



Chapter Two

KHAI ESTATE, KESH

THE NIGHT WAS BEAUTIFUL. THE MOON WAS HUGE AND FULL, CASTING a silvery blue glow on the land surrounding the Khai estate. Gavar Khai leaned on the balcony of the master suite, naked save for a pair of light, billowy trousers. His black hair was undone from its usual top-knot and flowed loosely about his shoulders.

He looked down at his cybernetic arm, lifting it slowly, clenching and unclenching the fist. The technology was excellent. It looked in all respects like a real arm. It had complicated sensors, so that all tactile sensations were replicated. And in many ways, it was superior to a flesh-and-blood arm. Now that he was mastering the use of it, he realized that he would soon become stronger and faster with it than with his real hand. If such were the case, then the “disfigurement” so frowned upon by the Lost Tribe would be recast in the light of an advantage.

But . . . it was still a false hand. And when he had caressed his wife's body with it an hour earlier, her skin had not felt the same.

It was not a flaw—no senseless accident had caused its loss, but rather a fight with one of the most powerful Jedi who had ever lived. And yet, he could not shake the feeling that it should not have happened.

Khai sighed quietly, looking out again over the landscape of rocky hills and stubborn trees that grew, albeit twisted, in the arid environment. Directly below him he heard the pleasant flow of water from a large glass-and-ceramic fountain.

Typically, he found the sound soothing. Now, when he thought of the word *fountain*, all he could recall was the Fountain of the Hutt Ancients on Klatooine. It had been the epitome of arrogance and foolishness for Taalon to want to harvest a piece of the thing. It had led to the unnecessary loss of several members of the Lost Tribe. Normally, such a thing would not concern him. But he could not help but wonder if perhaps, had they had another ship full of Sith, they might have been able to triumph over and properly subdue Abeloth after all, rather than being in the unpleasant position of trying to strike an alliance with her.

Yet . . . this could be a good thing. If she were, indeed, more powerful than the Lost Tribe—

He sensed his wife's wakefulness and concern, heard the soft pad of bare feet as she came up behind him and slipped her arms around his trim waist. Absently he covered one of her hands with his cybernetic one. Her cheek pressed against his back.

"Why does my husband not rest soundly in his own bed?" Lahka asked quietly. "Surely he is not worrying about the event to come."

Gavar did not answer immediately. He sighed, then turned to face his wife and gather her in his arms.

"I am, yes," he confessed. "There is much riding on how things go tomorrow night." He glanced up at the moon and amended his words. "Tonight."

She smiled up at him. Lahka had not a speck of Force sensitivity in her. Normally, that would have made her automatically undeserving of his affections. But Lahka had other extremely worthy qualities. She was intelligent, patient, and knew how to keep secrets. And she was

beautiful, as beautiful as any Keshiri woman, though she was human. Even now, well past her youth, her soft smile moved him. She had proven a good mate and mother, and he had missed her.

Her eyes searched his. “You are worried about our daughter,” she said.

Gavar tapped her nose lightly. “And you tell people you aren’t Force-sensitive.”

“I am Gavar-sensitive,” she said, humor warm in her voice, “which is perhaps even better.”

They had not spoken of Vestara until now, and Gavar found that he yearned to unburden himself of the worry. No one in the galaxy knew Vestara as well as he and Lahka did. Perhaps she could shed some insight.

So standing on the balcony, his arms around his wife, Gavar Khai spoke quietly of the challenges he had set their daughter. Of her success, or possible failure. Of killing High Lord Taalon. Lahka didn’t protest, or seem upset in any way. Both her daughter and her mate were powerful dark side users. He was the one best suited to guide Vestara, not she. But Gavar knew she loved them both, and he welcomed the chance to speak freely.

“She loves this Jedi boy?” Lahka asked.

“While he is yet a boy, he is already a Jedi Knight. Their equivalent of a Saber. And yes, I believe she does.”

“Do you think she could sway him? He could be a powerful asset to the Tribe, and it sounds like he will treat our daughter properly—with respect and care.” Lahka had the correct priorities—first the Tribe, and then their child.

“I fear he might sway *her*. Sometimes I think she is truly my daughter, a fierce and proud Sith, as I have trained her to be. And sometimes I think she is on the verge of betraying all of us.”

She gave him another one of her smiles, almost radiant with love. “Not our Vestara. She knows her duty. To the dark side, to the Sith, to the Lost Tribe, to us. Even if she falters, I have faith she will not truly fall from the path.”

He pressed his forehead to hers, sighing softly. “I hope you are right,” he said. He did not have to elaborate. If Vestara betrayed them, his duty would be to slay her. And Lahka knew it.

Wordlessly, Lahka lifted her mouth to his and kissed him. Her fingers curled around his cybernetic arm, and she led him back into the bedroom.

Gavar left her again once she had fallen asleep, quickly donning his robes and slipping out. He walked the halls of his own home as if he were a stranger, seeing everything with new eyes. Was this truly his glorious home, filled with art and high ceilings and musical instruments? He paused in front of Vestara's room.

He thought of the day that he had knocked on this door, knowing what Vestara did not—that soon she would begin her training at the Temple. He remembered bringing out Muura, telling the puzzled young Keshiri female that her services would no longer be needed.

Muura had known better than to ask for a reference. She had left quietly, after Vestara had departed. He had not been ungenerous; Muura had clothing, and food for several days. And he had alerted one or two of his friends who had daughters that she would be departing. If they were interested in employing her, they would find her. Regardless, Muura's time as a servant in the Khai household had come to its logical and inevitable end, and they both knew it.

Unable to resist, Gavar opened the door and looked into his daughter's room. Lahka had kept it as if the girl had only just left and might one day return, though Khai knew that would never happen save for brief visits.

The windows were closed against the cool night air, but the drapes were open. By the soft light of the moon, Khai could see everything. His gaze wandered to the beautiful glass vases, once filled with flowers; to the overstuffed bed that had not been slept in for a long time; to the dresser and mirror where Muura used to prepare Vestara. It was calm and orderly without being severe.

Here he had embraced his only child as she departed for her destiny; here, he would always see her, her strong body and lovely face adorned with vor'shandi markings, wearing an exquisite dress, standing straight and tall although he knew she was nervous.

It had been so promising a beginning for her . . .

Khai took a long, last look, then quietly closed the door. He trailed

his fingers against the smoothly polished stone of the walls as he left the main house. Massive doors opened with a twitch of a finger, and a moment later Gavar Khai was standing outside in the cool night air. He took a deep breath and looked out over his lands. Then, knowing where he needed to go now, he turned to make his way down a winding stone road.

The Khai family was nowhere near the wealthiest on Kesh, but they had done well enough. Vestara would have inherited everything upon her parents' death, and would have become a wealthy and powerful woman. The estate would have made her wealthy; her innate ability and shrewdness would have taken her very far in Sith society.

Would have.

Still could?

Gavar Khai did not know, and this not knowing ate at him, fueled the restlessness that would not let him sleep, even in his own bed next to a devoted wife.

It was a good thing, to be clever enough so that others did not guess one's motives. He had been proud that Vestara had misled the Skywalkers—even the vaunted Luke Skywalker—sufficiently well that she was still in their company. He had been excited at the thought of bringing so talented a Force-user as Ben Skywalker over to the dark side—firmly at the side of a Sith woman.

A Sith woman who had killed a High Lord . . . a High Lord who was becoming something . . . *else*. Had that been treachery, or loyalty?

Was Vestara still playing the game they had arranged?

Was Sith Saber Gavar Khai the father being duped, not Luke Skywalker?

For the life of him, Khai could not tell. He growled softly, following the road down to the stabling area. The stables were, on the exterior, as beautiful and ornate as the great house itself. Off to the side, there was a gated area for riding beasts such as the shumshur and the muntok, and in the center, tall and rectangular, was the aerie. He stood in front of it and flicked a finger, moving the heavy bolt on the great door that kept the uvak confined, and entered.

Vestara was playing not only with her own life and reputation, but with those of her father. Of her very lineage. If she failed to turn Ben Skywalker and enable the defeat of his father, then Gavar Khai would

bear the brunt of the reprisals from Lord Vol and the rest of the Circle. And if she actually was swayed by the persuasion of the boy—

“It will not stand,” he said aloud.

He stood in the center of the aerie. It was quite dark inside; uvak were diurnal creatures, and enclosing them in a dark space usually put them right to sleep. He had kept the door open, and a small patch of moonlight was the only illumination. Inside were two tall columns, vanishing into the darkness. The roof, now firmly shut, was retracted during the day and the beasts were allowed to fly, within limits; a collar affixed to their legs would emit a painful shock if they drifted too far from home.

There were two uvak in the Khai family. Gavar had one and Vestara, when she was much younger, had honored the family by causing a hatchling to imprint upon her. Tikk, she had named him, for the clacking sound his beak had made as he crawled out of the shell. Gavar had watched the hatching, had watched his daughter exert her will to make the creature come to her instead of to another Sith youngling.

She'd loved Tikk. He had known, as she did not, what might happen to the beast when Vestara had chosen him to bear her to the Temple for her apprentice training.

When Vestara had arrived at the Temple, her new Master, Lady Rhea, had appeared about to give an order to have Tikk slain. Vestara reacted properly—by not protesting. Lady Rhea, pleased, had spared the beast.

It was an old tradition, a sort of hazing, never spoken of to those who had not already experienced it. Khai had known to expect it, and when he had been asked afterward if he wished to recover Tikk from the Temple, he'd realized his daughter had passed her first test.

He gazed up at the column that served Tikk for a nest. Khai used the Force to enhance his ability to see in the dark; from this vantage point, Tikk seemed to be slumbering deeply. With a slight tweak of the Force, Khai leapt upward, landing softly beside the uvak. Tikk was curled up beak-to-tail, his wings folded over his body like a blanket.

Khai watched him for a moment, then glanced at the other pillar. His mount was also asleep. Khai extended his real, living hand to the other uvak and gently, unobtrusively, guided the creature into a slumber from which she would not awaken for several hours. Satisfied, he

reached out to pet Tikk's long, sinuous neck, sending calm to the creature. Tikk stirred slightly, opened one eye, and made a rumbling, purring sound before closing the eye and falling even more deeply asleep.

Tikk had been a loyal mount, serving Vestara well, as she had served the Sith well.

Gavar Khai no longer knew if she did so or not.

There was a *snap-hiss* as he lit the lightsaber. A soft red glow bathed Tikk's sleeping features. A heartbeat later the uvak's head toppled down to land with a thud and a slight crunch on the stone floor. Tikk's eyes were still closed.

The death had been accomplished with no pain to the creature, and Khai was glad of it. Tikk had done nothing to warrant suffering. Khai extinguished the lightsaber, nodded to himself, and Force-dropped to land gently.

He could sleep now.