

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

STAR WARS™

FATE OF THE JEDI



ALLIES

CHRISTIE GOLDEN

Author of Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi: Omen

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About the Book

Only one thing could unite the forces of Jedi and Sith: an enemy far deadlier than both.

What began as a quest for truth has become a struggle for survival for Luke Skywalker and his son, Ben. They have used the secrets of the Mind Walkers to speak with the spirits of the fallen, risking their lives in the process. They have faced a team of Sith assassins and beaten the odds to destroy them. And now the death squad's sole survivor, Sith apprentice Vestara Khai, has summoned an entire fleet of Sith frigates to engage the embattled father and son. But the dark warriors come bearing a surprising proposition that will bring Jedi and Sith together in an unprecedented alliance against an adversary more ancient and alien than they can imagine. For in the treacherous web of black holes that is the Maw, the Skywalkers and their Sith allies will have to fight an unimaginable evil, and Luke will be rocked by a staggering truth.

About the Author

Christie Golden is the award-winning author of 28 novels and over a dozen short stories in the fields of fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Her media tie-in works include launching the Ravenloft line in 1991 with *Vampire of the Mists*, over a dozen Star Trek novels, and the Warcraft novel *Lord of the Clans*. Her website is www.christiegolden.com.

ALSO BY CHRISTIE GOLDEN

- Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi: Omen*
Ravenloft: Vampire of the Mists
Ravenloft: The Enemy Within
Star Trek Voyager: The Murdered Sun
Instrument of Fate
King's Man and Thief
Star Trek Voyager: Marooned
Invasion America
Star Trek Voyager: Seven of Nine
Invasion America: On the Run
Star Trek The Next Generation: The First Virtue (with
Michael Jan Friedman)
A.D. 999 (as Jadrien Bell)
*Star Trek Voyager: The Dark Matters Trilogy, Book 1: Cloak
and Dagger*
*Star Trek Voyager: The Dark Matters Trilogy, Book 2: Ghost
Dance*
*Star Trek Voyager: The Dark Matters Trilogy, Book 3:
Shadow of Heaven*
Star Trek Voyager: Endgame (with Diane Carey)
Warcraft: Lord of the Clans
Star Trek Voyager: Gateways—What Lay Beyond
Star Trek Voyager: No Man's Land
Star Trek: The Last Roundup
Star Trek Voyager: Homecoming
Star Trek Voyager: The Farther Shore
On Fire's Wings
Star Trek Voyager: Spirit Walk, Book 1: Old Wounds
*Star Trek Voyager: Spirit Walk, Book 2: Enemy of My
Enemy*
In Stone's Clasp
Warcraft: Rise of the Horde

StarCraft: The Dark Templar Series, Book 1: Firstborn

*StarCraft: The Dark Templar Series, Book 2: Shadow
Hunters*

Under Sea's Shadow (eBook format only)

Warcraft: Beyond the Dark Portal (with Aaron Rosenberg)

Warcraft: Arthas: Rise of the Lich King

**STAR
WARS™**

FATE OF THE JEDI

ALLIES

CHRISTIE GOLDEN



arrow books

This book is dedicated to Jeffrey R. Kirby,
for reasons as numberless as the stars

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THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE

OLD REPUBLIC 5000–33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

*Lost Tribe of the Sith**

Precipice
Skyborn
Paragon
Savior
Purgatory
Sentinel

3650 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic

Deceived
Fatal Alliance

Red Harvest

*Lost Tribe of the Sith**

Pantheon**
Secrets**

1032 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Knight Errant

Darth Bane: Path of Destruction

Darth Bane: Rule of Two

Darth Bane: Dynasty of Evil

RISE OF THE EMPIRE 33–0 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Maul: Saboteur*

Cloak of Deception

Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

32 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE I THE PHANTOM MENACE

Rogue Planet
Outbound Flight
The Approaching Storm

22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE II ATTACK OF THE CLONES

22–19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Clone Wars
The Clone Wars: Wild Space
The Clone Wars: No Prisoners

Clone Wars Gambit

Stealth
Siege

Republic Commando

Hard Contact
Triple Zero
True Colors
Order 66

Shatterpoint

The Cestus Deception

The Hive*

MedStar I: Battle Surgeons

MedStar II: Jedi Healer

Jedi Trial

Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

Labyrinth of Evil

19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

Coruscant Nights

Jedi Twilight
Street of Shadows
Patterns of Force

Imperial Commando

501*

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Paradise Snare
The Hutt Gambit
Rebel Dawn

The Adventures of Lando Calrissian

The Han Solo Adventures

The Force Unleashed

The Force Unleashed II

Death Troopers

*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

REBELLION 0–5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Death Star

0

STAR WARS: EPISODE IV A NEW HOPE

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina
Allegiance
Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine
Splinter of the Mind's Eye

3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE V THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Tales of the Bounty Hunters
Shadows of the Empire

4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE VI RETURN OF THE JEDI

Tales from Jabba's Palace
Tales from the Empire
Tales from the New Republic

The Bounty Hunter Wars

The Mandalorian Armor
Slave Ship
Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura

Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor

NEW REPUBLIC 5–25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing

Rogue Squadron
Wedge's Gamble
The Krytos Trap
The Bacta War
Wrath Squadron
Iron Fist
Solo Command

The Courtship of Princess Leia
A Forest Apart*
Tatooine Ghost

The Thrawn Trilogy

Heir to the Empire
Dark Force Rising
The Last Command
X-Wing: Isard's Revenge

The Jedi Academy Trilogy

Jedi Search
Dark Apprentice
Champions of the Force

I, Jedi

Children of the Jedi

Darksaber

Planet of Twilight

X-Wing: Starfighters of Adumar

The Crystal Star

The Black Fleet Crisis Trilogy

Before the Storm
Shield of Lies
Tyrant's Test

The New Rebellion

The Corellian Trilogy

Ambush at Corellia
Assault at Selonia
Showdown at Centerpoint

The Hand of Thrawn Duology

Specter of the Past
Vision of the Future

Fool's Bargain*

Survivor's Quest

*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



NEW JEDI ORDER 25–40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Boba Fett: A Practical Man*

The New Jedi Order

Vector Prime
Dark Tide I: Onslaught
Dark Tide II: Ruin
Agents of Chaos I: Hero's Trial
Agents of Chaos II: Jedi Eclipse
Balance Point
Recovery*
Edge of Victory I: Conquest
Edge of Victory II: Rebirth
Star by Star
Dark Journey
Enemy Lines I: Rebel Dream
Enemy Lines II: Rebel Stand
Traitor
Destiny's Way
Ylesia*
Force Heretic I: Remnant
Force Heretic II: Refugee
Force Heretic III: Reunion
The Final Prophecy
The Unifying Force

35 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Dark Nest Trilogy

The Joiner King
The Unseen Queen
The Swarm War



LEGACY 40+ YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force

Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury
Revelation
Invincible
Crosscurrent
Millennium Falcon

43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Fate of the Jedi

Outcast
Omen
Abyss
Backlash
Allies
Vortex
Conviction**
Ascension**
Apocalypse**

*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

Dramatis Personae

lana Solo; child (human female)
n Skywalker; Jedi Knight (human male)
an Solo; captain, Millennium Falcon (human male)
ivar Khai; Sith Saber (human male)
gged Fel; Head of State, Galactic Empire (human male)
ina Solo; Jedi Knight (human female)
ndo Calrissian; businessman (human male)
ia Organa Solo; Jedi Knight (human female)
ke Skywalker; Jedi Grand Master (human male)
aadhi Vaandt; reporter (Devaronian female)
atasi Daala; Galactic Alliance Chief of State (human female)
rasu Taalon; Sith High Lord (Keshiri male)
hiri Veila; former Jedi Knight (human female)
stara Khai; Sith apprentice (human female)
ynn Dorvan; assistant to Admiral Daala (human male)

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...



ABOARD THE *JADE SHADOW*

BEN WONDERED IF he'd be his father's age before things started going right for him on any basis other than what appeared to be happy accidents.

Then he wondered if he'd be older than his dad.

True, he'd had a couple of uneventful years after the war. But then his father got arrested and exiled for a decade. Jedi who had spent formative years on Shelter in the Maw—and yes, Ben was among that number, how reassuring was *that* little fact—started going crazy. Ben and Luke had learned about some creepy powerful being with dark slithery mental tendrils of *need* who was probably responsible for the crazy Jedi, and had been going to pay her a visit inside the Maw when they abducted a Sith. One that was definitely easy on the eyes, but who was nonetheless a Sith, from a whole planetload of them, no less. A Sith who was still with them right now, standing and smirking at them while nearly a dozen frigates crammed with her pals surrounded them.

Yeah. He would *definitely* be older than his dad.

Luke had followed the instructions given by the unnamed, unseen Sith commander of the *Black Wave*, placing the *Shadow* in a parking orbit around Dathomir. There was no other choice, not with eleven ChaseMaster frigates ready to open fire.

"A wise decision," Vestara said. "I'm fond of my own life, so I'm glad you're cooperating, but if you had attempted to flee they most certainly would have destroyed you."

Luke eyed her thoughtfully. Clearly, he wasn't so sure.

"So," Ben continued, "what are they going to do with us? Are we going to be the main attraction at some kind of Sith ritual party?"

"I've no idea," Vestara said. She might be lying through her teeth. She might be telling the truth. Ben simply couldn't be sure.

"Your cooperation is appreciated, Master Skywalker," came the voice that had first hailed them. Ben and Luke exchanged puzzled glances. Of course, Vestara had told them who was holding her captive, but why the courtesy and respectful title?

"I am High Lord Sarasu Taalon, commander of this force," the voice continued. "Your reputation precedes you. We have studied you, and your son, a great deal."

"I wish I could say the same," Luke said. "I know nothing about you and your people, High Lord Taalon."

"No, you don't. But I am prepared for that to change ... somewhat. Your vessel carries a Z-95 Head-hunter."

"It does," Luke said. "I presume you're about to ask me to come over to your flagship and chat over a nice glass of something."

"You and Vestara, yes," Taalon said. "You will have to turn her back over to us, of course. But there is no reason we can't be civilized about this."

"No thanks," Luke said. "Anything you have to say to me can be said at a distance. Vestara isn't the worst companion I've ever traveled with. I think I'll let her stay here with us for a while longer."

Ben looked again at the Sith girl. His father was right. She *wasn't* the worst companion he'd ever traveled with.

"Let us revisit that subject in a moment," came Taalon's reply. "As I'm sure you know by now, Apprentice Vestara Khai has done a commendable job of keeping us informed of what has transpired. We are aware that you are having ... difficulty with certain Jedi who were fostered inside the

Maw. We believe this is due to the intervention of a being known to us as Abeloth, whom Vestara encountered. Many of our own apprentices are displaying the same symptoms as your younger Jedi.”

“Your younger Sith were in the Maw as well?”

“No. But such identical displays of aberrant behavior cannot be attributed to anything else.”

Ben was skeptical. But there was so much they didn’t know yet. His father’s blue eyes met his and he shrugged slightly. It was possible.

“We are many. You are only three,” Taalon continued. The third to whom he referred was Dyon Stad, a Force-sensitive human who had joined Ben and Luke on Dathomir and was currently aboard his own Suieb Soro yacht. “We have a common cause.”

“Are—are you proposing a formal alliance?” Luke was so surprised he didn’t even bother to hide it. Ben, too, literally gaped for a moment. Vestara seemed more shocked than any of them, judging by her expression and her feeling in the Force.

“Precisely.”

Luke started to laugh. “I’m sorry, but that doesn’t sound like a very Sith thing to say.”

The voice was cold when Taalon spoke again. “This creature, this ... Abeloth ... has the audacity to reach out and harm *our* apprentices. *Our* tyros. To toy with the Tribe—the Sith. The insult cannot be borne. It *will* not be borne. We are going into the Maw and teach her a lesson.”

Ben glanced at his father. “That, however, *is* a very Sith thing to say.”

Luke nodded. To Taalon, he said, “It may be that we do not need to teach her a lesson, as it were. We may simply need to find out why she is doing this.”

“And ask her nicely to please stop?”

Ben thought Han Solo could learn a thing or two from this Sith about infusing one’s voice with sarcasm.

“You just asked me nicely to help you out. Clearly you’re capable of good manners,” Luke replied, unruffled. “If it accomplishes the goal with fewer or perhaps no casualties, how is that not the best solution?”

There was silence. “It is possible she may not be amenable to ... polite conversation. What then, Master Skywalker?”

“I will do whatever is necessary to free the ill Jedi from her control,” Luke said. “I assure you of that.” His voice was not harsh, but there was a tone in it Ben recognized. The deed was almost as good as done when Luke Skywalker spoke like that.

“You agree, then?” Taalon asked.

Luke didn’t answer at once. Ben knew what he was struggling with. And he was surprised that it was even a struggle for the Grand Master. Luke was a Jedi. These were Sith. There couldn’t possibly be an alliance. Everyone would constantly be watching their own backs.

But then again ... He glanced at Vestara. She came from an entire culture of Sith. They couldn’t be backstabbing one another constantly—they’d have become extinct long ago. Somehow this flavor of Sith had learned how to cooperate. Vestara had proved it was possible. She had worked with Ben and his father before, on Dathomir, and that cooperation had saved Luke Skywalker’s life.

“We do have a common goal,” Luke said at last. “It would be better to work toward it together rather than getting in each other’s way. But don’t think that I will not be expecting treachery at every turn. There are fewer enmities more ancient than that of Sith and Jedi.”

A sigh. “This thing we both fight might be older than that,” Taalon said. “Well, I did not expect this to be a particularly comradely union. Very well. You deliver Vestara Khai. Together, in an alliance not seen since this galaxy was new, Sith and Jedi will confront and defeat their mutual foe

—one way or the other. And after that ... well, let us see where we stand then, shall we?”

“Vestara stays here.”

The Sith girl froze. There was a long silence.

“I cannot permit that.”

“Then we have no alliance.” Another long silence.

“She has information we require. She comes with us, or there is no deal,” Taalon said.

“Information about how to reach and confront our mutual foe?” Luke said, turning Taalon’s own flowery words back on him. “That, I do not object to permitting her to share. That *was* the information you were talking about, wasn’t it?”

“She will come to no harm while entrusted in your ... care,” said Taalon. “None. Or we will attack and destroy you down to your marrow and obliterate your very cells.”

“Provided you keep your bargain, she’s perfectly safe. Jedi aren’t in the habit of torturing children.”

Vestara frowned at being referred to as a child. Ben started to smile a little, despite the situation, then realized that she was the same age as he was. He shot his dad a disappointed glance.

“Then I believe we have an agreement,” Taalon said.

“Not just yet. We need to decide who is going to be in charge of this alliance first.”

“I would suggest we command as a pair, you and I,” Taalon said. “No Sith will take orders solely from a Jedi. And I am sure you would bridle at being told what to do by a Sith High Lord.”

“I would indeed. And *I* would suggest we begin this joint command by sharing information. You first.”

“Ah, but Master Skywalker, you have *our* source of information right there with you. Start with her. We will be prepared to depart within a half hour.”

“So will we. I’ll be in touch. *Jade Shadow* out.”

“Dad,” Ben said, the second the communication was terminated. “You just agreed to help the *Sith*.”

Luke shook his head. “No, son. I agreed to let the Sith help *us*.”

Ben regarded him, incredulity mixed with curiosity. “You trust them to keep their word?”

“I trust them to do what is best for them. And as long as what is best for them is best for us, then we’ll be fine.”

“And when it’s not?”

“Like Taalon said ... we’ll see where we stand then. I’m prepared for that. There are two old sayings, Ben: ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend’ and ‘Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.’”

Luke pointedly turned to Vestara, who stood straight with her hands clasped behind her back. “Now,” he said, “High Lord Taalon assures me you know everything they do.”

She lifted a small information chip. “Most of it’s here,” she said.

“And what’s not there?” Luke asked.

Vestara smiled slightly and tapped her temple. “And this is where it will stay until it is necessary. We have a card game on my world. It is called *Mahaa’i Shuur*, which means Ultimate Success in the tongue of the natives. The rules are complicated, but the goal is simple. The winner is the one who never, ever has to play his last card.”

Luke Skywalker watched Vestara Khai the way, long ago, a bartender named Wuher had watched him at the Mos Eisley cantina—coldly, expecting the unexpected, and looking for an excuse to cease being civil. Her back was to him, hands on her hips, her long brown hair hanging loose. She was looking out over the gathering of Sith vessels that were starting to fall into formation in preparation for departure, and he didn’t have to sense her in the Force to make a damn good guess as to what she might be thinking. As soon as he had the thought Luke amended it.

She was Sith. So were they. In Luke's mind, that automatically meant they could not be trusted. Even if they were sincere in this desire to unite forces and approach the Maw with a lot more firepower than the *Jade Shadow* would have mustered alone, there had to be a trick, or a trap. They were Sith. Deception was a keystone of their culture.

Vestara Khai was Sith. But she was also a girl who seemed to have at least a few virtues along with her vices, something Luke found unexpected and disconcerting. No doubt she was contemplating treachery. But he was willing to admit that she also might just be missing her people. A soft sigh escaped her, as if confirming his thoughts.

He had assigned Ben the job of being the first to read through the information Vestara had given them, thinking the task would distract his son from the admittedly attractive female his own age who was going to be living in such close quarters with them. He was not worried for Ben's state of mind regarding the Force. Ben had been through more things in his short life than most beings had in century-long ones. He wasn't likely to be tempted by offers of power or greatness, the usual tools those who tried to corrupt Jedi liked to employ.

But it was, Luke realized, entirely possible that Ben might get a little confused now and then. Vestara was strikingly attractive, and had presumably been through things comparable to what Ben had undergone. And she was extremely, in fact exceptionally, strong in the Force. It was a combination that might make any father at least a little anxious for his Jedi son's well-being.

The *Shadow* was quiet, the air heavy with all the "not talking" that was taking place. The only sound was Vestara's single, almost inaudible sigh and the occasional sounds of Ben shifting position in his chair as he read and occasionally cross-referenced data.

The sudden noise alerting them to an incoming message therefore sounded especially loud. No one actually jumped, but a sense of surprise rippled through them all. Luke glanced at the screen and frowned slightly. Three words flashed.

VESTARA KHAI. PERSONAL.

As far as Luke was concerned, they might as well have been EMERGENCY INCOMING ATTACK.

“Who’s it from, Dad?”

“I don’t know. But it’s for our guest. Do you know who might want to contact you, Vestara?”

Vestara actually looked surprised. Luke felt the faintest flicker of worry, like an echo of a whisper, in the Force. “I’ve no idea,” and it sounded genuine. “Is there a place where I can—”

“I can’t let you receive a private message, especially from someone who won’t identify him- or herself,” Luke said matter-of-factly.

Vestara nodded. “Of course not. If I were in your position, I would take similar precautions.”

Luke flipped a switch. “This is the *Jade Shadow* to the anonymous sender of the previous message directed at Vestara Khai. You must understand I cannot permit her to receive a private missive.”

There was a long silence. Luke could feel young ears straining. Then another message appeared, addressed to LUKE SKYWALKER.

THE MESSAGE MAY BE PUBLICLY VIEWED.

“Well, a reasonable Sith, what next,” Luke muttered, and touched another button on the console.

A small holographic figure took shape. It was a human male, wearing the traditional Sith black robes. A lightsaber of antique-looking design was clipped to his belt. His long dark hair was pulled up in a topknot. His face was chiseled and handsome.

Vestara's startled gasp revealed her emotions, but the Force did so even more prominently. There was a rush of warm, affectionate feelings, quickly clamped down, as if a lid had been put on a pot. Luke's eyes flickered to the girl, then back to the hologram. Both images appeared to be trying hard not to smile, although Vestara often looked as though she were smiling when she wasn't due to the little scar on her mouth.

"Daughter. You are well."

Luke's eyes widened. Daughter?

Vestara bowed. "Father. I am. It is good to see you. I am pleased that you were among those selected for the honor of this mission."

"You, it would seem, have already brought honor to the Tribe," the elder Khai said. "I understand you are the sole survivor of the ... initial exploratory team."

"Thank you, Father. I have always striven to elevate the standing of our household."

"Master Skywalker," Khai said. "I understand that you are graciously providing hospitality to my daughter."

"That's ... a word for it," Luke said.

"And that High Lord Taalon has agreed that you may continue to provide hospitality. Despite a father's wishes to the contrary."

"Let's face it," Luke said. "Sith and Jedi don't exactly mesh well. Put us together and we're about as volatile as Tibanna gas. If you were tentatively allied with eleven Jedi vessels, and my son were aboard *your* ship—well, I think you'd like to keep him there for a while."

Khai considered this for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Very well, your point is taken, and it is a shrewd one. You have promised she will come to no harm. I am sure that if Luke Skywalker gives his word, then every hair on Vestara's head will be safe," said Khai. His voice was

melodic and rich and beautiful, just like the voice of every member of this lost Tribe they'd encountered so far.

"It seems we have nothing more to discuss then," Luke said. "Say your farewells and—"

"Dad?"

Luke frowned a little, turning to Ben. "Yes?"

Ben jerked his head a little in the hologram's direction, and Luke muted the sound. "I know we can't just turn her over to them," Ben said, glancing over his shoulder at Vestara, who had been silent as the grave during the debate between the two parents. "But what harm can there be in letting them talk for just a few minutes?"

"A lot," Luke said. "You know that." Neither of them had ever bothered to hide their suspicions of Vestara, and Luke did not attempt to do so now.

"But ... you said it yourself, what if it were me?" Ben's blue eyes were intense. "What if this situation were reversed, and Vestara's dad was keeping a tight grip on me? A hologram is nice and everything, but you know it doesn't beat actually being with someone. And it's clear they really miss each other."

That much was true. "A private conversation would enable her to relay anything she's learned from us," Luke reminded him.

Ben rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Dad, let's face facts here—she already *has*. Otherwise how would the Sith know about the Jedi going crazy?"

Luke glanced at Vestara. He was not expecting a sheepish grin and a nod—even if their bluff was called, Sith were not likely to simply docilely show their hands—but neither did she make an earnest effort to contradict Ben. She was a smart kid.

He didn't reply to Ben, but turned around to the console and unmuted the channel. "Since I am prepared to admit that even nexu are fond of their cubs, I'll permit you to see Vestara for a brief visit. I will extend my hospitality to both

Khais. You will be permitted to come aboard the *Jade Shadow*, alone, and without weapons.” He knew, as he knew Khai knew, that any powerful Force-user did not need weapons to pose a deadly threat. But acquiescing would take this arrogant Sith down a notch. “Any hint of treachery from you and this alliance is dissolved.”

Khai frowned. He was clearly struggling to contain his offense. “I would never dream of doing anything to harm a union that my superiors have deemed necessary.”

“Then if you are truly simply a concerned father anxious to be reunited with his child, I *certainly* wouldn’t stand in the way.”

The two regarded each other for a long moment. Out of the corner of his eye, Luke saw Ben and Vestara exchange glances, and the young man stepped closer to her. He seemed to want to put a hand on her shoulder, but stopped just short of making the gesture.

Khai was good. He gave away nothing. At last he said, “Your terms are acceptable.”

* * *

A short time later, Khai’s small, podlike ship was secured to the docking port of the *Jade Shadow*. The port was located on the underside of the vessel. Vestara, Ben, and Luke stood awaiting him as he emerged from the connecting tube.

Khai was, not unexpectedly, an imposing presence, both physically and in the Force. He was tall, much taller than Luke, and while not bulky, was clearly muscular. Luke guessed he was in his early forties, but there was no trace of gray in the jet-black hair, and the lines on his face seemed to be either furrows of concentration or laugh lines rather than the marks of age.

Khai’s belt was empty of weapons, and scans that would detect even the smallest bits of metal on his person had

turned up nothing. He paused before stepping fully onto the *Shadow* and spread his hands. They were strong and callused, with long, clever-looking fingers.

“Saber Gavar Khai,” the Sith said, bowing. “Permission to come aboard.”

“Permission granted. I am Master Luke Skywalker. This is Ben Skywalker, my son and Jedi Knight. And Vestara, of course.”

Vestara had locked down her feelings. Save for the brightness of her eyes, she looked composed, almost bored. She bowed, deeply, respectfully.

“Father.”

Saber—whatever that meant—Gavar Khai opened his arms and Vestara went into them. For a brief moment, they were simply a reunited father and daughter, and Luke felt a brief flicker of embarrassment. It was swiftly quashed. Father and daughter they might be, and Luke was willing to grant that there might even be familial love between them, but they were still Sith. They probably fought pretty well as a father-child team, just like he and Ben did.

Vestara pulled back, keeping her face averted from Luke and Ben until the mask was back in place.

“Thank you for permitting me to see her,” Khai said, his arm still around his daughter’s shoulders. “Her mother and I have missed her greatly.”

That comment raised a hundred other questions in Luke’s mind, but he didn’t think any of them would be answered. At least, not honestly.

“I’m a father myself. I know how it is,” he said instead. “If you like, you two are welcome to use my quarters for a chat. A very brief chat.”

Vestara glanced first at Luke, then at Ben. Ben shrugged slightly.

“Thank you,” Gavar Khai said again. “That is most kind of you. Our chitchat about Vestara’s mother and servants

and the state of the household would likely not interest you anyway.”

“I doubt very much that it would,” Luke said. Both men smiled. Both knew that if any mention of mother, servants, and the state of the household did indeed occur, it would be only in passing. Between Sith, there were other matters to discuss.

Luke indicated his cabin, and the two Khais entered. The door slid shut, and Luke and Ben made their way back to the cockpit.

“How come you did that?” Ben asked. “I thought you were against a private visit.”

“I said they could have a chat. I never said that it would be private.”

“I see. But it’s not going to do us any good. I mean—Khai’s acting all polite, but he’s not going to speak Basic just so we can eavesdrop more efficiently.”

“No. They’ll speak the other language we’ve heard from Vestara before.” Luke flicked a switch. Gavar Khai’s voice was heard, speaking in a lilting tongue. Then Vestara’s, light and musical.

“It’s pretty,” Ben said, and Luke wasn’t sure if he meant the language or Vestara’s voice. “But what’s the point? We’ve got no reference in the databanks. There’s no way we can translate this.”

Luke gave him a grin. “We can’t. But I know someone who can.”

“They will be recording everything we say,” Vestara said.

“Of course they will. It is what I would do. But they have never heard Keshiri before. I doubt they will be able to translate it swiftly enough for our conversation to be useful to them.”

Vestara nodded. “This is not a diplomat’s vessel,” she agreed.

“You have been given free rein of it?” Khai said, reaching into his robes and producing a piece of flimsi and a writing instrument. When Vestara nodded, he said, “Good. Draw it for me while we speak.”

At once Vestara obeyed, laying the flimsi down on a flat piece of furniture and beginning to sketch. She heard a slight rustling and turned, curious. Her father was reaching inside his robes, searching for something, and a moment later his hand emerged.

He held out a shikkar.

Vestara smiled. Of course. The sensors would detect no weapon, as the shikkar was made entirely of glass. She recognized this one as one from her father’s personal collection. It was a piece crafted by one of the most famous shikkar glassmakers, Tura Sanga. Sanga’s work was distinctive, and this was no exception. The shikkar was narrow and elegant, stark black-and-white, the hilt slender and long, the blade barely the width of a finger. Its fragility was deceptive. The only weak spot was where the blade joined the hilt—a quick snap would separate the two. Vestara wondered who she would use it on. Ben? The great Luke Skywalker himself? Perhaps, if she was lucky. After all, she had already cut him once. She could do so again, should the opportunity arise. She accepted the noble weapon with a humble nod of thanks, and stashed it carefully in her own robes.

“How is Mother?” she asked.

“She is well. Missing you, but proud of what you are doing.”

Vestara smiled a little. “I am glad. I strive to make you proud.” *And to become a Saber like you ... or even soar higher than you.* She did not attempt to shield her emotions from her father; he encouraged her ambition and would not take offense.

“You did fine work on Dathomir,” Gavar continued. “And even though your Master is dead, you are still to be

granted the rank of apprentice. We will find a new Master for you when this business with Abeloth and the Skywalkers is complete. I am sure many will be eager to teach you."

Vestara straightened slightly, basking in the phrase. "The so-called Nightsister prisoners we took are being sorted out according to their abilities and Force-strengths," her father continued.

"They go willingly?" Vestara was surprised.

"Some do, most do not." Gavar shrugged his broad shoulders. "It matters not. They will go and do what we tell them, or they will suffer. And a little suffering often changes minds." He smiled. "And so another world has yielded to the Tribe what we need if we are to be strong and spread across this galaxy."

Vestara nodded. "I am glad they are proving useful." She glanced over her shoulder at him. "The apprentices ... how are they doing?"

He looked confused for a moment. "Apprentices?"

"The ones that Abeloth is turning mad," Vestara said.

Khai chuckled. Warm affection spread from him in the Force. "Dearest daughter, there is not a single thing wrong with any of the Tribe Sith apprentices that a good beating will not rectify."

"But—"

"I know what Taalon told Skywalker. It is an utter fabrication. We got the idea from you, my clever girl. We needed a good reason for the Skywalkers to ally with us, and it made sense to claim that our apprentices were suffering the same fate as the Jedi Knights."

"I see," Vestara said. It was an excellent plan, one that played well upon the idealistic natures of both Skywalker men. It was sound enough that she herself, who ought to have known better, had believed it. "So ... what is the *true* reason we are allying with them?"

Gavar gazed at her shrewdly. "You have held your tongue and guarded your feelings well thus far. But I think perhaps that information should come later."

For an instant, a dark flicker of resentment welled up in Vestara, but she extinguished it almost as soon as it came. She was fairly certain her father hadn't noticed. "Of course. As you see fit."

"I share your grief about Lady Rhea and Ahri Raas," Gavar continued, changing the subject. Vestara's brow furrowed slightly as she worked on the sketch, smudging out an inaccurate line with her fingers. She would have to remember to clean them before she left Luke's cabin.

She had respected and had a healthy fear of Lady Olaris Rhea. She had been devoted to her, as befit a proper Sith apprentice to her master. But there had been no affection between them. Vestara did grieve for Ahri, although at one point, she had been willing to kill him herself if need be. Lady Rhea's words came back to her: *Want everything you wish—hunger, burn for it, if that fuels you. But never love anyone or anything so much that you cannot bear to lose it.*

"They died well, at the hands of the Skywalkers," was all she said to her father. "You have met them. You know that there is no dishonor in falling against them."

"True," said Gavar Khai, stepping beside her and squeezing her shoulder affectionately as he peered at the sketch. "But I would just as soon neither of *us* fell against them."

Vestara grinned. "I agree."

"My decision to come here was sound. I learned a great deal about them just from the little exposure I had a few moments ago. The journey before us will give us ample opportunity to learn more."

Vestara examined the sketch critically. She added a few more notes. "I will continue to share with you everything I learn."