



THE PRESENT

JADEN FOUND HIMSELF ON HIS KNEES, THE ROOM SPINNING. Blood leaked from his right temple, splattered the floor in little crimson circles. More blood oozed from the stumps of his fingers. Pain blurred his vision, clouded his thinking. The short, rapid shrieks of an alarm blared in his ears, rising and falling in time with the dim flashes of overhead backup lights. Strange lights. Like little starbursts buried deep in the green resin of the ceiling. A haze of black smoke congealed near the ceiling and darkened air that stank of melted plastoid, rubber, and ozone. He thought he caught the faint stink of decaying flesh but could not be sure.

Gingerly he placed his unwounded hand to his right temple, felt the warm, sticky blood, the small hole there. The blood was fresh; the wound recent.

The rapid flashes of the lights made his movements seem herky-jerky, not his own, the stop-starts of a marionette in unpracticed hands. His body ached. He felt as if he'd been beaten. The stumps of the fingers he'd lost on the frozen moon throbbed, the wounds somehow reopened and seeping pus. His skull felt as if someone had driven a nail through it.

And he had no idea where he was.

He thought he felt eyes on him. He looked around the dark corridor, his eyes unable to focus. He saw no one.

The floor vibrated under him, as if coursing with power, the rale of enormous lungs. He found the feeling disquieting. Filaments dangled like entrails from irregular gashes torn in the walls. Black scorch marks bordered the gashes. A control panel, a dark rectangle, hung loose from an aperture in the wall, as if blown out by a power surge.

He found it difficult to focus for long on anything before his field of vision started to spin. His bleary eyes watered from the smoke. The flashing lights and the wail of the siren disoriented him, would not let him gather his thoughts.

The pain in his head simply would not relent. He wanted to scream, to dig his fingers into his brain and root out the agony. He'd never felt anything like it.

What had happened to him?

He could not remember. Worse, he could not think clearly.

And then he felt it: the faint tang of dark-side energy. Its taint suffused the air, greasy on his skin, angry, evil. He swallowed down a dry throat.

Had he been attacked by a Sith?

With an effort of will, he pushed the touch of the dark side away from his core, held it at arm's length. Having an enemy gave him focus. He steeled himself against the pain in his head and stood on weak legs. Each beat of his heart felt like a hammer blow to his skull. Pound. Pound.

He tried to hold his ground but the room began to spin more rapidly, the alarm loud in his ears, the floor growling under him, the ringing, spinning, whirling. He wobbled, swayed. Nausea pushed bile into the back of his throat.

Without warning, the pain in his temple spiked, a white-hot flash of agony that summoned a prolonged scream. His wail rebounded off the walls, carried off into the darkness, and with the scream as a sound track, a flood of memories and images streamed across his con-

sciousness, rapid flashes of colors, faces, a series of half-remembered or half-imagined things. He was unable to focus for long on any of the images, unable to slow them down; they blazed in and out of his awareness like sparks, flashing for a moment, then gone, leaving only a shadowy afterimage.

He squeezed his eyes shut and clamped his mouth closed to cut off the scream. The pain would not stop. His head was going to explode, surely it was going to burst.

He was teetering, his head pounding, his stomach in his throat, his eyes watering.

Unable to keep his feet, he sagged back to the floor. The spinning began to subside. The pain, too, began to fade. He sagged with relief. He would not have been able to bear much more.

Clarity replaced pain, and as his head cleared, images and events refitted themselves into the jigsaw puzzle of his memory, reconstituted him from their fragments. He sank into the Force, found comfort there. He closed his eyes for a time and when he opened them, he looked about with what felt like new eyes.

He sat in the middle of a wide corridor. The dim, intermittent flashes of the strange overhead lights showed little detail. The walls, ceilings, and floors were composed of a substance he'd never seen before, light green, semitranslucent. At first he thought it was some form of plastoid, or hued transparisteel, but no, it was a resin of some kind. For the first time, he realized that the floor was not merely vibrating under him, it was warm, like flesh. Faint lines of light glowed deep within it, barely visible, capillaries of luminescence. The arrangement looked ordered, a matrix of some kind, and the pattern of their flashes was not random, though he could not look at it long without its flashes disorienting him.

He tried to make sense of what he was seeing. The architecture, the technology it implied. . . .

Where was he?

A word leapt to the forefront of his mind, a flash that came and went without explanation.

Rakatan.

He leaned forward, trying to remember, feeling as if he were on the verge of some revelation. He tried to pull the word back, to force it to take on meaning and make sense, but it eluded him.

“Rakatan,” he said, and the word sounded strange on his lips. Saying it aloud triggered no more memories.

But more and more memories were clicking into place, connecting names, events, and faces, the backstory of his life being told just below the level of his consciousness. He must have been hit on the head, hit hard. Understanding would come eventually, or so he hoped.

Yet he knew he could not sit still and wait for it. The dark side was all around him. Palpable anger polluted the air, pressed against him. Alarms were wailing. The vibrations in the floor rose and fell like lungs, lurching, not so much like ordinary breathing as a death rale. He had to get away from wherever he was.

An explosion rumbled somewhere in the distance and everything shook.

He was in a ship then, or a station of some kind. He looked for a viewport but saw none.

He crawled over to the wall and used it to help himself stand. The pain in the stumps of his fingers caused him to wince. The smooth surface of the wall pulsed faintly under his touch and he had the sudden, uncomfortable fear that he had awakened in the belly of some nameless pseudomechanical beast, that he'd been swallowed and was now being slowly digested.

Licking his lips, he stood away from the wall. His wounded fingers had left bloody smears on the smooth green surface.

The comforting weight of his lightsaber hung from his

belt and he put his hand on its cool hilt. He had made it. . . .

Where had he made it?

On a ship. On *Junker*. He'd made it on *Junker*.

He remembered giving his other blade, the one he'd made as a boy on Coruscant, to Marr.

To Marr.

A face flashed in his memory: tan, weathered, a ruff of hair haloing a towering forehead. The face of a Cerean. Marr.

"Marr?" he called over the sirens, his raw voice bouncing down the corridor. In his mind's eye he saw a lazy eye, a malformed asymmetrical face, and a ready smile, and a name accompanied the image. "Khedryn?"

No response.

He was alone.

He took a moment to evaluate his physical condition, examining his limbs, chest, abdomen. Other than the reopened wounds on his hand and the small hole in his head, he'd suffered no serious visible harm. He had been in a fight, though. His cheek felt sore to the touch; his ribs and his arms had several bruises, as if from blocking blows.

He took inventory of his gear, sifting through pockets, the cases on his belt—nutrition bars, extra power packs for his blaster, liquid rope, a glow lamp. No medpack, though.

He took the glow lamp in his wounded hand and activated it. Its beam put a path of luminescence on the semitranslucent floor, down the corridor. The hair-thin filaments in the floor seemed to glow in response, the photons communicating in a tongue he could not comprehend. He fell in behind the beam of his glow lamp and tried to find a way out.

He felt more himself as he moved. The corridor split repeatedly. Vertical seams in the walls opened wetly at

his approach to reveal corridors and rooms beyond. Once more, he marveled at the technology.

The smoke made his eyes leak, turned his throat raw. The blinking patterns of light in the walls and floor drew him on, will-o'-the-wisps tempting him to some fate he did not understand. Distant explosions continued to rock the vessel and he staggered under their onslaught, his legs still weak.

The energy of the dark side thickened. He was closing on its source. Its power alarmed him. He leaned into it, against it, as he might against a rainstorm. He flashed on a memory of Force lightning crackling out of his fingers, energy born of fear or anger. He studied his hands, the one unwounded, the other missing three fingers, and knew that fear and anger no longer held any power over him. Force lightning was not a weapon he would use again.

Ahead he saw a large vertical seam, its size suggestive of a much larger door, a much larger chamber beyond. The lights in the floor and walls made a kaleidoscope of color around him, reds, greens, yellows, beckoning him forward, but he slowed, sensing something awful in the air, some lurking danger that lived in the darkness beyond the door. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. The lights flared more rapidly, more urgently, as if sensing his emotion. He stopped, swallowed. Sweat collected on his flesh.

His glow lamp died, then the lights in the walls and floor, leaving only the dim intermittent flashes of the overhead lights. He stood alone in the corridor, bathed in darkness, in light, in darkness, in light.

A shriek carried from the room beyond the seam and pierced the tension, a prolonged wail of hate only partially human. Its pure, unadulterated rage staggered Jaden. He took a half-step back, his hand on the hilt of his lightsaber. Adrenaline flooded him, turned his senses hyperacute.

The shriek diminished to a savage growl, but he heard the cunning in it. A huge boom sounded from within the chamber, another. Footsteps? Some kind of locomotion, surely. Whatever horror lurked in the chamber was coming toward him.

He fell into the Force and unclipped his lightsaber from his belt, the metal of the hilt cool in his sweat-slicked hand.

“Jaden,” said a voice from behind him, a voice that sunk a fishhook into his memory and started reeling recollections to the surface of his consciousness.

He turned, saw furtive figures emerge from the shadows. Had they been following him? How had he missed them?

Jaden recognized them, one with his arm around the throat of the other, but his mind did not put a name to them right away.

“I know you,” Jaden said.

And all at once memories flooded him. He remembered where he was, why he had come, what had happened to him. The sudden rush of memory and emotion overwhelmed him. He clutched at his head and groaned.

One of the figures held something in his off hand, a lightsaber hilt. He ignited it and a red line split the darkness.

Another shriek sounded from the chamber behind Jaden. The lights in the wall flared to life in response, brighter than before, and Jaden at last recognized them for what they were—veins coursing with dark-side energy.

He *had* awakened in the belly of a beast.

Another shriek shook the walls.

He ignited his lightsaber, its yellow light his answer to the darkness that surrounded him.