



# STAR WARS<sup>®</sup>

## LOST TRIBE OF THE SITH PRECIPICE

JOHN JACKSON MILLER

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# Chapter One

5,000 years BBY

“Lohjoy! Give me something!” Scrambling to his feet in the darkness, Commander Korsin craned his neck to find the hologram. “Thrusters, attitude control—I’ll take *parking jets!*”

*A starship is a weapon, but it’s the crew that makes it deadly.* An old spacer’s line: trite, but weighty enough to lend a little authority. Korsin had used it himself on occasion. But not today. His ship was being deadly all on its own—and his crew was just along for the ride.

“We’ve got nothing, Commander!” The serpent-haired engineer flickered before him, off-kilter and out of focus. Korsin knew things belowdecks must be bad if his upright, uptight Ho’Din genius was off-balance. “Reactors are down! And we’ve got structural failures in the hull, both aft and—”

Lohjoy shrieked in agony, her tendrils bursting into a mane of fire that sent her reeling out of view. Korsin barely suppressed a startled laugh. In calmer times—half a standard hour ago—he’d joked that Ho’Din were half tree. But that was hardly appropriate when the whole engineering deck was going up. The hull had ruptured. Again.

The hologram expired—and all around the stocky commander, warning lights danced, winked, and went out. Korsin plopped down again, clutching at the arm-rests. *Well, the chair still works.* “Anything? Anybody?”

Silence—and the remote grinding of metal.

“Just give me something to shoot at.” It was Gloyd, Korsin’s gunnery officer, teeth shining in the shadows. The half smirk was a memento from a Jedi lightsaber swipe years earlier that just missed taking the Houk’s head off. In response, Gloyd had cultivated the only wit aboard as acidic as the commander’s own—but the gunner wasn’t finding much funny today. Korsin read it in the brute’s tiny eyes: *One close call is all.*

Korsin didn’t bother to look at the *other* side of the bridge. Icy glares there could be taken as a given. Even now, when *Omen* was crippled and plummeting out of control.

“Anybody?”

*Even now.* Korsin’s bushy eyebrows flared into a black V. What was *wrong* with them? The adage was right. A ship needed a crew united in purpose—only the purpose of being Sith was the exaltation of self. Every ensign an emperor. Every rival’s misstep, an opportunity. *Well, here’s an opportunity,* he thought. *Solve this, someone, and you can flat-out have the blasted comfy chair.*

Sith power games. They didn’t mean much now—not against the insistent gravity below. Korsin looked up again at the forward viewport. The vast azure orb visible earlier was gone, replaced by light, gas, and grit raining upward. The latter two, he knew, came from the guts of his own ship, losing the fight against the alien atmosphere. Whatever it was, the planet had *Omen* now. A jolt, and more screams. This wouldn’t last long.

“Remember,” he yelled, looking at them for the first time since it had started. “You *wanted* to be here!”

\* \* \*

And they had—most of them, anyway. *Omen* had been the ship to get when the Sith mining flotilla gathered at Primus Goluud. The Massassi shock troops in the hold didn't care where they went—who knew what the Massassi even *thought* half the time, presuming they did at all. But many sentients who had a choice in the matter picked *Omen*.

Saes, captain of the *Harbinger*, was a fallen Jedi: an unknown quantity. You couldn't trust someone the Jedi couldn't trust, and they would trust just about anyone. Yaru Korsin, the crewmembers knew. A Sith captain owning a smile was rare enough, and always suspect. But Korsin had been at it for twenty standard years, long enough for those who'd served under him to spread the word. A Korsin ship was an easy ride.

Just not today. Fully loaded with Lignan crystals, *Harbinger* and *Omen* had readied to leave Phaegon III for the front when a Jedi starfighter tested the mining fleet's defenses. While the crescent-shaped Blades tangled with the intruder, Korsin's crew made preparations to jump to hyperspace. Protecting the cargo was paramount—and if they managed to make their delivery before the Jedi turncoat made *his*, well, that was just a bonus. The Blade pilots could hitch back on *Harbinger*.

Only something had gone wrong. A shock to the *Harbinger*, and then another. Sensor readings of the sister ship went nonsensical—and *Harbinger* yawed dangerously toward *Omen*. Before the collision warning could sound, Korsin's navigator reflexively engaged the hyperdrive. It had been in the nick of time . . .

. . . or maybe not. Not the way *Omen* was giving up its vitals now. *They did hit us*, Korsin knew. The telemetry might have told them, had they had any. The



ship had been knocked off-course by an astronomical hair—but it was enough.

Commander Korsin had never felt an encounter with a gravity well in hyperspace, and neither had any of his crew. Stories required survivors. But it felt as though space itself had yawned open near the passing *Omen*, kneading at the ship's alloyed superstructure like putty. It lasted but a fraction of a second, if time even existed there. The escape was worse than the contact. A sickly snap, and shielding failed. Bulkheads gave. And then, the armory.

The armory had exploded. That was easy enough to know from the gaping hole in the underside of the ship. That it had exploded in hyperspace was a matter of inference: they were still alive. Grenades, bombs, and all the other pleasantries his secondary cargo, the Massassi, were taking to Kirrek would have gone up in a theatrical flourish, taking the ship with it. But instead the armory had simply vanished—along with an impressive chunk of *Omen's* quarterdeck. The physics in hyperspace were unpredictable by definition; instead of exploding outward, the breached deck simply left the ship in a seismic tug. Korsin could imagine the erupting munitions dropping out of hyperspace light-years behind the *Omen*, wherever it was. That would mean a bad day for someone!

*Oh, wait. It's already my turn.*

*Omen* had shuddered into realspace, decelerating madly—and taking dead aim at a blister of blue hanging before a vibrant star. Was that the source of the mass shadow that had interrupted their trip? Who cared? It was about to end it. Captured, *Omen* had skipped and bounced across the crystal ocean of air until the descent began in earnest. It had claimed his engineer—probably all his engineers—but the command deck still held. Tapani craftsmanship, Korsin

marveled. They were falling, but for the moment they were still alive.

“Why isn’t he dead?” Half mesmerized by the streamers of fire erupting outside—at least the *Omen* was belly-down for this bounce—Korsin only vaguely grew aware of harsh words to his left. “You shouldn’t have made the jump!” stabbed the young voice. “Why isn’t he *dead*?”

Commander Korsin straightened and gave his half brother an incredulous stare. “I *know* you’re not talking to me.”

Devore Korsin jabbed a gloved finger past the commander to a frail man, still jabbing futilely at his control panel and looking very alone. “That navigator of yours! Why isn’t he *dead*?”

“Maybe he’s on the wrong deck?”

“*Yaru!*”

It wasn’t a joke, of course. Boyle Marcom had been guiding Sith ships through the weirdness of hyperspace since the middle of Marka Ragnos’s rule. Boyle hadn’t been at his best in years, but Yaru Korsin knew a former helmsman of his father’s was always worth having. Not today, though. Whatever had happened back there, it would rightfully be laid at the navigator’s feet.

But assigning blame in the middle of a firestorm? That was Devore all over.

“We’ll do this later,” the elder Korsin said from the command chair. “If there is a later.” Anger flashed in Devore’s eyes. Yaru couldn’t remember ever seeing anything else there. The pale and lanky Devore little resembled his own ruddy, squat frame—also the shape of their father. But those eyes, and that look? Those could have been a direct transplant.

*Their father.* He’d never had a day like this. The old spacer had never lost a ship for the Sith Lords. Learning at his side, the teenage Yaru had staked out his own

future—until the day he became less enamored of his father’s footsteps. The day when Devore arrived. Half Yaru’s age, son to a mother from another port on another planet—and embraced by the old admiral without a second thought. Rather than find out how many more children his father had out there to vie for stations on the bridge, Cadet Korsin appealed to the Sith Lords for another assignment. That had not been a mistake. In five years, he made captain. In ten, he won command of the newly christened *Omen* over a captain many years his senior.

His father hadn’t liked that. He’d never lost a ship for the Sith Lords. But he’d lost one to his son.

But now losing the *Omen* was looking like a family tradition. The whole bridge crew—even the outsider Devore—exhaled audibly when rivulets of moisture replaced the flames outside the viewport. *Omen* had found the stratosphere without incinerating, and now the ship was in a lazy saucer spin through clouds heavy with rain. Korsin’s eyes narrowed. Water?

*Is there even a ground?*

The terrifying thought rippled through the minds of the seven on the bridge at once, as they watched the transparisteel viewport bulge and warp: *Gas giant!* It took a long time to crash from orbit, presuming you survived reentry. How much longer, if there was no surface? Korsin fumbled aimlessly for the controls set in his armrest. *Omen* would crack and rupture, smothered under a mountain of vapors. They shared the thought—and almost in response, the straining portal darkened. “All of you,” he said, “heads down! And grab something . . . *now!*”

This time, they did as told. He knew: Tie it to self-preservation, and a Sith would do anything. Even this bunch. Korsin clawed at the chair, his eyes fixed on the forward viewport and the shadow swiftly falling across it.

A wet mass slapped against the hull. Its spindly form tumbled across the transparisteel, lingering an instant before disappearing. The commander blinked twice. It was there and gone, but it wasn't part of his ship.

It had wings.

Startled, Korsin sprang from his seat and lurched toward the viewport. This time, the mistake was certifiably his. Already stressed before the midair collision, the transparisteel gave way, shards weeping from the ship like shining tears. A hush of departing air slammed Korsin to the deck plating. Old Marcom tumbled to one side, having lost hold of his station. Sirens sounded—how were they still working?—but the tumult soon subsided. Without thinking, Korsin breathed.

“Air! It's air!”

Devore regained his footing first, bracing against the wind. Their first luck. The viewport had mostly blown out, not in—and while the cabin had lost pressure, a drippy, salty wind was slowly replacing it. Unaided, Commander Korsin fought his way back to his station. *Thanks for the hand, brother.*

“Just a reprieve,” Gloyd said. They still couldn't see what was below. Korsin had done a suicide plunge before, but that had been in a bomber—when he'd known where the ground was. That there *was* a ground.

Once-restrained doubts flooded Korsin's mind—and Devore responded. “Enough,” the crystal hunter barked, struggling against the swaying deck to reach his sibling's command chair. “Let me at those controls!”

“They're as dead for you as they are for me!”

“We'll see about that!” Devore reached for the armrest, only to be blocked by Korsin's beefy wrist. The commander's teeth clenched. *Don't do this. Not now.*

A baby screamed. Korsin looked quizzically at Devore for a moment before turning to see Seelah in the doorway, clutching a small crimson-wrapped bundle. The child wailed.

Darker-skinned than either of them, Seelah was an operative on Devore's mining team. Korsin knew her simply as Devore's female—that was the nicest way to put it. He didn't know which role came first. Now the willowy figure looked haggard as she slumped against the doorway. Her child, bound tightly in the manner of their people, had worked a tiny arm free and was clawing at her scattered auburn hair. She seemed not to notice.

Surprise—was it annoyance?—crossed Devore's face. "I sent you to the lifepods!"

Korsin flinched. The lifepods were a nonstarter—literally. They'd known that back in space when the first one snagged on its stubborn docking claw and exploded right in the ship's hull. He didn't know what had happened to the rest, but the ship had taken such damage to its spine that he figured the whole array was a probable loss.

"The cargo hold," she said, gasping as Devore reached her and grasped her arms. "Near our quarters." Devore's eyes darted past her, down the hallway.

"Devore, you can't go to the lifepods—"

"Shut up, Yaru!"

"Stop it," she said. "There's land." When Devore stared at her blankly, she exhaled and looked urgently toward the commander. "*Land!*"

Korsin made the connection. "The cargo hold!" The crystals were in a hold safely forward from the damage—in a place with viewports angled to see below. There was something under all that blue, after all. Something that gave them a chance.

"The port thruster will light," she implored.

“No, it won’t,” Korsin said. Not from any command on the bridge, anyway. “We’re going to have to do this by hand—so to speak.” He stepped past the ailing Marcom to the starboard viewport, which looked back upon the main bulge of the ship trailing aft. There were four large torpedo tube covers on either side of the ship, spherical lids that swiveled above or below the horizontal plane depending on where they were situated. They never opened those covers in atmospheres, for fear of the drag they would cause. That design flaw might save them. “Gloyd, will they work?”

“They’ll cycle—once. But without power, we’re gonna have to set off the firing pins to open them.”

Devore gawked. “We’re not going out there!” They were still at terminal velocity. But Korsin was moving, too, bustling past his brother to the port viewport. “Everyone, to either side!”

Seelah and another crewman stepped to the right pane. Devore, glaring, reluctantly joined her. Alone on the left, Yaru Korsin placed his hand on the coldly sweating portal. Outside, meters away, he found one of the massive circular covers—and the small box mounted to its side, no larger than a comlink. It was smaller than he remembered from inspection. *Where’s the mechanism? There.* He reached out through the Force. *Careful . . .*

“Top torpedo door, both sides. *Now!*”

With a determined mental act, Korsin triggered the firing pin. A large bolt released explosively, shooting ahead—and the mammoth tube cover moved in response, rotating on its single hinge. The ship, already quaking, groaned loudly as the door reached its final position, perched atop the plane of the *Omen* like a makeshift aileron. Korsin looked expectantly behind him, where Seelah’s expression assured him of a similar

success on her side. For a moment, he wondered if it had worked . . .

*Thoom!* With a wrenching jolt that leveled the bridge crew, *Omen* tipped downward. It didn't slow the ship as much as Korsin had expected, but that wasn't the point. At least they could see where they were going now, what was below. *If these blasted clouds would clear . . .*

At once, he saw it. Land, indeed—but more water. Much more. Jagged, rugged peaks rose from a greenish surf, almost a skeleton of rock lit by the alien planet's setting sun, barely visible on the horizon. They were rocketing quickly into night. There wouldn't be much time to make a decision . . .

. . . but Korsin already knew there was no choice to be made. While more of the crew might survive a water landing, they wouldn't last long when their superiors learned their precious cargo was at the bottom of an alien ocean. *Better they pick the crystals out from among our burned corpses.* Frowning, he ordered the starboard-side crew to activate their lower torpedo doors.

Again, a violent lurch, and *Omen* banked left, angling toward an angry line of mountains. Rearward, a lifepod shot away from the ship—and slammed straight into the ridge. The searing plume was gone from the bridge's field of view in less than a second. Gloyd's torpedo crew would be envious, Korsin thought, shaking his head and blowing out a big breath. Still people alive back there. *They're still trying.*

*Omen* cleared a snow-covered peak by less than a hundred meters. Dark water opened up below. Another course correction—and *Omen* was quickly running out of torpedo tubes. Another lifepod launched, arcing down and away. Only when the small craft neared the surf did its pilot—if it had one—get the engine going.

The rockets shot the pod straight down into the ocean at full speed.

Squinting through sweat, Korsin looked back at his crew. “Depth charge! Fine time for a mixed warfare drill!” Even Gloyd didn’t laugh at that one. But it wasn’t propriety, the commander saw as he turned. It was what was ahead. More sharp mountains rising from the waters—including a mountain meant for them. Korsin reeled back to his chair. “Stations!”

Seelah wandered in a panic, nearly losing the wailing Jariad as she staggered. She had no station, no defensive position. She began to cross to Devore, frozen at his terminal. There was no time. A hand reached for her. Yaru yanked her close, pushing her down behind the command chair into a protective crouch.

The act cost him.

*Omen* slammed into a granite ridge at an angle, losing the fight—and still more of itself. The impact threw Commander Korsin forward against the bulkhead, nearly impaling him on the remaining shards of the smashed viewport. Gloyd and Marcom strained to move toward him, but *Omen* was still on the move, clipping another rocky rise and spiraling downward. Something exploded, strewing flaming wreckage in the ship’s grinding wake.

Agonizingly, *Omen* spun forward again, the torpedo doors that had been their makeshift airbrakes snapping like driftwood as it slid. Down a gravelly incline it skidded, showering stones in all directions. Korsin, his forehead bleeding, looked up and out to see—

—nothing. *Omen* continued to slide toward an abyss. It had run out of mountain.

Stop. *Stop!*

“*Stop!*”



Silence. Korsin coughed and opened his eyes.

They were still alive.

“No,” Seelah said, kneeling and clinging to Jariad.  
“We’re already dead.”

*Thanks to you*, she did not say—but Korsin felt the words streaming at him through the Force. He didn’t need the help. Her eyes said plenty.

## Chapter Two

*Omen's* permanent crew came from the same human stock as Korsin: the debris of a noble house, launched skyward centuries before in the whirlwind that formed the Tapani Empire. The Sith had found them, and found them useful. They were skilled in commerce and industry, all the things the Sith Lords needed most but never had time for with their world-building and world-destroying. His ancestors ran ships and factories, and ran them well. And before long, mingling their blood with that of the Dark Jedi, the Force was in his people, too.

They were the future. They couldn't acknowledge it, but it was obvious. Many of the Sith Lords were still of the crimson-hued species that had long formed the nucleus of their following. But the numbers were turning—and if Naga Sadow wanted to rule the galaxy, they had to.

*Naga Sadow.* Tentacle-faced, Dark Lord and heir to ancient powers. It was Naga Sadow who had dispatched *Omen* and *Harbinger* in search of Lignan crystals; Naga Sadow who needed the crystals on Kirrek, to defeat the Republic and its Jedi.

Or was it the Jedi and their Republic? It didn't matter. Naga Sadow would kill Commander Korsin and his

crew for losing their ship. Seelah was right about that much.

Yet Sadow need not lose the war, depending on what Korsin did now. He still had something. The crystals.

But the crystals were high above at the moment.

It had been a night of horrors, getting 355 people down from the lofty plateau. Sixteen injured had died along the way, and another five had tumbled into the darkness from the narrow ledge that formed the only apparent way up or down. No one doubted that evacuation had been the right call, though. They couldn't stay up there, not with the fires still burning and the ship precariously perched. The last to leave the ship, Korsin had nearly soiled himself when one of the proton torpedoes had disengaged from the naked tube, tumbling over the precipice and into oblivion.

By sunrise, they'd found a clearing, halfway down the mountain, dotted with wild grasses. Life was everywhere in the galaxy, even here. It was the first good sign. Above, *Omen* continued to burn. No need to wonder where above them the ship was, Korsin thought. Not while they could follow the smoke.

Now, walking back into the afternoon crowd—less an encampment than a gathering—Korsin knew he never need wonder where his people were, either. Not while his nose worked. “Now I know why we kept the Massassi on their own level,” he said to no one.

“Charming,” came a response from over his shoulder. “I should say they are not very happy with *you*, either.” Ravilan was a Red Sith, pureblooded as they came. He was quartermaster and keeper of the Massassi, the nasty lumbering bipeds that the Sith prized as instruments of terror on the battlefield. At the moment the Massassi didn't seem so formidable. Korsin followed Ravilan into the fiendish circle, made even less pleasant by the stench of vomit. Florid mon-

sters two and three meters tall sprawled on the ground, heaving and coughing.

“Maybe some kind of pulmonary edema,” Seelah said, passing around purified-air canisters salvaged from an emergency pack. Before connecting with Devore and securing a place on his team, she’d been a battlefield medic—though Korsin couldn’t tell from her bedside manner, at least with Massassi. She barely touched the wheezing giant. “We’re no longer at elevation, so this should subside. Probably normal.”

To her left, another Massassi hacked mightily—and mutely regarded the result: a handful of dripping scar tissue. Korsin looked at the quartermaster and asked drily, “Is that normal?”

“You know it’s not,” Ravilan snarled.

From across the clearing, Devore Korsin charged in, shoving his son into Seelah’s hands before she was done wiping them. He seized the brute’s massive wrist, looking for himself. His eyes flared at his brother. “But Massassi are tougher than anything!”

“Anything they can punch, kick, or strangle,” Korsin said. An alien planet, however, was an alien planet. They hadn’t had time to do a bioscan. And all the equipment was high above. Devore followed Seelah, backing away from the sickly Massassi.

Eighty of the creatures had survived the crash. Korsin learned that Ravilan’s assistants were burning a third of those survivors, even then, over the hillside. Whatever unseen thing it was on this planet that was killing the Massassi, it was doing it quickly. Ravilan showed him the stinking pyre.

“They’re not far enough away,” Korsin said.

“From whom?” Ravilan responded. “Is that depression a permanent camp? Should we remove to a different mountain?”

“Enough, Rav.”

“No witty comeback? I’m surprised. You at least plan *that* far ahead.”

Korsin had fenced with Ravilan on earlier missions, but now wasn’t the time. “I said, *enough*. We’ve surveyed below. You saw it. There’s nowhere to go.” There were beaches at the bottom of the bluff, but they terminated against the oily cliffs that began the next mountain in the chain. And going farther along the chain meant trips through tangles of razor-sharp brambles. “We don’t need an expedition. We’re not staying.”

“I should hope not,” Ravilan said, his own nose turned by the smell of the fires. “But your brother—I mean, Captain Korsin’s other son—feels we shouldn’t wait to return.”

Yaru Korsin stopped. “I have the transmitter codes. It’s my call to make.” He looked up at the second, more distant smoky plume far above. “When it’s safe.”

“Yes, by all means. When it’s safe.”

The commander hadn’t wanted Devore on the mission. Years earlier, he had been relieved when his half brother had abandoned a naval career, drifting into the Sith’s mineralogical service. Power and riches were more easily had there, searching for gems and Force-imbued crystals. With their father’s sponsorship, Devore had become a specialist in using plasma weapons and scanning equipment. The recent conflict with the Jedi found him in high demand—and assigned, with his team, to *Omen*. Korsin wondered whom he’d played a joke on to deserve that. He’d been told Devore officially answered to him, but that would have been a first. Not even Sith Lords were that powerful.

“You should have kept us in orbit!”

“We were never *in* orbit!”

Korsin recognized the voice of the navigator, Marcom, coming from over the dusty rise. He already knew the other one.

The old man was trying to push his way out of the crowd when Korsin topped the hill at a full run. Devore's miners weren't letting Boyle go. "You don't know my job!" he yelled. "I did all that I could! Oh, what's the use talking to . . ."

Just as Korsin reached the clearing, the crowd surged forward, as if pulled down a drain. One sickeningly familiar crackle followed another.

"No!"

Korsin saw the lightsaber first, rolling toward his feet when he breached the crowd. His father's old helmsman lay ahead, gutted. Next to Seelah and Jariad stood Devore, his lightsaber glowing crimson in the lengthening shadows.

"The navigator attacked first," Seelah said.

The commander gawked.

"What *difference* does it make?" Korsin charged into the center, lifting the loose lightsaber into his hand with the Force. Devore stood his ground, smiling gently and keeping his lightsaber burning. His dark eyes had a wild look, a familiar one. He was shaking a little, but not from fear—not fear Yaru Korsin could feel. The commander knew it was something else, something more dangerous. He turned Marcom's unlit weapon tip-down and shook it. "That was our navigator, Devore! What if the star charts don't work?"

"I can find our way back," Devore said smartly.

"You'll have to!" Korsin grew conscious of the mix around him. Gold-uniformed miners in the circle, yes, but bridge crew, too. A red-faced Sith—not Ravilan, but one of his cronies. He was undeterred. "This is not going to do any good, any of you. We wait here until it's safe to return to the ship. That's all."

Seelah straightened, emboldened by the supporters around. "When will it be safe? In days? Weeks?" Her

child wailed. “How long must we last—until it’s safe enough for *you*?”

Korsin stared at her and breathed deeply. He threw Marcom’s lightsaber to the ground. “Tell Ravilan there’s one more for the pyre.” As a begrudging crowd gave him room to exit, he said, “We go when I say. That ship blows up, or tips into the ocean, and we really will have problems. *We go when I say.*”

The world spun. As Korsin stepped backward, Gloyd stepped forward, keeping a wary yellow eye on the grumbling masses. He’d missed the fun.

“Commander.”

They looked past each other, watching Sith in all directions. “Not really happy here, Gloyd.”

“Then you’ll want to hear this,” the hulking Houk rasped. “As I see it, we’ve got three choices. We get these people off this rock in whatever will fly. Or we look for cover and hide until they all kill one another.”

“What’s the third choice?”

Gloyd’s painted face crinkled. “There isn’t one. But I figured it’d cheer you up if you thought there was.”

“I hate you.”

“Great. You’ll make someone a fine Sith someday.” Korsin had known Gloyd since his first command. The Houk was the kind of bridge officer every Sith captain wanted: more interested in his own job than in taking someone else’s. Gloyd was smart to spare himself the trouble. Or maybe he just loved blowing things up too much to want to leave the tactical station.

Of course, with that station left roughly a kilometer up the mountain, Korsin had no idea how useful his old ally would be. But Gloyd still had fifty kilos on most of the crew. No one would move against them while they stood together.

No one would move alone, anyway.

Korsin looked back across the clearing at the mob.

Ravilan was there now, huddled with Devore and Seelah and a couple of junior officers. Devore spotted his brother watching and averted his gaze; Seelah simply stared back at the commander, unabashed. Korsin spat an epithet. “Gloyd, we’re *dying* here. I don’t understand them!”

“Yeah, you do,” Gloyd said. “You know what we say: You and me, we’re about the job. Other Sith are about what’s *next*.” The Houk plucked a scaly root from the ground and sniffed it. “Trouble is, this whole *place* is about what’s next. You’re trying to keep ’em together—when you’ve really got to show ’em there’s something after this rock. There’s no time to win people over. You pick a path. Anybody won’t walk it . . . ”

“Push ’em off?” Korsin grinned. It really wasn’t his style. Gloyd returned the smile and sank his teeth into the root. Wincing comically, the gunnery chief excused himself. They wouldn’t be living off the land—not *this* land, anyway.

Looking back at the teeming crowd, Korsin found his eyes drifting up toward the dwindling tendril of smoke drifting from the heights above.

Above. Gloyd was right. It was the only way.



## Chapter Three

The Massassi had died on the mountain. Korsin had left at dawn with three bearers: the healthiest of the Massassi, each passing around the remaining air canister. It hadn't lasted, and neither had they. Whatever it was on this planet that didn't like Massassi existed up above as well as below.

It was just as well, Korsin thought, leaving the blood-colored corpses where they fell. He couldn't run Massassi. They were pliant and obedient warriors, but they answered to force, not words. A good Sith captain needed to use both, but Korsin leaned more on the latter. It had made for a good career.

Not down the mountain, though. Things were going to get worse. They already had. It had been cold in the night—chillier than he had expected from what seemed like an oceanic climate. Some of the heavily injured had failed from exposure or from lack of medical care.

Later, some kind of animal—Gloyd described it to him as a six-legged mammal, half mouth—vaulted from a burrow and tore into one of the injured. It took five exhausted sentries to slay the beast. One of Devore's mining specialists cast a chunk of the creature's body into the campfire and sampled a piece. She

vomited blood and died within heartbeats. He was glad he hadn't been awake for that.

Whatever relief there was in knowing there was life on the planet ended right there. *Omen's* crew didn't number enough to sort out what was safe and what wasn't. They had to go home, regardless of the state of things with the ship.

Korsin looked up into the morning sky, now streaked more by cirrus clouds than smoke. He hadn't told the others about the thing that had struck the viewport during the descent. What had he seen? Another predator, probably. There was no point in bringing it up. Everyone was scared enough, and fear led to anger. The Sith understood this—they made use of it—but uncontrolled, it wasn't doing them any good. The sun hadn't even set before lightsabers came out again in a dispute over a foodpak. One less Red Sith. Not twenty standard hours since the crash and things were starting to get basic. Tribal.

Time *had* run out.

*Omen* had come to rest in a small indentation down a short ways on the other side of a crest. Sky and ocean spread out ahead. The ship had stopped on the incline just in time, and there wasn't a flat plane left on the vehicle. The sight of his ship, shattered on the alien rocks, moved Korsin only a little. He had known opponents—mainly captains in the Republic—who were sentimental about their commands. It wasn't the Sith way. *Omen* was a tool like any other, a blaster or lightsaber, to be used and discarded. And while the ship's resilience had saved his life, it had betrayed him first. Not a thing to be forgiven.

Still, it had a purpose. Flying again was out of the question, but the sight of the metal tower just above the bridge gave him hope. The receiver would find the Republic's hyperspace beacons in an instant, telling

Korsin his location. And the ship's transmitter would tell the Sith where to find *Omen*—and, more important, the Lignan. Maybe not in time for the engagement at Kirrek, but Sadow would want it nonetheless. Walking carefully over loose stones to the airlock, Korsin tried not to think of the other possibility. If the Battle of Kirrek was lost because *Omen* was lost, he would die.

But he would die having completed his mission.

A vial lay empty in Devore's open, quaking palm.

Devore had somehow gotten to *Omen* first—and was sitting in the commander's chair. Well, slouching was more like it. "I see your cabin's intact," Korsin said. He remembered Seelah returning to the living quarters for little Jariad. In a fire, you go for the thing you love.

"I didn't go there first," Devore said, limply letting the vial drop to the deck beside the command chair. There was another container there, particles of glistening spice still beside it. *He's been here awhile*, Korsin guessed. He had a sneaking suspicion spice was why Devore had gone into mining in the first place; it had certainly shortened his naval career. "I didn't go there—I mean, it wasn't first," Devore said, pointing vaguely to the ceiling. "I went to look at the transmitter array."

"Structure looked sound."

"From outside, maybe." Slouched in the command chair, Devore watched blankly as his brother clambered over fallen beams to reach the ladder. Above the ceiling panels, Korsin saw what Devore must have seen: a melted mass of electronics, fried when a seam opened in the hull during the descent. The external transmitter stood, all right—but as a monument to its former purpose, nothing more.

Climbing down, Korsin made his way to the comm control panel and pressed the button several times.

Nothing. He sighed. The story was the same everywhere on the bridge. He switched the transmitter on one last time and stepped back over the debris. *Omen* was dead. But Sith had survived death before, and the guts of *Omen* still held enough spare parts to allow a transplant. His eyes darted to the hallway. Surely, in the workshop—

“Gone, with the armory!” The explosion had vented most of the stores into space. Devore buried his face in his hands, finished.

Korsin wasn’t. “The landing bay. The Blades.” The fighters had been in flight when *Omen* made its sudden departure, but something in the landing bay might be serviceable.

“Forget it, Yaru. The deck was crushed when we hit. I couldn’t even get in there.”

“Then we will cut the ship down deck by deck and fabricate the parts we need!”

“With what? Our lightsabers?” Devore rose, steadying himself against the armrest. “We’re done!” His cough became a laugh. The Lignan crystals offered the Sith power—just not the kind to operate a distress beacon, a receiver, or even the celestial atlas. “We are *here*, Yaru. We are here and we are out of action. Out of the war. Out of everything. We are out of it!”

“*You’re* out of it.”

Korsin climbed into a hallway and began rummaging through cabinets, looking for something that would help those below. Unfortunately, *Omen* had been outfitted for a deep-space mission. Sith provisioners were sparing. No portable generators at all. Another compartment. Clothes. That would help tonight, but they wouldn’t be staying.

“We have to stay,” Devore said, as if he had read Korsin’s thought.

“What?”

“We have to stay,” Devore repeated. Standing alone,

a tombstone in the shadows of the hallway, he spoke with a voice that quaked. “It’s been two days. You don’t understand. It’s been two days.”

Korsin didn’t stop his search, passing in front of his brother to another door, jammed by the damage.

“It’s been two days, Yaru. Naga Sadow will think we ran away. To take the Lignan crystals for *ourselves!*”

“He’ll blame *Saes*,” Korsin said, remembering. Naga Sadow hadn’t fully trusted the fallen Jedi who captained the *Harbinger*. He’d asked Korsin to keep an eye on *Saes*, to report back. When he did—if he did—Korsin fully intended to explain how the *Harbinger* had lost control, how the *Harbinger* had struck the *Omen*. With any luck, Sadow had *Harbinger* already—

Korsin released the door handle. He hadn’t seen what happened to *Harbinger* after the collision, but it was a safe bet that Sadow would have the crippled *Harbinger* already. And *Saes*, sitting there with only half the shipment of Lignan crystals and unable to deliver, would be bargaining for his life, saying anything about the *Omen*. He would sing harmonies the Khil would be proud of.

Korsin looked down the hallway. “Back at Primus Goluud. On the station. You met with Sadow, didn’t you?”

Devore shuffled. “To discuss the Lignan operation.”

“You weren’t discussing something else? Like who should command this mission?”

Devore glared at him with bloodshot eyes. That look again.

“You were discussing who should command this mission,” Korsin pressed, surprised at his own calm. “What did you say when he said no?”

The commander’s blood froze. He knew how things always went with Devore—how things must have gone. Sadow had rejected his half brother, and Devore had said something. What? Not enough to offend Sadow—no,

Devore was still here in the wreck, drawing labored breaths. But Sadow would have reason to suspect Devore's loyalty, would have cause to wonder whether his crystals were safe. The one thing Yaru Korsin had was his reputation for playing it straight—but now at a minimum, Sadow would know that Korsin was not the absolute master of his own vessel. And if he wasn't . . .

Devore's hand shook—and his lightsaber flew into it. The weapon that had killed Boyle Marcom ignited in his hand.

“What did I tell you?” Korsin yelled, approaching him anyway. “No games on my ship!”

Shaken, Devore darted back toward the bridge. Korsin followed. “The only way we come out of this is if we're completely clean, Devore! Sadow can't think we did this on purpose!” He reached the doorway. “*No games on my ship!*”

Korsin walked into a hurricane. Devore stood atop the command chair, calling forth all the debris of the bridge like a deity on a mountaintop. Korsin rolled, fragments of transparisteel raking his face and ripping into his uniform. Reaching Gloyd's station, he mounted his own defense, cocooning himself in the Force against the onslaught. Devore was as strong as any in his family—and now he was riding chemicals Korsin didn't understand.

A beam slammed against the bulkhead—and *Omen* shivered. A second strike, and the bridge tipped forward, knocking Devore off his perch. Korsin didn't let him get up again. The moment Devore's head appeared behind the chair, Korsin Force-flung him out through the ruined viewport. He had to get this outside, before everything was lost.

Korsin bolted uphill through the hallway to the airlock, huffing as he did. *Fighting a spice-crazed assailant on a teetering deathtrap? I must be the crazy one!* The

step down from the portal was now a leap. His boot sank into a soft patch as he hit, wrenching his ankle and sending him tumbling down the scree-covered slope. Biting his lip, he tried to clamber back from the brink toward *Omen's* crushed nose. A shadow was falling on him. He lit his lightsaber—

Suddenly he saw it—or it saw him. Another winged creature, high over the near ridge, circling and watching. Watching *him*. Korsin blinked sand from his eyes as the creature soared away. It was the same as the one from the descent—almost. The difference was . . .

*Thoom!* Korsin felt himself lifted into the air and before he could register what was happening, he slammed into the wreck of *Omen*. Devore marched into view, pebbles rolling before him as if propelled by a magnet. Trapped against the crumpled frame, Korsin struggled to stand. His father's familiar look was gone from Devore's face, replaced by a bleak nothingness.

"It's over, Yaru" Devore said, raising his lightsaber high. "We should have done this before. It's been decided. *I'm* Commander Korsin."

*It's been decided?* The thought flashed through Yaru Korsin's mind even as the lightsaber flashed past his ear. It sparked against the *Omen's* battered armor. The commander raised his weapon to parry the next stroke—and the next, and the next. Devore hammered away. No style, just fury. Korsin found nowhere to go, except along the side of the ship, sliding backward toward the port-side torpedo tubes. Three of the doors had been opened in the descent. The fourth—

Korsin spotted the control box, just like the one he'd remotely manipulated in the descent. He flexed toward it through the Force, and ducked. The firing pin activated, bulleting forward and catching Devore in the lightsaber shoulder. The torpedo door tried to cycle open, but pinned against the ground it only dug into the strata,

sending a stream of rocks flooding beneath the ship. *Omen* lurched forward again, with Devore sliding in front of it toward the edge and the ocean below.

It took a minute for Korsin to get loose from the handhold he'd found on the ship, and another for the dust to clear. Finding *Omen* surprisingly still, he gingerly stepped away on the crushed slate. *Omen's* bow had impaled itself on a razor rise on the promontory, just meters from the edge.

Ahead of it, partially buried in rubble, lay his brother. His golden uniform shredded, his shoulder bloodied, Devore writhed on the precipice. He tried to kneel, shrugging off the surrounding rocks, only to collapse again.

Devore still gripped his lightsaber. How he could still be holding on to it with the whole world falling down, Korsin didn't know. The commander fastened his own lightsaber to his belt.

"Yaru?" Devore said. It was a whimper now. "Yaru—I can't see." His face was tear-stained, but intact. Then his lightsaber rolled free, plummeting out of sight over the cliff's edge and revealing the oily pink stain on his hand. *Red Rage*. That was what had been in the vials, Korsin thought. That was what had given Devore his manic power, and that was what was stealing from him now.

The shoulder wound wasn't bad, Korsin saw, lifting his brother to his feet. Devore was young; with Seelah tending to him, he might even survive out here, presuming he could live without the spice. But . . . what then? What could be said that wasn't already said?

*It's been decided.*

A helpful hold became a tighter grip—and Yaru Korsin turned his brother to face the setting sun over the ocean. "I *will* complete my mission," he said, looking over the side to the ocean yawning far below. "And I will protect my crew."

He let go.



## Chapter Four

It was nearly night when Korsin appeared on the twice-trodden trail, pulling a makeshift sledge crafted from a mess table. With thermal blankets and the remaining foodpaks heaped upon it, Korsin had needed the help of the Force a few times to get it down the mountain. Straps from pouches cut into his shoulders and neck, leaving ugly welts. The single campfire had become several. He was glad to see them.

Ravilan appeared glad to see him, too, after an initial surprised reaction. “The beacon! Is it working?”

“I pushed the button myself,” Korsin announced.

“And?”

“And we wait.”

Ravilan’s eyes narrowed in the smoky haze. “You know where we are? You spoke to someone?” Korsin’s attention had already turned to unloading the packs to anxious crewmembers. Ravilan lowered his voice. “Where . . . are your Massassi?”

Korsin didn’t look up. “All dead. You don’t think I wanted to do this myself, do you?”

The quartermaster’s crimson face paled a little. “No, of course not—Commander.” He looked back at the summit, fading in the surrounding darkness. “Perhaps others of us could have a look at the transmitter. We might—”

“Ravilan, if you want to go back up there, you’re welcome to. But I’d bring a team with some heavy equipment, because if we don’t get some supports under that ship, the next person who boards could take it on its last flight.” Korsin set down the last pack and stretched his neck. “Where are *your* Massassi?”

Ravilan stared. “All dead.”

Korsin stepped free, at last, from the cabling he’d used to drag the sledge. The bonfire blazed invitingly. So why was he so cold?

“Seelah.”

“Where’s Devore?”

He looked at her coldly. Seelah stood, her tarnished gold uniform flickering in the firelight. “Where *is* Devore?” he repeated.

“He went up—” She stopped herself. No one was supposed to leave camp. And now, the look in Yaru Korsin’s eyes.

She squeezed Jariad, who woke crying.

The pep talk began as many of Korsin’s did—with a summation of Things Everyone Already Knows. But this speech was different, because there were so many things nobody knew, himself included. The assurance that Naga Sadow still valued their cargo rang true for all, and while they were clearly a long way from anywhere, few could imagine the Sith Lord’s desire exceeding his reach. Even if they were less sanguine about what Sadow felt about *them*, Korsin knew his crew would accept that someone, somewhere, was looking for them.

They just didn’t need to know how long that might take. It was too soon for that. Sadow, he would figure out later. This place couldn’t be about what was next. It had to be about now.

By the speech’s end, Korsin found himself growing

unusually philosophical: “It was our destiny to land on this rock—and we are bound to our destiny. For a time, it looks like, we’re also bound to this rock,” he said. “So be it. We’re Sith. Let’s make it ours.”

He looked toward a satellite campfire and spotted Gloyd and the remains of his gunnery crew bristling against the breeze. He waved them to the main bonfire. It would be another hard night, Korsin knew, and the supplies he’d brought would soon run out.

But he knew something else. Something he’d seen, that no one else had.

*The winged beast had carried a rider.*

The Force was with them.

Gripping her son, Seelah watched the circle break. Nodding, human Sith set to their tasks, stepping around Ravilan, the master without Massassi. He stood aloof, commiserating with the Red Sith and the few other surviving aliens. Energized and triumphant, Yaru Korsin conferred with Gloyd—keeping his confidences, as he always had, to the huge alien. Too strong to be defeated, too stupid to betray him—and dumb to the Force. The perfect ally.

Turning away from the Houk, Korsin saw Seelah. A new land to be broken to his will, and no one to stand in his way. He smiled.

Seelah returned his gaze coldly. Thinking of Devore, thinking of little Jariad, she made a quick decision. Summoning all her anger, all her hatred, all her will . . .

. . . Seelah smiled back.

Devore had underestimated Yaru Korsin. Whatever came, Seelah thought, she would not. She would bide her time.

Time, they had.

*Read on for an excerpt from*  
Star Wars: **Fate of the Jedi: Omen**  
*by Christie Golden*  
*Published by Del Rey Books*

Kesh  
Two Years Earlier

The ocean sighed as it rushed forward and receded in a rhythm even more ancient than what was unfolding on its lavender-sand shores. While the sun was bright and warm, a breeze came from the sea to cool the heated faces of the two figures standing there.

They faced each other, as still as if they were carved from stone, the only motion around them that of their hair and heavy black robes as the wind toyed with them.

Then, as if by some unheard signal, one of them moved. The soft sound of the ocean was punctuated by a sharp *snap-hiss*. The almost perfectly symmetrical, light purple features of Vestara Khai's adversary were abruptly cast into sickly green relief. Vestara activated her own weapon with a fluid motion, saluted her opponent with it, settled into position, and waited to see who would make the first move. She balanced lightly on the balls of her booted feet, ready to leap left, right, or straight up. Still her opponent did not move.

The sun was at its height and its light was harsh, beating down on them like something physical. Their

heavy dark robes were stifling hot, but Vestara would no sooner abandon her robes than she would abandon her weapon or her heritage. The robes were traditional, ancient, a deep and valued part of who she was, and she would endure the encumbrance. The Tribe valued strength as much as it valued beauty; rewarded patience as much as initiative. The wise being was the one who knew when which was called for.

Vestara sprang.

Not at her opponent, but to the left and past him, leaping upward, turning in the air, and slashing outward with the blade. She felt the blade impact and heard its distinctive sizzle. He gasped as she landed, flipped, and crouched back into a defensive position. The sandy surface was treacherous, and her foot slipped. She righted herself almost instantly, but that moment was all he needed to come at her.

He hammered her with blows that were more of strength than grace, his lithe body all lean muscle. She parried each strike, the blades clashing and sizzling, and ducked underneath the final one. Lightness and agility were her allies, and she used them freely.

Her long, light brown hair had come loose from its quickly twisted braid, and the tendrils were a distraction. She blew upward to clear her vision just in time to block another one of the strong blows.

“Blast,” she muttered, leaping back and switching the blade to her other hand. She was completely ambidextrous. “You’re getting good, Ahri.”

Ahri Raas, apprentice, member of the native—and conquered—species of Keshiri and Vestara Khai’s close friend, offered her a smile. “I’d say the same about you, Ves, except for the fact that that sand-jump messes you up every single ti—”

She interrupted him with a sudden upward leap, landing on his shoulders, balancing there lightly with the use

of the Force, and plunged the lightsaber straight downward, aiming for his back between his shoulder blades. He dived forward, Force-pushing her off, but not before she had touched the tip of the glowing red blade to his robes. Ahri arched, his dive thrown off as his body twisted from the pain; even the training lightsabers inflicted a powerful shock.

Vestara leapt as Ahri dived, using his Force push to her own advantage, turning twice in the air and landing surely, facing him. She smirked in satisfaction as she brushed her renegade locks out of the way. Ahri completed his dive and came to his feet, rolling in the sand. Vestara extended her arm with the grace of a dancer. Ahri's lightsaber was snatched from his hand and flew into hers. She grasped it and dropped into the Jar'Kai stance, ready to come at him with both blades. Ahri looked up and sighed, dropping back into the sand.

"And you get distracted far too easily. Focus, Ahri, focus," she chided. She gestured casually, just a slight jerk of her chin, and a handful of sand flew toward Ahri's face. Muttering, he lifted his empty hand and used the Force to deflect the grains.

"It's just training, Ves," he muttered, getting to his feet and dusting himself off.

"It's *never* just training," she shot back. She deactivated her training lightsaber, hooked it back on her belt, and tossed Ahri's to him. The Keshiri youth caught it easily, still looking disgruntled. Vestara undid her hair and fluffed it for a minute, letting the air penetrate to the roots to cool her scalp. Her long fingers busily re-braided it, properly this time, as she continued to speak, while Ahri shook grains of purple sand out of his own white, shoulder-length hair.

"How often have I told you that? Say that in the presence of one of the Masters and you'll never make it beyond a Tyro."

Ahri sighed and rose, nodding to acknowledge the truth of what she said. Neither of them had been formally chosen as an apprentice yet, although they had been training in classes under the tutelage of various Masters for years, their strengths and weaknesses in the Force noted and analyzed and pushed.

Vestara knew that, at fourteen, it was still possible, even likely, that she would be chosen by a Master as his or her formal apprentice. But she chafed horribly at the delay. Some Tyros were chosen at much younger ages, and Vestara knew that she was strong in the Force.

She reached out for a flask of now warm water and the canteen resting on the sand floated to her, the lid unfastening as it moved. Vestara gulped down the liquid thirstily. Sparring at the height of the sun was exhausting, and Ahri always muttered about it, but she knew it toughened her. Vestara handed the canteen to Ahri, who also drank.

She regarded him for a moment. He was a nearly perfect physical specimen of a species whose physical strength, agility, and harmony of features and form had become an ideal for her own people. He could easily pass for a member of her own species—he would make a striking human, but a human nonetheless—were it not for the pale purple cast to his skin. His eyes, too, were slightly larger than a human's; large and expressive. His shoulders were broad, his hips narrow, and there was not an ounce of superfluous fat on his frame. His face, though, was flushed a darker purple than usual because he was overheated, and his hair had far too much sand in it.

“That’s two for two,” she said. “You up for another round?” She gave him a wicked grin, which was exaggerated by the small scar at the corner of her mouth. The scar that the Tribe saw as a flaw. It was plain on her face, right out in the open—there was very little she

could do to disguise it. Attempts had been made to heal it and to correct it with cosmetic surgery. Those attempts had been mostly successful and now, to be sure, it was not all that noticeable. But this was a world where any flaw, any scar or deformity, was a strike against one's potential for advancement.

The scar added insult to injury, as far as Vestara was concerned—because of its location, the thin line almost always made her look like she was smiling, even when she wasn't. She had hated that about it until Lady Rhea, one of the most respected of the Sith Lords, had told her that deception was actually a very useful thing indeed.

"It mars your beauty," Lady Rhea had said bluntly, pausing as she strolled down the line of potential apprentices after a formal ceremony. "A pity." She, whose beauty was only slightly diminished by the cruel ravages of time, reached out a long finger and touched the scar. "But this little scar—it can aid you. Make others think you are *something you are not*." She tapped the scar lightly with each of the last four words, emphasizing her point.

That had made Vestara feel a bit better. All of a sudden, looking like she was smiling all the time, even when she wasn't, seemed like a good thing to her.

"I think I've sweated off at least two liters already," Ahri replied. "Can't we continue in the training courtyard at least? It's cooler in the mountain shadows."

At least he wasn't refusing the offer of another round. Vestara dragged a black-draped arm across her own forehead. She had to admit, fighting in the cool shadows of the proud columns, beautiful statuary, and sheer mountain stone in which the Temple courtyard was nestled had a definite appeal right at the moment. While they were not yet formally apprenticed to any of the Sabers or the Masters, as Tyros they would be per-



mitted to spar in the courtyard. That was as far as they were allowed to go, however. Neither of them had seen inside the Temple or, even more significant, inside the Ship of Destiny yet. The ship's name was *Omen*, but the name "Ship of Destiny" had fallen into common usage. For such it was. Such an ancient, precious part of the Tribe's heritage, with all its secrets and mysteries, was not just for any eyes.

"Well," Vestara said, "we can go back and finish there. But only because you're too fragile to—"

Her teasing insult died in her throat as something passed over the sun.

It was not an uvak, one of the deceptively delicate winged reptiles that were used for aerial transportation. Vestara's dark brown eyes widened in shock.

"Ves," Ahri said in a faint voice, "that's . . . is that a *ship*?"

The hairs on her arms and the back of her neck stood on end despite the heat as she watched, lifting a hand to shade her eyes. She still couldn't speak, but nodded. She was pretty sure that was exactly what the thing in the sky was.

Yet it looked nothing like the Ship of Destiny, or any other vessels she had seen depicted or heard described. Rather than being long and rectangular, or V-shaped, it was a symmetrical sphere. With . . . with wings like an uvak. It moved swiftly and silently, and she now saw that its color was a dark orange-red. Closer and closer it came, until for a wild moment Vestara thought it was going to land right on the beach beside them.

It was coming in for a landing, certainly, but not quite so close as that. It was heading for the sharp, ridged mountains that seemed to spring up from the ocean itself. That was where the Ship of Destiny had crashed so long ago, and for a moment Vestara was alarmed that this vessel would suffer the same fate. Sudden worry

suffused her. It couldn't! She had to know who was inside, what sort of beings they were. Perhaps they were a species she had never before encountered. The thought was thrilling.

As it passed over, its shadow fell across her for an instant. A sensation of coldness, much more than the expected sudden coolness of something blocking direct sunlight, brushed Vestara. She gasped slightly as the feeling tingled through her.

It was cold, yes, forbidding . . . but also challenging. Curious. Intrigued.

By *her*.

She no longer was afraid for the vessel's safety. Its pilot knew exactly what it was doing. It was heading directly and quite deliberately for the ruins of the Ship of Destiny, and the Temple, almost as old, that had been constructed around it.

Any fear or trepidation she had experienced a moment before evaporated like water on a hot rock. Vestara reached out in the Force and summoned Tikk, her uvak. Tikk had been basking in the sunlight, craving the heat as all reptiles did, his sharp beak and brilliant green eyes closed. Now he lifted his bright gold head, stretched out his long neck, and spread his red-and-black ruff in the uvak equivalent of an awakening stretch. With an answering croak, he spread his wings, leapt upward, and flew the few meters toward Vestara and Ahri.

She barely paid attention to Tikk, keeping her eyes glued to the strange vessel as it grew smaller and finally vanished from her sight. When she could see it no longer, Vestara took a deep, steadying breath, then gathered up the long hem of her robes, turned to where Tikk patiently awaited her, and began to run as fast as her long legs would carry her in the cumbersome sand, using the Force to stabilize her feet and push her along.

“Come on,” she called over her shoulder.

“Where are we going?” asked Ahri, hastening to catch up.

Vestara Force-leapt upward, landing gracefully on the broad back of the uvak. Ahri followed suit, his arms slipping around her waist as he sat behind her.

“To follow the ship,” Vestara said. “Couldn’t you feel it? It was for us, Ahri.”

Tikk gathered himself, shifting his weight from one clawed foot to the other, then sprang upward.

“For us?” Ahri shouted over the beat of the membranous, veined wings—wings so very like those of the vessel that had brushed Vestara’s thoughts only a few heartbeats earlier.

“For us,” Vestara repeated firmly. She didn’t know how she knew, only that she did.

The vessel had come for them. For younglings. For apprentices.

It had come for Sith.

It was not a very great distance as an uvak flew to the Sith Temple. Accessible only from the air or by a perilous climb, the Temple had been created to protect and watch over the Ship of Destiny and house the survivors of the crash. Vestara had visited here many times before, ever since she had become a Tyro. But she was more excited now than she had been even on her first trip so long ago.

Tikk’s leathery wings beat steadily, and the Temple came into view. It had been hewn from the very rock that had been the destruction of the Ship of Destiny—the *Omen*. It was very much like the Sith, Vestara thought, to take that which had been responsible for their greatest hardship and make it serve them. She knew the history of its creation; how the original Sith crew, equipped only with lightsabers and a few hand-

held energy weapons, had cut into the mountain's heart and shaped the spires, walls, and windows of the massive central Temple. Other wings were added as the centuries crawled past.

Most of the initial work had been done by the Sith, who could move huge chunks of rock with the power of the Force. Later, here and many kilometers away in the capital city of Tahv, the Keshiri—Ahri's people, the native humanoid species of this world—were put to work, with the Sith in charge. Tahv bore the stamp of a place that had been expanded by a people who had the luxury to appreciate art and beauty; the Temple, while beautiful in its own right, as the first home of the Sith was more functional than decorative. The statuary, of early Sith leaders, including Captain Yaru Korsin, the first commander of the *Omen*, had been brought in much later, and the lovely carvings were an almost delicate counterpoint to the hard beauty of the Temple architecture.

Not visible from the air, but housed protectively within a special, highly secured section of the Temple, was said to be the *Omen* itself. Some muttered that the vessel was nothing more than bits and pieces of twisted metal, preserved only for sentimental reasons. Others believed that much of what it had once been still remained, its knowledge hoarded and shared with only the select few who ascended to the lofty ranks of the Sith Lords or the Masters.

But Vestara was not interested in admiring the black spires and functional, simple terraces of the Temple, or the beautiful figurines of its courtyard. And for once, her thoughts did not drift toward wondering what secrets the *Omen* contained. This time, her eyes were on the sphere of livid orange-red that sat in the middle of the courtyard of the Sith Temple.

Vestara's breath caught in her throat again, and she

stared, not even wanting to blink. Suddenly she felt as if all her life had simply been spent waiting until the moment when the spherical vessel had soared over her and caressed her with the cool brush of darkness, calling her to follow it.

The . . . Ship . . . was a perfect circle, its wings now folded in on itself, its surface rough and hard looking. Dark-side energy seemed to flow from it. Dozens of Sith were milling about in the courtyard already, and Vestara saw that more were approaching on uvak-back.

She wanted to land, to leap off, to rush up to the Ship and caress its knobbed, pebbly surface. A soft sob escaped her; embarrassed, she tried to turn it into a cough. But Ahri knew her too well. He tightened his arms around her waist.

“Yes, you all right?”

“Yes, of course I am. I just . . . this is an unusual situation, don’t you think?”

She knew that Ahri was fond of her, and while she found him attractive—he was a Keshiri male, of course he was gorgeous—she had no desire to start a romance. For one thing, despite the fact that the Sith were firm believers in merit over birth, there was still a stigma attached to being Keshiri. No doors were closed to them by their unfortunate birth—indeed, one of the current High Lords was Keshiri—but there were never marriages between them and the Sith, and they had a narrower window of opportunity to prove themselves.

Some Sith did take Keshiri lovers, of course, although the species were sufficiently different that no children could be conceived. The physical beauty of the Keshiri was difficult to resist, but Vestara knew she would not be one of those who succumbed to it. She was utterly devoted to the Force, to her studies, to practicing and training and honing her skills until her body quivered with weariness, until she was drenched in sweat, until

she crawled into bed and slept the dreamless sleep of the exhausted.

And now this Ship had come, and she did not care about anything else.

Again she felt the cold perusal, and shivered. Ahri's arms tightened about her, mistaking the gesture for a physical chill.

*You sensed me.*

*I—I did, she sent back through the Force.*

*She was being . . . examined. Appraised.*

*You seek to become a Sith Master. To harness the power of the dark side.*

*I . . . I . . .*

Vestara straightened to her full tall height atop Tikk's back and deliberately banished her childish hesitancy. Never mind that she had never before beheld a spacefaring vessel—never even seen the diagrams and schematics that were purported to rest inside the forbidden hull of the crashed *Omen*. She was of the Tribe, the daughter of a Sith Saber. She was exceptionally strong in the Force and knew it.

And the ship—Ship itself, not its pilot, she realized now it had no pilot, not yet—was testing her. She would not shrink before its probity.

*I do. I shall. I am Vestara Khai, daughter of a proud heritage. I have what is necessary to command the dark side and bend it to my will. To use it for the good of the Tribe, and the People.*

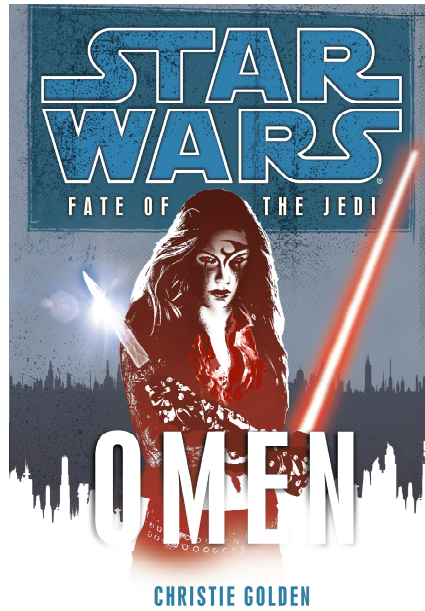
*For the good of all Sith,* Ship suggested.

She nodded automatically, though even as she did so she realized the vessel couldn't see her.

Except somehow it *could*. Or rather, she realized, it could sense her agreement in the Force. She felt it approve and then withdraw. Without the coldness of its presence in her mind, she somehow felt bereft, but she refrained from seeking it out again.

At that moment, as her gaze wandered from Ship to the throng of Sith crowding around it, in that sea of dark robes she saw a pale blond head turn in her direction. It was Lady Rhea, one of the members of the Sith Circle of Lords, and her blue eyes were fixed upon Vestara. Even from this height, Vestara could see that Lady Rhea's eyes were narrowed, as if she was considering something.

Slowly, Vestara smiled.



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