

Star Wars

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Ghosts of the Sith

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A short story by the author of the Scholastic series The Last of the Jedi. This interlude takes place between book #2, Dark Warning, and #3, Underworld.

The starcruiser lurched as Ferus Olin yanked it to starboard. The debris field was studded with jettisoned space garbage and small asteroids that could get sucked into your engine faster than you could say, Ooops. He could handle it. If only his hands would stop sweating.

Korriban, the seat of power for the ancient Sith order, lay behind the debris field. A source of evil that still calls evil to meet it, Obi-Wan Kenobi had once said. As Ferus's ship approached its inner atmosphere, he could feel the dark side of the Force rising around him.

Ferus had made the choice to come, had entered the co-ordinates into the nav computer - yet it had felt as though the decisions were being made outside of his own will. It was as though a tractor beam had got a hold of him, yanking him forward.

Why am I doing this? Why?

It made no sense, except in his bones.

Just days before, Obi-Wan had hiked up a mountaintop on Bellassa to track him down. Ferus had been your average, run-of-the-mill Clone Wars veteran/resistance fighter/Imperial prison escapee. Then Obi-Wan had shown up, and soon he was dodging bounty hunters and finding himself smack in the middle of civil wars, not to mention finding out that the galaxy was in the hands of the Sith.

Now here he was, a Jedi again. And Obi-Wan had toddled off to retire among the banthas on Tatooine.

He wasn't even a Jedi. Not really. He'd been Siri Tachi's apprentice when he'd left the Jedi order. He could feel the Force, but accessing it with the same swiftness, the same pureness, was a struggle.

He had been on his way to Coruscant from the Outer Rim to check out a rumour about imprisoned Jedi when the idea had occurred to him to use Korriban for a fuel stop.

He never said he'd been a smart Jedi.

Something had called him. An urge to test himself, maybe. He needed to see what he was up against. Even a glimpse of the dark side on Korriban would tell him more than Obi-Wan's words ever could.

He passed through the debris field and suddenly Korriban was there, crimson clouds obscuring its surface, seven moons the colour of bleached bone. He'd been here before as an apprentice. He remembered the feeling in his stomach, a kind of too-sweet sickness, like rotten fruit, in his mouth.

His 13-year-old traveling companion, Trever Flume, came up behind him. "Spooky. Those clouds..."

"The colour of blood."

"The colour of pain," Trever said.

Ferus glanced at him. Trever had seen much in his short life. The Imperials had killed his entire family. If pain could have a colour, Trever would know it.

They were cleared to land at Dreshdae. The spaceport lay in the centre of a plateau, just a huddle of ugly buildings under a metallic sky. Ferus eased the ship down to the landing platform, coming in low and easy.

"Can we review now, o' brave leader?" Trever asked. "According to you and the 'Wan, the Sith are the ultimate bad guys with awesome evil-doing power. And you want to refuel at their own private pit stop?"

"That about covers it." Ferus grinned. "We won't stay long."

Trever raked back his blue hair with one hand. "We've already stayed too long," he muttered.

Outside, an Imperial officer was already waiting.

"No access to Dreshdae. Emergency fuelling only. Stay by your ship."

"Charming welcome," Trever said as the officer walked away.

Ferus took in everything without seeming to, an old Jedi technique. The landing platform and hangar had been expanded recently - he could see the new ferrocrete laid in slabs next to the old, done hastily with humps and bumps and already cracked and scorched from the amount of traffic. The hangar was thick with Imperial traffic and battered star cruisers. Grungy pilots leaned against their ships, and Imperial officers hurried by importantly. Battle droids were everywhere. He'd thought most of them were out of service now.

He felt as though something brushed his shoulder, but there was no one there. Perspiration sprang upon his skin, rolled down between his shoulder blades. The dark side of the Force was so powerful here that it seemed to hang in the air like dank humidity. He remembered that feeling, too. And the voices.

At first they were so low, you thought it was a breeze, until you noticed there was no breeze. And the words weren't coming from the beings around him. They were inside him, insistent and soft, like damp fingertips caressing him.

The ghosts of the Sith were whispering in his ear, picking up his own fears, adding their own dark invitations.

You think you've lost the Force, but we can teach you. You'll be better than before. You've lost everything; we'll get it back for you. We can get you everything back... everything you had, and everything you want... just stay and join us....

"Ferus? You okay?"

"Fine."

The voices were bad enough. Now Ferus noticed the peculiar quality of sound in the hangar. Was it the design of the landing strips, the docking bays, or the low overhangs that made voices echo? Whatever it was, it gave the sound a hallucinatory quality. Footsteps you thought were approaching were actually receding. Voices you thought were behind you really came from up ahead. A landspeeder you thought would appear around a corner never arrived.

So when the voice came from behind him, but she appeared in front of him, he was surprised.

The woman surveyed the landing platform with a chilly blue gaze. Then she flung a luxurious chaughaine cape around her shoulders and stalked in his direction, followed by a high-ranking Imperial officer.

Ferus reached back casually and drew his hood over his head, shadowing his face.

"Take me immediately to the Valley of the Dark Lords," she said to the officer as she passed them.

"You know her?" Trever asked.

"Jenna Zan Arbor. The most-wanted galactic criminal before the Clone Wars. A brilliant scientist who developed cures for diseases that would decimate populations."

"That's good."

"Then she would introduce the virus into the population, killing thousands, before stepping in to save them. In the meantime, she would jack up the price."

"That's bad."

"You're catching on. She was obsessed with studying the Force. She might be one of the few in the galaxy who knows that Palpatine is a Sith. On my last mission, we tracked her here. She came to meet a Dark Lord. I wonder why she's here."

"Not our problem. We're headed to Coruscant, remember?"

"If we followed her..."

"We're not supposed to leave the ship. Normally I don't like obeying orders, but in this case... gladly." Trever shivered as he looked over the lip of the platform, down at Dreshdae.

Stay. We have things to teach you.

He wanted to stay. He could outwit the voices. They would think he was staying for them, for their powers, but he would stay only for his own reasons.

You can become stronger in the Force. This is the place to do it. You know it.

Ferus felt the urge inside, strong as the pull of a gigantic moon. He could learn from them and yet not surrender to the dark side. They were right - he was weak now, and he needed to be strong. He could stay.

"Ferus!" Trever put a hand on his wrist.

He looked down, and did not see the genial, wounded boy he was fond of. He saw an obstacle.

Good, good, you're learning.

He stared down at Trever's hand. He felt the warmth of skin on skin. A touch, one being to another. And in that touch he felt trust.

"I just think..." Trever said, "that at this point, we need to choose our battles."

With an effort, Ferus pushed against the voices. The dark side was here, but so was the Force he knew. He felt it around him and grabbed on.

Twenty metres ahead, Zan Arbor suddenly turned. He wasn't sure what had prompted her movement. Her blue gaze was intense as she studied him. He didn't move.

She said something to the officer next to her.

"We'd better go," Ferus said.

Without any appearance of haste, they turned and jumped into their cruiser.

He keyed in the request for clearance and counted off the seconds. It seemed to take years. In that span of time he realised how close he had come to staying. He had barely fought off that urge. They had found his weakness and exploited it.

The light flashed green. Departure Granted.

The light flashed yellow and the screen was blinking Contact Ground Control as he fired the engines.

Ignoring the summons, Ferus took off.

Korriban had taught him something. He wasn't strong enough to take on the Sith. He wasn't ready.

Yet he was on his way.