



STAR WARS™

THE LAST JEDI

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS OF *STAR WARS: SHADOW GAMES*

**MICHAEL REAVES AND
MAYA KAATHRYN BOHNHOFF**

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About the Book

Ever since Emperor Palpatine's Order 66—which called for the execution of all Jedi—Jax Pavan is the last Knight around to fight the dark side of the Force. Together with his droid I-5, Jax has eluded Vader time and again, all the while wreaking havoc against the Empire through the underground resistance on Coruscant. But now the Rebel's leader on the city-planet has been captured, and it's up to the Last Jedi to ride again... possibly for one final adventure.

About the Authors

MICHAEL REAVES is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Star Wars: Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter* and *New York Times* bestselling co-author of *Star Wars: Shadow Games* (with Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff); cowriter (with Steve Perry) of the two *Star Wars: MedStar* novels and *Star Wars: Death Star*; and the author of the three *Star Wars: Coruscant Nights* novels. He lives in the Los Angeles area.

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STAR WARS NOVELS BY MICHAEL REAVES AND MAYA KAATHRYN
BOHNHOFF

Star Wars: The Last Jedi (a Coruscant Nights novel)
Star Wars: Shadow Games

STAR WARS NOVELS BY MICHAEL REAVES

Star Wars: Coruscant Nights I: Jedi Twilight
Star Wars: Coruscant Nights II: Street of Shadows
Star Wars: Coruscant Nights III: Patterns of Force (with
Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff)

Star Wars: Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

STAR WARS NOVELS BY MICHAEL REAVES AND STEVE PERRY

Star Wars: Death Star

Star Wars: Medstar I: Battle Surgeons
Star Wars: Medstar II: Jedi Healer

STAR WARS™

THE LAST JEDI

MICHAEL REAVES
MAYA KAATHRYN BOHNHOFF



arrow books

To my family, for not minding all the times I blathered on
about droids, lightsabers, and Force-adepts. And for
reminding me that even Jedi have to eat, sleep, and do the
laundry.

—MKB

This one is for Grant Fairbanks—JMR

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE

BEFORE THE REPUBLIC 37,000-25,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

c. 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Dawn of the Jedi: Into the Void**

OLD REPUBLIC 5000-67 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Lost Tribe of the Sith[†]
Precipice
Skyborn
Paragon
Savior
Purgatory
Sentinel

3954 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Old Republic: Revan

3650 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic: Deceived

Lost Tribe of the Sith[†]
Pantheon
Secrets
Red Harvest

The Old Republic: Fatal Alliance
The Old Republic: Annihilation

2975 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Lost Tribe of the Sith[†]
Pandemonium

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 67-0 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

67 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Plagueis

33 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

Imperial Commando
501st

Coruscant Nights
Jedi Twilight
Street of Shadows
Patterns of Force
The Last Jedi**

*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

† Lost Tribe of the Sith: The
Collected Stories

19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Paradise Snare
The Hutt Gambit
Rebel Dawn
The Adventures of Lando Calrissian
The Force Unleashed
The Han Solo Adventures
Death Troopers
The Force Unleashed II



**REBELLION
0-5 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: *A New Hope***

Death Star
Shadow Games

0

**STAR WARS: EPISODE IV
A NEW HOPE**

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina
Tales from the Empire
Tales from the New Republic
Winner Lose All*
Scoundrels
Allegiance
Choices of One
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
THE RETURN OF THE JEDI**

Tales from Jabba's Palace
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
Wraith 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

Scourge

Fool's Bargain*
Survivor's Quest

*An eBook novella

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
Riptide
Millennium Falcon

43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Fate of the Jedi

Outcast
Omen
Abbyss
Backlash
Allies
Vortex
Conviction
Ascension
Apocalypse
X-Wing: Mercy Kill

45 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Crucible**

*An eBook novella
**Forthcoming

Dramatis Personae

Aren Folee; Antarian Ranger (human female)
Darth Vader; Sith Lord and Emperor Palpatine's enforcer
(human male)
Degan Cor; Toprawan resistance leader (human male)
Den Dhur; former journalist (Sullustan male)
Geri; resistance mech-tech (teenaged Rodian male)
I-Five; sentient protocol droid
Jax Pavan; Jedi Knight (human male)
Laranth Tarak; Gray Paladin (Twi'lek female)
Magash Drashi; Dathomiri Witch of the Singing Mountain
Clan (Zabrak-human female)
Pol Haus; sector police prefect (Zabrak male)
Prince Xizor; Black Sun Vigo (Faleen male)
Probus Tesla; Inquisitor (human male)
Sacha Swiftbird; Antarian Ranger (human female)
Sheel Mafeen; poetess (Togruta female)
Thi Xon Yimmon; Whiplash leader (Cerean male)
Tuden Sal; Whiplash operative (Sakiyan male)
Tyno Fabris; Black Sun lieutenant (Arkanian male)

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

“The Jedi are extinct; their fire has gone out in the universe.”

—GRAND MOFF TARKIN

— [PART ONE] —

VASTER THAN EMPIRES

one

“Sakiyan freighter *Far Ranger* requesting clearance for departure.”

I-Five’s mimicry of Tuden Sal’s gruff voice was flawless. No one listening—or, more to the point, no vocal analyzer scanning—would know that, in reality, the Sakiyan merchant was sitting in a safe house somewhere in the twilight warren near the Westport, plotting infamy against the Empire. No one, that was, except for the *Far Ranger’s* crew and her lone passenger.

Jax Pavan, his hands on the *Far Ranger’s* steering yoke, realized he was holding his breath as he waited for the Westport flight dispatcher to approve their departure plan. He let his tension go with a soft rush of air and ignored the urge to reach out with the Force to give the dispatcher a nudge. It was tempting, but best not to take the chance. Even something as minor as that could alert Darth Vader to their movements . . . if Vader was, against all odds, still alive.

Jax believed that he was. Even though he hadn’t sensed the Dark Lord’s uniquely powerful indentation in the fabric of the Force lately, it was difficult to conceive of such power, such concentrated evil, being gone, being over, being *done*. And until he gazed upon Vader’s corpse with his own eyes, until he could reach out and touch him with the tendrils that constituted his own connection with the living Force and sense no reciprocation . . .

Well, until that came to pass, Jax knew he couldn’t be too careful.

And speaking of erring on the side of caution . . . was the silence on the comlink just a little too long? Had someone suspicious of the freighter's relatively new Sakiyan registry connected the ship to Jax Pavan?

Am I overthinking this?

"*Far Ranger*, your ascent plan is approved. Your departure window is . . ."

There was a pause, and Jax held his breath again. I-Five glanced at him and let two pearls of luminescence migrate, left to right, along the top outside rims of his photoreceptors—the droid's equivalent of rolling his eyes.

"Ten standard minutes—on my mark."

"Aye," said I-Five.

"Mark."

"Beginning ascent." I-Five cut the comlink and turned to Jax. "She's all yours. And not a single battle cruiser on our tail, that I can see."

Jax ignored the droid's sarcasm. His left hand eased forward on the thruster control as his right pulled up and back on the steering yoke. The ship, a modified Corellian Action VI transport, lifted from the spaceport docking bay into the night sky, which, even at this elevation, was a blaze of ambient light. Jax felt the vibration of the ship through the yoke, felt it merge with his desire to be away from Coruscant until it seemed to him that *Far Ranger* itself yearned above all things to leap into hyperspace before even clearing the atmosphere.

The sky changed. It warmed to twilight, to daybreak, to full day, then cycled back again through dusk and twilight as they soared, finally, into the flat black of space. They saw no stars; the glorious blaze of the city-planet's night side was enough to drown out even the nearby nebulae of the Core completely.

I-Five sent a last message back to Flight Control in Tuden Sal's gravelly tones: "*Far Ranger* away."

"Aye. Clear skies."

The droid shut down the comlink and Jax navigated above the orbital plane, adjusted course, and set the autopilot to their first jump coordinates. Then he sat back to clear his head.

He felt a touch—in his mind and on his arm. Laranth. He turned his head to look up at her. She was grinning at him—or at least, she was doing something that was as close to grinning as she was likely to get. One whole corner of her mouth had curled upward by at least a millimeter.

“Nervous, are we?” she asked. “I could feel you angsting all the way up in the weaponry bay.”

“What were you doing up there?”

“Getting the feel of the new triggering mechanism.”

“Nervous, are we?” Jax mimicked, smiling.

“Being proactive.” She gave his arm a squeeze and glanced out the viewport. “I’ll be glad to be out of this gravity well. Too much traffic here by half. Any one of those ships—” She nodded toward their closest companions in flight: a Toydarian grain transport, another Corellian freighter, a private yacht. “—could be targeting us right now.”

“You’re being paranoid,” Jax assured her. “If Vader were watching us, I’d know. *We’d* know.”

“Vader watching us—now, *there’s* a cheery thought.” Den Dhur stepped onto the bridge and slid into the jump seat behind Jax. “I’m hoping he’s watching us from beyond the crematorium.”

“Paranoia,” I-Five said. “Another human emotion I just don’t get. The list of things both animate and inanimate in this galaxy that are capable of utterly annihilating you is longer than a superstring . . . yet real danger evidently isn’t enough: you organics aren’t happy without making up a bevy of bogeymen to scare you even more.”

Jax said nothing. In the months since their last confrontation with the Dark Lord—a confrontation in which one of their Whiplash team had betrayed them and another

self-immolated trying to assassinate Vader—they had heard not even a whisper about either his whereabouts or his condition. There had been no reports on the HoloNet, no rumors from highly placed officials, no speculation or stories by various life-forms in places like the Blackpit Slums or the Southern Underground. It was as if the very concept of Vader had vanished along with his corporeal form.

And yet Jax still couldn't believe that his nemesis was dead, as much as he wanted to. The entire scenario had been *too* perfect. In the thrall of a potent drug that enhanced Force abilities in unpredictable ways, Vader had lashed out wildly, trying to fend off his would-be assassin. The release of energy had been enough to vaporize the unfortunate Haninum Tyk Rhinann, who'd pushed Vader over the edge—in more ways than one. Both of them had fallen a great distance. Rhinann had died.

Vader had vanished.

If Darth Vader had been a normal human being—or even a normal Jedi—Jax could assume he was dead, as well. But he was neither of those things. He was at once less and more than human. At once less and more than a Jedi. He was a powerful merger of the human and the inhuman. He was a Sith . . . who had once called Jax friend. For Jax suspected—no, *more* than suspected, *knew*—that Darth Vader had somehow once been Anakin Skywalker. He had sensed it through the Force, and in their last encounter Vader had confirmed it with a slip of the tongue that might well have been intentional.

The man who wouldn't die.

“You going to share that load with us, Jax?” Den was looking at him with eyes that only seemed lazy. “Have you sensed anything about Vader since . . .” The Sullustan made a *boom* gesture with both stubby-fingered hands.

Jax shook his head. “Nothing. But Den, if he'd died, I think I'd know that. There would have been a huge shift in

the Force if a being of that much focused power was destroyed.”

“I saw the flaming backwash from ground zero,” Den objected. “That wasn’t a shift?”

“No, that was a light show. Mostly flash, with a little substance. It was enough to kill Rhinann. But I don’t think it killed Vader.”

The Sullustan looked to Laranth. “No joy from you, either?”

“Sorry, Den. I’m of the same opinion. He might be severely injured and in a bacta tank somewhere, but he’s not dead. The most we can hope for is that he’ll be out of commission long enough for us to get Yimmon to safety.”

“You just came from Yimmon, didn’t you?” Jax asked Den, and at the Sullustan’s nod, he added, “How does he seem?”

Den shrugged. “About like you’d expect a guy to seem who’s been nearly dead four times in the last three weeks.”

Jax took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Those near-hits were why they were removing Thi Xon Yimmon from Coruscant. The leader of the anti-Imperial resistance cell known locally as Whiplash had been targeted a number of times in the past weeks by Imperial forces. In two cases, only the fact that Jax and his team had a friend on the police force—a Zabrak prefect named Pol Haus—had tipped them to the threat in time to avoid it.

In a twisted way, the Imperial attention to Whiplash—and Yimmon in particular—was flattering. It meant they had risen from mere annoyances to serious threats. Perhaps the Empire had even made the connection between the local resistance on Imperial Center and the broader movement that was springing up on a growing number of far-flung worlds. In practical terms, this meant that—over the last several months—the Imperial orders had gone from “shoot ’em if they get in the way” to “ferret them out, track them down, and destroy them.”

The Emperor had also changed tactics. Absent from these recent attempts at annihilation were the Force-sniffing, raptorlike Inquisitors. Now the attacks came from Force-insensitive bounty hunters and battle droids. It was as if, having failed to turn the gifts of the Force against Yimmon and his cohort, the Emperor was simply throwing every mundane weapon in his arsenal at them.

Jax wanted to believe that these were the acts of a desperate tyrant who had just lost his most potent weapon. He wanted to believe it as much as he wanted to believe that Vader was gone. But . . .

The man who wouldn't die.

He shook himself, realizing he had come to think of Darth Vader as inevitable . . . and immortal.

Whatever hideous truth lay behind that feeling, Jax could not let it distract him from the hard reality that the Empire wanted Whiplash dead and buried. The Empire, being the hierarchical beast that it was, figured this was best done by destroying the brains of the organization. But Yimmon—with his dual cortex and a personal cell of operatives that included a Jedi, a Gray Paladin, and a sentient droid—was a hard man to kill or capture. Still, the last attempt had come close. Too close. *Way* too close. It had taken out several storefronts and more than a dozen innocent citizens who happened to be too near a tavern that the Whiplash had used to pass messages.

Jax couldn't shake the memory of the street in the aftermath of that attack. The bodies littering the walkway, the sharp smell of ozone in the heavy air, the photonic imprints of people on the walls of the buildings, reverse shadows caught at the instant of death. The hushed sense that the entire neighborhood was holding its breath, readying a roar of outrage . . . a roar that would fall on deaf ears.

Outrage against the Empire seemed futile; Jax had to believe it was not.

The decision to move the resistance leader from Imperial Center had been almost unanimous. The sole dissenting voice had belonged to Yimmon himself. Only a great deal of convincing had finally gotten him to agree that relocating their base of operations to Dantooine was the wisest move.

And none too soon.

Jax shook off the feeling of dread that threatened to settle over him. For the hundredth time that day, he opened his mouth to tell Laranth about the “summons” he’d gotten three days earlier from a Cephalon Whiplash informant. But caution and Den’s presence kept the words from his tongue.

“I’m going to go back and talk to Yimmon,” he said, rising. “Take the helm?”

Laranth nodded and slid into his seat. Jax turned to I-Five. “Ping me when we’re about to jump to hyperspace, okay?”

“You don’t trust us to enter the corridor correctly?” asked the droid.

Laranth merely looked at Jax through her large, peridot-colored eyes.

“Of *course* I trust you. I just need a front-row seat for the jump. Yeah, I know it’s not rational,” he added when I-Five made a testy clicking sound. “I just need to see the stars change. That all right with you?”

“As you wish,” droid and Twi’lek said in eerie unison. Jax thought he heard Den Dhur chuckle softly.

He found Thi Xon Yimmon sitting at a duraplast table fashioned to look like wood. It looked like wood for no other reason than that Jax liked wood. On extended missions in space—which seemed to happen increasingly as resistance activity picked up and spread—he wanted to be reminded that somewhere there were worlds with forests alive and growing.

He had a real tree in his quarters—a tiny thing in a ceramic pot. It was a gift from Laranth and was many hundreds of years old, though it remained tiny. I-Five had shown Jax how the masters of an ancient art form called miisai trimmed and guided the branches. Jax had learned to do it using delicate tendrils of the Force. The practice had become a meditation. So, too, had going through the forms of lightsaber combat with his new weapon—a lightsaber he and Laranth had constructed using a crystal that had come to him from an unexpected source. The weapon's weight was a comforting presence against his hip; no less comforting than being able to stow the Sith blade he'd been using.

He'd had no time to meditate in the last two days. He'd told himself it was because of their aggressive time line for moving Yimmon offworld. He knew better. It was because meditating led to thinking about the message the Cephalon had given him.

Time, for a Cephalon, was a somewhat malleable substance. "Plastic," a philosopher or physicist might have said. Den called it "squishy." Whatever modifier seemed most appropriate, it all came down to the same thing: Cephalons "saw" time as other sentients saw spatial relationships. Something might be before you or behind you or beside you, but if you turned your head to look, it was visible. If you walked around an object, you could see different sides of it—gain different perspectives. A crude analogy, but approximate to the way Cephalons saw time. A moment might be before them or behind them or on top of them—future or past or present—yet they could but turn their immensely complex minds and perceive it, move around it, and view it from different points.

This perception might—or might not—have had something to do with the fact that Cephalons had what was known variously as augmented or punctuated intelligence.

This meant that they had, in addition to one big brain, several “sub-brains”—ganglionic nodes, really—that took care of more atavistic body functions and left the big brain free to do . . . well, whatever it did.

Through his connection to the Force, Jax had occasionally come close to grasping the reality of this, but even a Jedi couldn’t fathom the precise nature of the Cephalons’ relationship to time. And, alas, what Cephalons could *not* do terribly well was communicate what they perceived. Tenses were lost on them. What happened the previous day or last century was as “present” as something that would happen the next day or a century in the future. And since they were linked to one another through the Force, a Cephalon might very well be able to “see” something that hadn’t happened or would not happen in its own lifetime.

Which was why receiving a message from a Cephalon Whiplash operative before a major mission was, to Jax Pavan, a severe test of his Jedi patience. He often sent the more dispassionate I-Five to interview Cephalons, but this time that hadn’t been an option. When Jax had received this message, I-Five had been off with Den Dhur and Tuden Sal, securing a series of bogus ship’s ident codes that might be needed for their journey to Dantooine. So he’d gone by himself back into their old neighborhood near Ploughtekal Market to meet with a Cephalon who’d installed itself in a residence that catered to non-oxygen-breathing life-forms. Cephalons preferred methane and liked their atmosphere a little on, as Den put it, the “chewy” side.

Jax had arrived at the Cephalon’s address in heavy disguise. To outsiders he appeared to be an Elomin diplomat—just the sort of visitor a Cephalon might be expected to have. Diplomats and politicians were always looking for an edge when it came to future—or past—events. The Cephalons had no scruples about divulging information. They merely were incapable of communicating it clearly.

Jax found the alien in a loft that was considered grand by Cephalon standards. Within the methane-infused habitat, it kept a variety of kinetic fountains, sculptures, and art wall displays. The Cephalons liked movement. The huge being—whose designation, Aoloiloa, loosely meant “the one before Lo and after Il”—lived behind a huge glass-walled barrier in which it floated in its soup of methane like a gigantic, mottled gray melon. It ate and communicated via a baleen that strained nutrients from the methane soup and vibrated to give form to thoughts that were displayed on a panel in an antechamber outside its inner sanctum. The name, Jax knew, was for the benefit of other sentients the Cephalons interacted with—a means for those temporally challenged souls to distinguish between individuals. Presumably the Cephalons had their own mysterious way of doing that.

Jax had announced himself using the translation device next to the Cephalon’s display panel.

“I, being Jax Pavan, come as bidden.” *Now warn me of an Imperial plot.*

The Cephalon, of course, did nothing of the kind. Instead, it asked a question: *Depart you (have/will)?*

Jax blinked. Clearly a question about a future event. “Yes.”

—*Crux.* The word typed itself onto the display panel.

“Crux?” repeated Jax. “What kind of crux?”

—*Nexus,* said Aoloiloa. *Locus. Dark crosses/has crossed/will cross light.*

“Yes, I know what a crux is. What does it mean—in this case?”

—*At crux: Choice is/has been/will be loss. Indecision is/has been/will be all loss.*

Jax waited, but the Cephalon did not elaborate.

“What does that mean: ‘Choice is loss. Indecision is all loss’?”

—*It means what it means. Everything.*

Jax kept his thoughts composed with effort. *Listen*, he told himself. *Listen*. “Whose choice?” he asked. “Whose indecision? Mine?”

—*Choice upon choice. Decision upon decision. Indecision is/was/will be cumulative.*

“Indecision over a period of time? Or the cumulative indecision of a number of people?”

The Cephalon bobbed up and down slowly, then turned away from the transparisteel barrier that protected it from the oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere of Coruscant.

So, silently, Jax had been dismissed. He’d walked back to the art gallery and event center that served as Whiplash headquarters pondering the Cephalon’s words: *Choice is loss; indecision is all loss.*

Any way he interpreted that, it did not sound good.

Jax stopped in the hatchway of the *Far Ranger’s* crew’s commons, studying the Whiplash leader where he sat at the faux-wood table. “You’re still not resigned to this, are you?” he asked finally.

“Would you be, if you were being asked to relocate and leave the heart of your operations? The only reason I agreed to this is that if the Emperor suspects I’ve moved, he may focus his efforts on finding me and give the network on Coruscant some relief.”

“The attack near Sil’s Place was too close, Yimmon. And the loss of innocent life involved . . .”

The Cerean nodded wearily. “Yes. That, too. That bloodbath was . . . unforgivable. That he would send battle droids, have them kill indiscriminately and widely . . .”

“Apparently, they knew we were in the area, but their information wasn’t precise enough to target effectively. Photonic charges gave them a shot at killing some of us without extreme damage to the infrastructure.” Jax couldn’t quite keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“Maybe. And maybe . . .”

“What?”

The Cerean shook his immense head. “You said it yourself once: It felt as if the Emperor was desperate. If Vader is out of the way for a while and the Inquisitors can’t track us without you sensing them, that makes some sense, but . . .”

Jax felt a niggle of unease but shook it off. He’d understood the Cephalon’s warning, he told himself, and heeded it.

“Are you suggesting the Emperor might not be as desperate as he seems?” Jax asked Yimmon.

The Cerean sighed, his breath rumbling deep in his broad, muscular chest. “Let us just say that I have never known Emperor Palpatine to be prone to panic. But—as I said—with his champion out of the way . . .”

“Any more intel from our informants?”

“None. No one has seen Vader or heard so much as a rumor about his condition since your last meeting.”

Their last meeting—in which Vader had tried to punish Jax for still being Jedi, in which he had cultivated a traitor within Jax’s team, in which he had tried to make use of a rare biological agent to enhance his own connection to the Force. Jax found it ironic that, in his unenhanced state, Vader might have succeeded in capturing or killing him . . . along with all his companions. But the Dark Lord had overreached and defeated himself. There was a lesson in that about hubris and impatience. Jax wondered if Anakin Skywalker—imprisoned in that towering black survival suit, held together by cybernetic implants—would recognize it.

“Then this is a window of opportunity,” said Jax. “To be timid now . . .”

“Timid?” Yimmon laughed. “Am I not showing timidity by running?”

“No. You’re showing wisdom. Whiplash needs you. The growing resistance needs you. The Emperor’s flailing around almost got you killed.”

Thi Xon Yimmon looked up at Jax with steady eyes the color of old bronze. “What if he is not flailing around, Jax? What if there *is* a method to these attacks?”

Jax pushed away the cold that tried to invade his core. “Then we’ll remove ourselves from harm’s way. Look, Yimmon, if he’d known Sil’s Place was the pass-through for our operatives, he would have simply taken it off the map. If he’d known where our base of operations was, he would have sent his bounty hunters and his battle droids and his Inquisitors there and killed us in our sleep. What could he possibly have to gain by plunging randomly around like a rancor in bloodlust?”

“Perhaps what he *has* gained—my leaving Coruscant. My disconnecting myself from the battle long enough to relocate and regroup. Long enough for *him* to regroup. This may be a window of opportunity for the Emperor, too.”

Jax levered himself away from the hatch frame. “I’ve told you, if you want my team to stay with you on Dantooine—”

The Whiplash leader shook his head wearily. “No. Tuden Sal needs you on Coruscant. He’s unhappy enough that you’re the one serving as my nursemaid on this voyage. He’s right. I’d talk you out of this if I could. I’d like to have our best near Palpatine . . . and Vader, if he re-emerges.”

If? No, not *if*. Jax knew it was really only a matter of when.

two

Their route to Dantooine had been decided in a heated consultation during which Laranth and I-Five argued for a direct shot into Wild Space and from there into Myto's Arrow, while Tuden Sal and Thi Xon Yimmon counseled that they take a more mundane approach along a heavily traveled trade lane.

Myto's Arrow was a narrow corridor that would take them from the fringes of the galaxy directly to Dantooine through a patch of unstable space stressed by the gravitational tides of a particularly violent binary star system most pilots called simply the Twins. Its saving virtue was that the heavily fluctuating magnetic fields around the binary pair cloaked any attitude changes a ship made as it passed by. Theoretically, a master pilot with an enemy in hot pursuit could flee into the binary's gravity coil, drop out of hyperspace just long enough to make a radical course change, then leap again in a completely different direction while the pursuer tried to figure out which way he'd gone.

The mere mention of Myto's Arrow made Tuden Sal's face pucker. His recommendation that they make port on Bandomeer made Laranth's eyes roll.

"There's still a pronounced Imperial presence on Bandomeer, Sal," she had objected. "After Vader crushed the miners' revolt last year, the Emperor has kept a watchful eye on things."

"Which is why no one would expect a ship full of subversives to make port there," Sal argued. "You would be just one more cargo ship doing its mundane business in an Imperial port."