larger, some smaller, all deadly.

"Maybe they smell us. Or hear us. Or they're calling each other to dinner. " He shone his light up above them. "What's that? There's something up there. "

Favoring his injured foot, Jesson climbed higher on the spur, shining his light as he did.

There was indeed something clinging atop the spur. No, Obi-Wan realized as they climbed. Not something. Someone. And not clinging.

Strapped to the rock by a length of rope was the desiccated corpse of an X'Ting male. Little was left but carapace and dried flesh.

"What happened here? " Jesson whispered. "This was my broodmate Tesser. He made it this

far, and no farther. " He climbed higher to touch his own forehead to his dead brother's withered brow. "He climbed up here to escape the worms. Strapped himself so that he wouldn't slide back down if he lost consciousness. If he became weak. And here he died. " So. Now they knew what had happened to two of those who had tried to reach the egg chamber.

"We will die, " Jesson said, his voice flat and drained of emotion.

"That's defeatist thinking, " Obi-Wan said. "After all, Tesser made it farther than the other. Perhaps we can make it farther still. "

Something like hope blossomed in Jesson's eyes. "You have a plan, Jedi? "

"Not yet, but I will. "

What distance to the far wall? Obi-Wan measured it with his eyes: sixty meters. Too far to run. The worms would overwhelm the wounded Jesson, and perhaps Obi-Wan, as well. And there was no point in reaching the egg chamber without his X'Ting companion. Without Jesson's specialized knowledge, he had no chance at all of accessing the vault.

"What equipment do you have? "

"My spear is gone. I have the glowlight, and a grapnel line. "

A grapnel line? That might come in useful. "Let me see it, " Obi-Wan said.

Jesson showed him the gun. It was about the size of a hand blaster, with a filament reel nestled beneath. Fairly standard GAR surplus.

"How much line? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Twenty meters? "

So. They had twenty meters of grapnel cable as standard equipment, but that wasn't enough to get them over . . .

To their left jutted another rock spur, this one about fifteen meters from their destination: the far wall. The spur was about thirty meters away. Could they make it that far? No, not with Jesson's wounded leg.

All right. What, then?

Obi-Wan looked up above their heads and noted a ten-meter stalactite above them, halfway between their current position and that rock spur. A plan began to evolve. It would depend on the strength of that stalactite, but it might just work.

"I'm going to try something, " Obi-Wan said. "If you trust me, we might make it through this. "

"All right, Jedi, " Jesson said. "I have no choice. Let's hear your idea. "

"You'll see, " Obi-Wan said, and climbed higher up the spur. The worms humped around the base. From time to time one or two tried to crawl up, but they couldn't get good purchase on the rock and slipped back down.

Obi-Wan took Jesson's grapnel and aimed carefully, firing it at the protruding stalactite. The line flew true, its claw-tip anchoring deeply into the rock. He yanked hard, and it seemed firm enough.

"All right, " he said. "Hold on to my waist. "

Jesson looked at him dubiously, then his strong, thin arms encircled Obi-Wan's waist.

Obi-Wan braced himself and swung off the rock spur. They flew in a long, shallow glide, the radius of their arc taking them so close to the soil that the worms hungrily snapped at them, cilia weaving as if in starvation or anger.

Jesson clung to him, faceted red eyes wide in wonder as they flew . . .

Then the X'Ting uttered a shrill series of terrified clicks as the stalactite above them

broke. They were on the upswing of the arc when it happened. A huge chunk of rock snapped free and fell, sabotaging their arc. They flew up, then the rock smacked down into the soil, jerking them back down hard, so that they whuffed into the soil a moment later, the impact slamming the breath from Obi-Wan's lungs.

He scrambled up as fast as he could, winded but unwilling to die a meal for the worms.

"Run! " he screamed as the creatures streaked toward him. He had the presence of mind to trigger the grapnel's release mechanism and jerk the line free. The reel pulled in the filament as he sprinted toward the next rock, feet pounding puffs of dirt from the ground. Jesson was limping too slowly. Obi-Wan closed his mind to pain, grabbed with his right arm, and, ignoring the strain, forcing himself to greater effort, heaved the X'Ting soldier up on the rock then leapt up himself as one of the worms grabbed his left boot. He reached out, scrabbling for the rock and failing to find purchase as the worm struggled to drag him back down. But Jesson had regained his senses, and reached down for Obi-Wan's wrist with primary and secondary hands. He braced his spindly legs and pulled for dear life.

Obi-Wan managed to brace his knee against the rock and pushed, forcing himself up as the worm lost its grip. He scrabbled up a bit higher and then, bracing himself, turned with lightsaber in hand and cut his attacker in half. The severed portion dropped to the ground and writhed, ichors oozing from the end, then disappeared into the ground and was gone.

The Jedi gulped air and breathed a sigh of relief. He looked up at Jesson. "Thank you, " he said.

"We're even now, " Jesson said. He scanned the wall ahead. "Well, we're better than halfway there. "

"That might be enough, if we're clever, " Obi-Wan said. He climbed up the limestone spur, measuring the distance to the far wall, hoping that he had been correct. Otherwise, it was all too possible that their skeletons might, one distant day, be found here on the rock.

"Where is the far opening? " he asked, shading his eyes with his hands. "I can't see it. "

"There is a rock ledge, about five meters above the ground, " Jesson said, pointing.

Obi-Wan squinted until he could make it out. "Yes. "

"And beyond that is the entrance to the chamber. I can get us in. After that . . . " The X'Ting shrugged. "I do not know. "

"All right. " Obi-Wan measured the distance between the far wall and the rock spur, and found a surface that looked suitable.

He fired the grapnel. Once again the line flew true, anchoring itself in the rock. He anchored the other end to their spur. He hated to leave the gun behind, but either there were additional resources available on the other side, or all attempts at survival might be futile.

"Give me the light, " Obi-Wan said. He turned Jesson's glowlight up to full radiance and shone it directly in the worms' eyes.

For many years the worms had been in the caves beneath Chikatlik. But it was possible they hadn't been down here long enough to grow blind-that, in fact, brilliant light might actually be painful and confusing to them.

And clearly it was. Already they were scurrying away, their pain echoing through Obi-Wan's Force-sense. "Let's go! " he yelled. And he began moving out over the soil, hand over hand along the line.

Twenty meters, give or take. The worms seemed to have recovered from the light: they were humping back in the direction of their quarry. Obi-Wan swung his feet up and crossed them over the line for support, then triggered the lamp again beneath them. The worms gave their soundless squeal and retreated-But not as far. Obi-Wan extended his senses through Force, sensing the hissing, coiling creatures as they crept back. He unhooked his feet from the line and moved hand over hand again, increasing his speed.

The line cut into his fingers. Pain like the slice of a frozen razor raced down his arm to

his elbow. He bit back a scream, refusing to give up their position.

Could the worms see them? He wasn't certain, but Obi-Wan considered it unlikely the creatures had evolved to hunt prey dangling over their heads.

Still, the vibration of the falling rock, and perhaps the scream of the wounded worm, had summoned additional creatures from deeper in the caves. By the fungal glow along the walls, he could see that the soil beneath them teemed with worms, boiled with them, hundreds, thousands of them—finger-size to meters in length. They jostled and snapped at each other, reaching up for Obi-Wan and Jesson.

One of the severed segments actually managed to leap free of the soil, gnashing at Obi-Wan's pant leg, missing the calf muscle but enmeshing itself in the cloth. It whipped its tail this way and that, trying to find purchase.

Swaying, trying to shake the thing free, Obi-Wan lost hold with his right hand. Behind him, Jesson emitted a sour, frightened wisp of air.

Dangling by his left hand, Obi-Wan called his lightsaber to his right hand, triggered it, and cut at the thing hanging from his leg. Severed, the worm fell in halves to the ground below them.

Hand over hand. Hand over hand. The grapnel line sliced his palms, but he shut the pain away in a small dark room in his mind and concentrated on the task at hand.

When finally his feet were over the ledge, he dropped down and pivoted. Jesson was almost there, swinging back and forth like a pendulum. The X'Ting warrior jumped down and almost missed the ledge; he battled for balance, Obi-Wan snatching at his hand.

Then they were both safe on the ledge, far above the snapping mouths of the worms.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Obi-Wan turned toward the wall. Viewed from the far side, shadow had disguised a shallow tunnel, but the mouth was easy to see now. At the end of the tunnel was a sealed durasteel door inset with some manner of electronic reader device. "How do we open this? "

Jesson pressed his face up close to the door. "It is said that any X'Ting can open this door. It is what awaits within—"

As if it had been listening to his speech and timing its own response, the door sighed open. Obi-Wan and Jesson stepped inside.

Chapter 6

The chamber within was roughly egg-shaped, constructed of some kind of white, curved tile, probably something produced offworld. There were two other doors: one on the far side of the chamber, and the other directly to the right of them, with another sensor housed against it.

Obi-Wan walked to the door across the way. A monitor screen was set into the middle, and he manipulated its fingerpad until a sharp little holo appeared. It seemed to be an image taken right outside this very portal. When it focused, he turned away again: huddled on the far side of the door was a body. Another X'Ting brother who had tried and failed to reach the egg chamber. Obi-Wan could not see what had killed the warrior, but his body looked as if the exoskeleton had been partially . . . dissolved.

He shuddered. Without whatever specific instructions had been destroyed by plague or supernova, could anyone have been expected to survive such a gauntlet?

Jesson was at the silver door, touching sensors and manipulating the controls. Obi-Wan waited while he attempted several different patterns, but then the young X'Ting warrior hit the wall with a balled fist in frustration. "I can't open it! "

"How many times did you try? " Obi-Wan asked, alarmed. "Don't you only have three attempts? "

"Not here, " Jesson said. "Once we are inside, the challenge truly begins. "

"I can try my lightsaber if you wish. "

Jesson laughed. "I think not. This door was designed to resist any known torch. Just give me a bit of time, and-"

But Obi-Wan had already triggered his weapon and was forcing the glowing blade into the door. "Turn your head away, " he warned. Jesson complied.

Within a few moments, Obi-Wan knew Jesson was right: this door was certainly tougher than the previous one. Regardless, the Jedi weapon blistered the durasteel, sending sparks flying and globules of glowing metal dribbling down to the floor.

The door was sandwiched with energy-absorbing circuits that slowed, but never stopped him. Finally the door twisted free, metal droplets spraying as it clattered down. They stepped through the smoking entrance.

Within was another egg-shaped chamber with a three-meter pentagonal gold seal emblazoned on the floor. On the far side, a single molded chair sat before an array of . . . what? Nozzles and beam projectors pointed menacingly at the chair, clear warning for anyone who would brave the challenge.

Rows of readouts and meters blinked to life as they entered, and Obi-Wan inspected them swiftly. Most of the controls were labeled in both Basic and X'Tingian. One of the most provocative labels read: WORM CALL/WORM SENSOR.

Worm call? Then one of his questions was more or less answered. The worms had not been natural to the cave. The security company had brought them here as a passive guarding device. But had something gone horribly wrong? Had the worms found a way into the Hall of Heroes, where so many X'Ting still lived?

That would explain much. What a moment of horror that must have been, when the mindless creatures appointed to guard their most precious treasure burrowed or found a way through the rock wall separating the egg chamber from the living settlement, and chaos reigned.

A hologrammic display caught his eye. A sonic gauge of some kind, labeled HYPERSONIC REPEL. So . . . the worms were called by sound, and could be repelled the same way. A simple answer, but one unknown to the X'Ting.

Jesson had already eased his way into the command seat. Obi-Wan smelled the change in the room and guessed that the X'Ting was calming down, preparing to perform a task for which he had long prepared.

Jesson's four sets of fingers interlaced, and there was aBRRRRRAKK! sound as sixteen knuckles cracked in a whiplash.

The X'Ting began his sequence, first speaking in X'Tingian, then switching to Basic, perhaps in respect for Obi-Wan. "The start-up sequence is on record, " he said, his six limbs moving with insectlike precision as he manipulated the controls.

"What is all of this? " Obi-Wan asked, indicating the nozzles and ray projectors surrounding the seat in a halo. Was it possible that the legend, the fragmentary information available to Jesson, was incorrect, and it wasn't the eggs that would be destroyed if three wrong answers were given-but the questioner himself?

For the first few minutes Jesson's efforts were unrewarded; then a hologram blossomed before them. The glowing image was a schematic of the entire room, the chamber itself. They could see a narrow shaft beneath the gold seal, and at the bottom of that shaft, behind a thick shield, lay two precious eggs surrounded by a laser array. Tentatively, he reached out through the Force . . . but the mechanism controlling the array was too complex for his understanding. His heart sank. There was little question that the array would defeat any efforts he might make to circumvent it. How he wished that Anakin were here! His Padawan learner was an intuitive genius with all things mechanical, and might well have devised a means of defeating this apparatus. Obi-Wan felt helpless.

Thankfully, his X'Ting companion had survived to enter the capsule. Their only hope of success lay in Jesson's four capable hands.

Jesson took the controls as if he were playing some kind of complex musical instrument. Obi-Wan could hear varying sighs and squeaks, and the X'Ting warrior answered the calls in a blur of finger-play across the control board.

Finally the schematic floated to the left. A spherical target shape appeared, its three layers rotating above a core resembling the egg chamber.

Three concentric layers. Obi-Wan's mouth felt dry.

He glanced at his wrist chrono and was astounded. Had only an hour elapsed since they had first entered the catacombs? Since they had left the X'Ting council chamber? It felt like days!

An X'Ting voice with an interrogative intonation sounded, followed by a voice speaking in Basic. "Answer the following question: What is in the hive but not of the hive? What nurtures but is nurtured, what dreams but never sleeps? "

Jesson took a deep breath. From a belt pod he extracted a flat rectangle. "This is the last remaining key chip, " he said. "I have only three chances, but I think that we will succeed. "

"Do you know the answer to the riddle? " Obi-Wan asked.

"Yes, " Jesson said confidently. "It is the Zeetsa. They live in the hive but are not X'Ting. They give to us, but in turn receive nourishment and care. They dream but are aware. " His certainty increasing with every motion, Jesson placed the card in its slot.

There was a soft blur, and the voiced of the scanner said: "Your answer? "

"The Zeetsa, " Jesson said.

There was a pause. The sphere began to rotate more swiftly and the outer third began to peel away, the pieces dissolving as they did. Jesson sat, astounded, as the voice said, first in X'Tingian and then in Basic:

"Incorrect. "

Jesson stood from the chair, eyes wide and disbelieving. The voice said: "Sit down, or the session is terminated. "

Jesson looked back at Obi-Wan. The nozzles at the edges of the room opened like sunblossoms welcoming the dawn. Obi-Wan suspected-no, heknew that if the session was terminated, so were they. And so were the eggs.

"Sit down, " he said quietly. And Jesson did. The nozzles seemed to track their motion. Obi-Wan had no interest in discovering what might flow through them at a moment's notice.

"Do you wish to continue the sequence? "the machine asked.

"Do I have a choice? " Jesson said miserably.

"Yes. You may choose personal termination. If you choose this option, the eggs will not be damaged. "

"I'll try again, " he said, and swallowed hard.

"Very well. "A pause. The pause lasted for so long that Obi-Wan wondered if it was going to speak again, but then it did.

"Who lived and now stand still? Who cared not for acclaim, but are idolized by all? Who carried weight and now ring hollow? "

"You speak Basic and X'Tingian, " Obi-Wan said to Jesson. "Are the words accurately translated? "

The warrior's serrated teeth clattered. "I think so. There is a certain poetry missing from the Basic translation. "

" 'Who lived and stand still, ' " Obi-Wan went on. "That could have two meanings: to be motionless, or to persist, to 'still stand, ' if you get my meaning. Do you understand this one? "

"I believe so, " Jesson said, but he no longer seemed so confident.

"Then do you think you know the answer? "

Jesson stared at the spilling sphere. Just two layers left. "I think so. "

"Then answer, " Obi-Wan said, trying to give the X'Ting confidence that he himself did not entirely feel.

Jesson took a deep breath. "I am ready to proceed, " he said.

"Answer, "the machine said.

"The heroes of the hive. The Hall of Heroes. "

The seconds ticked past, and nothing happened. Then the sphere began to rotate more swiftly, and the second, orange layer peeled away and vanished.

"Incorrect, "the voice said.

Jesson shivered in the seat, and Obi-Wan detected a sharp, sour odor in the air. Fear? "They should not have sent me, " the X'Ting said.

Self-pity? Jesson did not seem the type, but . . . Then the warrior went on, haltingly, "I can't do this. Because of me, the eggs will be destroyed. "

There it was. The reaction hadn't been self-pity at all. It was concern for the eggs Obi-Wan had heard in Jesson's voice, seen in his body, smelled in the air.

The warrior was on the edge, about to give up. Obi-Wan had seen this before. It was not fear, as most beings knew it, because for most, fear was a matter of personal loss: loss of self-image, loss of health, loss of life. But even without being able to directly interpret the pheromones now flooding the air, he knew that these were not the source of Jesson's anguish. The X'Ting warrior loved the hive, and was now terribly afraid of letting it down. He had been well chosen. He would be more than happy to die in the accomplishment of this task, die anonymously and in great pain if need be, if the hive could only survive and thrive, and be raised up to its rightful glory.

Jesson was locked almost in paralysis, his hands hovering over the controls. Every muscle in his body seemed to be stiffened in unyielding contraction, all of the cockiness drained from him by the reality of the tests he had already failed. "How? " he said. "How could it be? What answers were they looking for? "

"We can't know, " Obi-Wan said, and laid a hand on the X'Ting's shoulder. "All we can do, all we can ever do, is the best we can. The rest is controlled by the Force. "

"The Force! " Jesson spat. "I've heard so much about you precious Jedi and your Force. "

"It is not our Force, " Obi-Wan said, trying to comfort him. "It owns us. And you. It creates all of us, but is also created by us. "

"Riddles! " Jesson screamed. "Nothing but riddles. I've had enough! "

He leapt up from the seat and ran across the room, hammering at the door, screaming, "Let me out! Let me out ! "

"Return to the seat, or the session will be terminated, "the machine said calmly.

Obi-Wan gazed at Jesson and then made a snap decision. He went to sit in the chair.

"You are not the original participant, "the machine said in its androgynous, synthesized voice. "It is necessary that the original participant finish the process. "

Obi-Wan looked back over his shoulder at the wounded, broken X'Ting warrior. How proud and confident he had seemed only an hour before! How obvious now that all of that pride had been a thin shield against the fear of failing his people, a support against the terrible weight of that responsibility.

"He is unable to continue, " Obi-Wan said.

"In one hundred seconds this test is terminated, "the voice said. "Ninety-nine, ninety-eight . . . "

"Askme the questions! " Desperation crept into Obi-Wan's voice. "Please. Ask me the-

"Ninety-three, ninety-two . . . "

Obi-Wan jumped out of the chair and went to Jesson, still huddled on the floor, primary and secondary arms wrapped around his knees.

"Jesson, " he said in his calmest voice. "You must try again. "

"I can't. "

"You must. There is no one else. "

The X'Ting sank his head against his knees and shivered.

"All your life, " Obi-Wan said, "you have prepared yourself for a great challenge. As all warriors do. "

No response.

"Do not think I don't know how you feel. Your warrior clan could not protect the hive from Cestus Cybernetics. They have power beyond anything your people can match. And so you feel that even your death cannot free your people. Even the best effort you can manage is not enough to fill the need. So deep in your heart you feel that there is nothing. "

Jesson finally looked up. "You understand this? "

"It is the same on planets all over the galaxy, " the Jedi said. "Whenever there are conquered species, the warriors are the first to be oppressed. Because they are the most dangerous. "

"Seventy . . . sixty-nine . . . sixty-eight . . . "

"All my life, " Jesson said, "all I've wanted is to fulfill the function I was appointed at birth. As my ancestors did. When female, to bear healthy eggs, to learn and heal and teach. When male, to fight for my hive, to keep it safe. Perhaps to die. "

Jesson looked up at Obi-Wan, faceted eyes glimmering with hope. If the offworlder could understand his misery, then perhaps, just perhaps there was a way out. There was an answer.

"And then when G'Mai Duris regained leadership of the hive council, you had hope. "

"Yes! "

"Fifty-four, fifty-three . . . "

Obi-Wan fought to keep his voice calm, although he felt the urgency boiling within him. "And when you were chosen to be the one to find and bring back the royals, you thought that this was your chance. This was your opportunity to serve the hive. This was the moment of glory! "

"Yes! "

"It still is, " Obi-Wan said. "All warriors dream of conquest, of glorious victory or glorious death. But none of us knows the price of our lives. None of us knows the worth of our deaths. That is for others to decide, after we are gone. All we can do is struggle, to fight with both courage and compassion, to sell our lives dearly. And later, after the battle is over, others will be able to decide if that sacrifice was in vain, or whether it was the deciding factor. Some of us must place our lives on the altar of sacrifice. Others on our dreams of victory. "

Jesson gazed up at him, some small measure of hope and understanding creeping in. "And if I fail, and the royal eggs die? "

"Then you will have done all that you could, serving the hive with all your strength. "

"And if my failure costs your life as well as my own, Jedi? "

Obi-Wan spoke as kindly as he could. "My life was forfeit the moment I set myself on this path. Tread not the path to war seeking to preserve life. That is a fool's dream. Seek to live your days honoring whatever principles you hold dear. Work to gain the highest skills of which you are capable. Sell your life dearly. "

"Be true to the hive, " Jesson said.

"Yes. "

"How can a human understand so well? "

Obi-Wan smiled. "We all have a hive, " he said.

"Twenty-seven, twenty-six . . . "

"Stand, X'Ting warrior, " Obi-Wan said, putting durasteel into his voice.

Jesson stood.

"Fifteen, fourteen . . . "

He made his way back to the chair and sat down. The countdown ceased.

"Are you prepared to continue? "the voice asked in Basic, after a series of X'Tingian pops.

Jesson answered in affirmative clicks.

There was a pause. The rotating hologrammic sphere was moving more swiftly now. But a single layer remained over the egg chamber.

"Answer, "the machine said. "Who ate our eggs and now hide their young? Whose web of fear ensnares them? Who stole the sun but now live in shadow? "

"It's too simple, " Jesson whispered.

"Sometimes simplicity is the best disguise, " Obi-Wan said. "Don't try to be tricky. Answer with truth. "

"But that is what I did before, " Jesson said. "And both times I was wrong. "

"This was created by your own people, " Obi-Wan said. "They would not make it impossible for you to succeed. Trust your forebears. "

But Obi-Wan felt a slight prickle at the back of his neck. Something. A warning? A clue? Something. What was it? Something about the array of weapons around the chair? The nozzles. The questions. Apparently simple for an X'Ting . . .

But the answers were wrong.

Obi-Wan's instinct was screaming at him, but he couldn't put his finger on what, exactly, it was trying to say. Couldn't, but had to. This was the last chance, and if he couldn't help his X'Ting companion, all was lost, and his cause was set back irreparably.

Still, in the depths of his heart, he felt a simple answer, heard it echoing with the truth of the Force.

"Answer truthfully, " he said again. "Don't try to be clever. Don't try to second-guess. Give it the answer that you know to be true. "

Jesson nodded. "The spider people, " he said. "Once, they were the lords of this planet. Once, they drove us from the surface. We sent them to the shadows. "

His hands splayed out on the control panel, and his eyes were locked on the rotating sphere. What? What . . . ?

It rotated more rapidly, and a thin whining sound arose in the room, seemed to envelop

them. Then the sphere accelerated faster still, and the segments fragmented and flew away.

"Answer incorrect, "the voice said. "Egg termination has begun. "

Obi-Wan stared, shocked. How wrong could he have been? Rarely had his insights been proven so horribly wrong. Perhaps he could burn through the floor with his lightsaber and save the royal pair . . .

He triggered his weapon and blazed it into the floor's pentagonal gold seal. Beneath it, he imagined, was a case-hardened durasteel vault door. The hologrammic image was melting, blazing, even as the first sparks leapt from the floor and the room filled with smoke. Jesson sat stunned in the chair, unable to move. "No, " he said. "I did everything right. I did everything. No, please. "

"Vaporization fifty percent complete-"

The chamber lights flashed on and off in dizzying bursts, and nozzles at the corners of the rooms began to hiss, expelling a thin greenish gas. Obi-Wan snapped his rebreather into his mouth, sorry that he didn't have one for Jesson, as well. But if he could just get through this lock, if he could just get to the egg vault, even if his companion perished, the mission would still . . .

"Vaporization complete. "

He felt numb.

Jesson leaned over the controls, sobbing. "Kill me, kill me, " he said, speaking to no one in particular, and the universe in general.

The weapons array around Jesson began to glow, and the mist filling the air was sucked toward it. In a few minutes the room was cleared of mist, and Jesson lay still. Obi-Wan looked at his companion's limp body, feeling a sense of despair and failure that he had rarely known.

Then . . . Jesson moved .

He sat up and looked around, as torpidly as if he had been drugged. "Why am I still alive? " he asked.

"Look at the holo, " Obi-Wan said quietly.

Without any fuss, the schematic had reappeared on the display. In miniature form, the egg chamber was rising up through the shaft.

"What . . . what is this? " Jesson said.

The computer began a series of clicks and pops.

"What does it say? " Obi-Wan asked.

Jesson listened carefully. "It says . . . 'Congratulations, X'Ting warrior. You have succeeded. ' "

Obi-Wan was staggered. What was this?

He looked more carefully at the weapons array around the chair and realized that he had been wrong. It wasn't a weapons array at all. They weresensors. And the gas? It had been some kind of analytic compound that combined with Jesson's pheromones, the smells that X'Ting emitted under stress. The resultant cocktail had been reabsorbed and analyzed by the sensor array . . .

Clarity struck like lightning. "You were never intended to answer the questions successfully, " Obi-Wan exclaimed. "Your answers were probably correct. Answering them proved that you knew X'Ting history. The sensors proved you were X'Ting. But it needed to know how you would react to failure. "

"To . . . failure? But I don't understand. "

"You might have sought the egg from a wish to destroy it. Or to control all the X'Ting. It

might have been for lust of power, or from greed. But when you came from love of hive, and failed, and saw your failure as killing the last king and queen, you felt not anger, but anguish. The test was not for your mind. It was for your heart. "

"It smelled my grief, " Jesson said, comprehending.

The burned gold seal rose up, exposing a durasteel column of the same shape. The column rose until it was Jesson's height, revealing a chamber. Thick transparent crystal windows slid open, showing a disk half a meter high. Around the edge of the disk blinked the red-white lights of an activated antigrav ring. With the greatest delicacy, Jesson pulled the disk out. The antigrav ring reduced its effective weight to no more than a few grams. Holding it in hovering position with the touch of their fingers, X'Ting and Jedi checked the little readout meter blinking at the top.

"They are alive, " he whispered. "I will take them to the council. Our medical clan will know what to do. "

"Yes, " Obi-Wan said.

The walls were blinking more rapidly. A speaker squealed a deep, booming vibration that rattled Obi-Wan's spine.

"What's that? " Jesson asked.

Obi-Wan inspected the controls. "I think it's a worm repellent, " he said. "The room is letting us leave. "

The doors unsealed. They examined the far door. The dead X'Ting lay limp and half melted. "What killed him? " Jesson asked.

"I don't know. And I don't want to take the risk. We know the hazards behind us. We'll go back the way we came. "

Chapter 7

The egg cask was relatively easy to take through the door leading to the worm chamber. They stood on the ledge and gazed down on the floor beneath them. Artificial lights had triggered along the ceiling and, in combination with the fungus, illuminated the plowed soil where the worms had fled the shrill, painful sounds. Obi-Wan extended his senses into Force: nothing. The cave was deserted.

They moved the disk down to the dirt floor. With the help of the antigrav unit, the carbonite disk virtually floated across the cavern. The rock walls seemed so huge and majestic now. Obi-Wan hadn't been able to appreciate it, but as artificial lights switched on in the ceiling, the sight of cascading stalactites and vast arched walls took his breath away.

What sort of celebratory scene had the builders pictured for this moment? Were thousands of X'Ting expected to be gathered now, cheering this ceremony as a new queen and king entered the world?

How strangely and sorrowfully it had all worked out.

There would be such celebration eventually, of course, but not now. Now there was silence and shadows.

The egg cask slid easily through the pentagonal openings on the far side of the cavern. Jesson seemed drained but exultant, a different being from the cocky young warrior who had accompanied Obi-Wan from the council chamber less than two hours before.

Truly, Obi-Wan thought, transformation was not a matter of time. It happened in a blink, or not at all.

They crawled through the darkness, pulling the precious cargo between them. Jesson found his way through the labyrinth more easily this time, and their steady shuffling was not really laborious-it was filled with a sense of purpose.

"You know, Jedi, " Jesson said back over his shoulder, "I may have been wrong about you. "

"It's possible, " Obi-Wan said, smiling.

A few moments passed, during which they proceeded in darkness, Jesson scenting his way and perhaps organizing his thoughts.

"I've seen what you can do, and who and what you are. " He paused. "It is even possible that Duris wasn't lying about that Jedi Master. Maybe he really did visit, and maybe he really did do something worth remembering. "

Obi-Wan chuckled. He himself might never know. At least, not until he returned to Coruscant. Then he might make polite inquiries, just to satisfy his curiosity.

On the other hand, some of the greatest Jedi were notoriously reticent to speak of their deeds. His questions might well be carefully deflected, his curiosity never satisfied.

They reached the next chamber, the hall of statues where they had first entered. Jesson climbed out and down onto the ledge. Obi-Wan gently pushed the egg cask out. Suspended by its antigrav unit, it floated down to Jesson as gently as a chunk of tilewood settling through water.

Obi-Wan jumped down lightly. There was a choice to make: to go back the way they had come, to reenter that first hollow statue and brave the cannibals again, or . . .

"I'm in no mood for an unnecessary battle, " the Jedi said. "Let's climb the rocks and see if the door up on the far side will open. "

"Agreed, " Jesson said. Fatigue blurred his voice. The last hours had to have been the most taxing of the X'Ting warrior's life. A frantic battle, a climb through darkness, pursuit by carnivorous cave worms, dooming and then saving his species' royal heirs . . .

Obi-Wan wondered: would an X'Ting deal with this stress by celebrating, or by hibernating?

When they were both safely on the stone ledge, they guided the egg cask up the incline toward what Jesson said was a door.

It took several nerve-racking minutes to get the egg cask over the rockfall. On the far side they found something ghastly: the corpse of another of Jesson's broodmates, his lower body jutting from beneath a boulder. His withered secondary arm still clutched a lamp.

So much death, in service to their hive. Any species that produced both a G'Mai Duris and a Jesson Di Blinth was formidable indeed.

Obi-Wan picked up the lamp. It was of industrial design, heavier and more powerful than the GAR-surplus model Jesson had brought down into the labyrinth. When he triggered it, an eye-searing beam splayed out against the wall.

Pity it hadn't helped Jesson's brother.

Just a few meters up the ramp was the door that would take them back to the main hive. A droid mechanism had barred the door. In all probability, the same booby trap had triggered the deadfall.

"I think my question is answered, " Jesson said behind Obi-Wan, voice deep and respectful.

"What question is that? " Obi-Wan asked, triggering his lightsaber's energy beam. He examined the door more closely, judging the best angle for the initial cut.

"Look. Please, " Jesson said.

Obi-Wan turned around, allowing his eyes to follow Jesson's beam of light. It played out along the cavern, illuminating in turn image after gigantic image of the kings and queens of the X'Ting, their greatest leaders in colossal array. Rendered in chewed stone was a veritable forest of noble, insectoid titans. Some male, some female, some tall and young, some stooped and old, their four hands variously held in postures of beseeching, imploring, protecting, comforting, teaching, healing.

A hall of heroes, indeed, Obi-Wan thought. "What is it? "

"There, " Jesson replied. "Where we first came in. " And he focused the beam on the

largest statue.

Now Obi-Wan could see the stooped, aged figure far more clearly. The narrow ladder tube they had descended had been a cane. The chamber in which they had fought so desperately against the cannibal X'Ting was, from without, seen to be a muscularly rounded torso. Their point of initial entry, the very first chamber, was a head with flared, triangular ears. The statue stood at least seventy meters high, taller than any other in the X'Ting Hall of Heroes.

Indeed, many questions were answered, but more remained, questions that Obi-Wan might never satisfy. For there, robed arm outstretched in greeting, gigantic and benevolent in the lamplight of a valiant, long-dead X'Ting soldier, loomed the hollow, chewed-stone statue of a smiling Master Yoda.