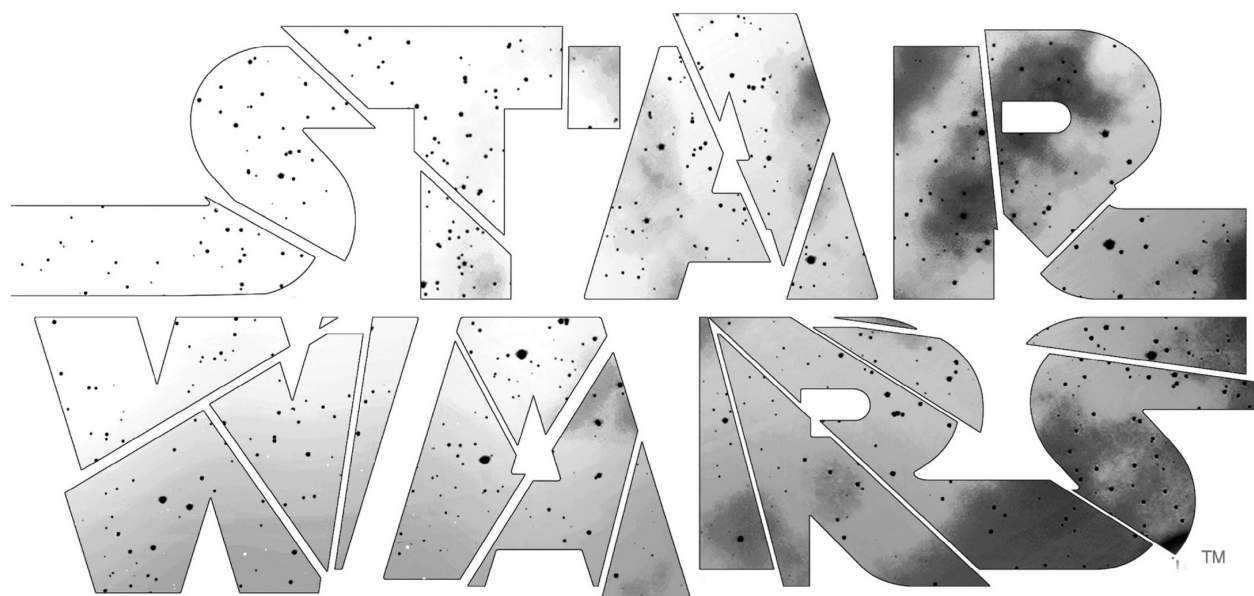


STAR WARS
MACE WINDU
THE GLASS ABYSS



STEVEN BARNES

STAR
WARS

The image shows the 'Star Wars' logo in a stylized, blocky font. The letters are filled with a grayscale starfield pattern, featuring numerous small black dots of varying sizes against a lighter gray background. The letters have a slight 3D effect with a darker gray outline. The word 'STAR' is on the top line and 'WARS' is on the bottom line. A small white star is visible within the letter 'A' of 'WARS'. A small 'TM' trademark symbol is located at the bottom right of the 'S' in 'WARS'.

TM

BY STEVEN BARNES

STAR WARS

Mace Windu: The Glass Abyss

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Twelve Days



STAR WARS

MACE WINDU

THE GLASS ABYSS

STEVEN BARNES

RANDOM HOUSE WORLDS



NEW YORK

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Family is more than blood. The line of love and gratitude runs from my
two living fathers: Larry Niven and Steve Muhammad...
through me...
To my son, Jason, and daughter, Nicki...
you are my heart.

THE **STAR WARS** NOVELS TIMELINE

THE HIGH REPUBLIC

Convergence
The Battle of Jedha
Cataclysm

Light of the Jedi
The Rising Storm
Tempest Runner
The Fallen Star
The Eye of Darkness
Temptation of the Force
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Lords of the Sith
Tarkin
Jedi: Battle Scars

SOLO

Thrawn
A New Dawn: A Rebels Novel
Thrawn: Alliances
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ROGUE ONE

IV A NEW HOPE

Battlefront II: Inferno Squad
Heir to the Jedi
Doctor Aphra
Battlefront: Twilight Company

V THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

VI RETURN OF THE JEDI

The Princess and the Scoundrel
The Alphabet Squadron Trilogy
The Aftermath Trilogy
Last Shot

Shadow of the Sith
Bloodline
Phasma
Canto Bight

VII THE FORCE AWAKENS

VIII THE LAST JEDI

Resistance Reborn
Galaxy's Edge: Black Spire

IX THE RISE OF SKYWALKER

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

“Tell us the story again,” the child said.

“It is late,” the Webkeeper said, knowing she had already lost the argument.

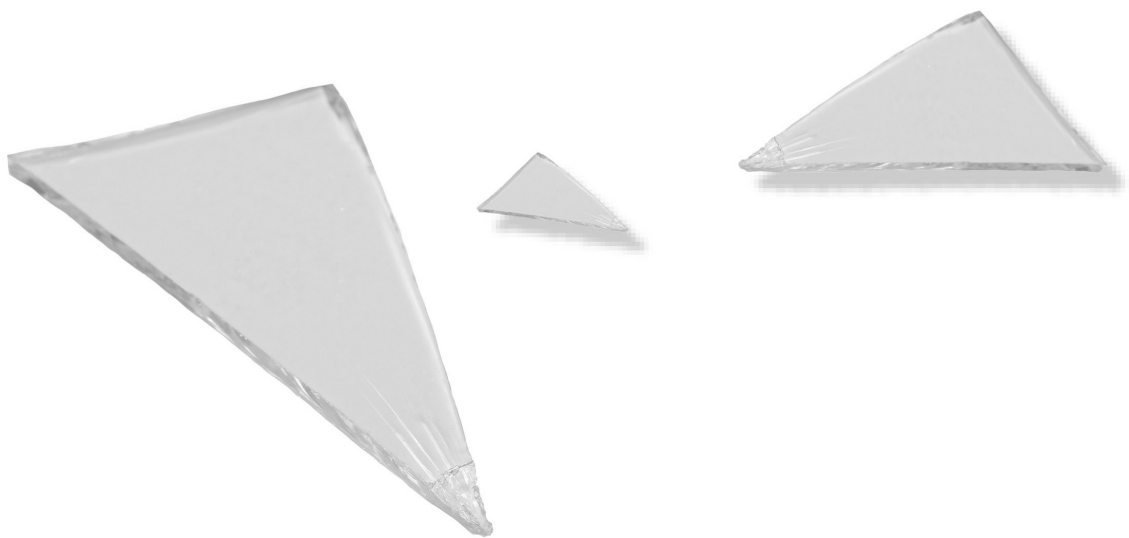
“Please!” they all cried.

The Webkeeper’s lips curled in a mock frown, and then she nodded agreement. She had never tired of this story, and if life was kind, she never would.

“Once within the Web,” she began, “there was a wounded world, a land of crystalline wonder. A people balanced on the edge of disaster.”

The children elbowed one another and whispered in anticipation. This was more than a good story...it was the very best.

She continued, “But Spinners never despaired, knowing that all existence is connected through the Web. And that one day a warrior would come, the fiercest in the galaxy. Drawn by duty but bound by love...”



CHAPTER ONE

THE STRANGER

Metagos

Staff in hand, the stranger arrived in the slums of New Xaxxis, capital city of the planet Metagos. In days past, the underground caverns housing New Xaxxis had been derisively referred to as the Glass Abyss, thanks to the gigantic crystal obelisks towering proudly from the ground like stalagmites or hanging from the ceiling like jagged, broken fangs. The entire city was laid out like a wagon wheel, with roads and canals sectioning it off. The very poorest section, sometimes called the Children's Maze, was situated at the hub.

Swathed in black leather, the stranger was tall, lithe, and human. His face was almost as dark as his ankle-length bantha-hide coat. With his every step along the slum streets, moisture oozed around the edges of his boots, drawn from deep artisanal wells.

Gaping volcanic vents in nearby vacant lots jetted steam that drifted upward toward the ceiling, forming into wispy clouds, which personal flight craft, birds, and leather-winged reptiles glided through.

Three armed enforcers appeared: one human and two Zilka, much like four-legged, armored bugs. "Here's an ugly one!" the human cried, laughing. He and one of the Zilka were armed with shock prods. The other bug carried a halberd with a smear of dried blood on the blade.

"All you humans are ugly," the halberd-wielding Zilka said to his human companion. "But this one could give lessons." They cackled at the mild witticism. The stranger seemed to ignore them, but if they thought he hadn't noticed, then they'd missed the angry glint in eyes as black as a blaster's barrel.

"Checkpoint, stranger," the first enforcer—the Zilka carrying the shock prod—said. "Citizen or newcomer?"

“Newcomer. Rim-runner. Just landed.”

“Are you armed?” he asked.

The newcomer nodded and carefully thumbed aside his black cloak, revealing the hilt of a holstered blaster. Under the triple threat of their weapons, they disarmed him of the pistol but ignored his two-meter brown staff, formed from some seamed and knotty wood.

“Gotta have the right credentials,” the second said, the human—a big male with outsized hands. Strangler’s hands.

“No weapons. You can enter,” the third said, and the second laughed.

“*He* won’t live long,” one said, as if the newcomer were not standing directly before them.

“Welcome to New Xaxxis,” the third sneered.

The stranger scanned a few buildings and spotted a placard promising gaudy entertainment a few steps away. He walked half a block, ignoring solicitations and questioning eyes, until he found the sign reading VIN-VIN’S WHEELHOUSE and pushed through the door. The interior was crowded with tables and noisy, but the bar proper seemed underpopulated, and he found himself a seat.

—

THE BARTENDER’S NAME was Vin-Vin Sunfall. He was a reptilian Metagosan, with all the dense, almost casually brutal musculature famous among a similar breed, the Trandoshans. It had been a busy night with patrons enjoying their drink and food and the music of the Xaxxis Axis Quartette and acrobatic dancers (“Hot Licks! Cool Tricks”). But he noticed the stranger when the doors opened. Vin-Vin noticed everything. It was one reason he was still alive when the rest of his family fed the Web.

Without speaking a word, the stranger pointed a finger at a glass of foamy brown bitters currently being drained by a Muun miner, then lifted that finger in request. He seemed a man whose fondest wish was to be left in peace.

When the stranger had entered, he’d moved as if gliding on rails. His brown eyes suggested a soft yet focused gaze. This was a man of action who

was seeking calm. No. He was the center of calm and would remain so even amid violent action. Vin-Vin's fingers brushed Bloodhammer, the massive peacekeeper under the bar. He hoped he wouldn't have to reach for it, at least in part because the thought of fighting this newcomer twisted his gut.

Vin-Vin poured, served, and took a coin in return. He'd have then moved his attention elsewhere, but two enforcers, a human and one of those annoying Zilka bugs, swaggered through the door, wafting attitude and unwashed skin. The Zilka's powerful musk glands reeked of adrenal danger. The pair pushed their way through the crowd and bracketed the stranger. It seemed to Vin-Vin that they were attempting to renew a discussion that began outside.

"You strut in here like a Harch on death sticks," the human said. "Who are you working for?"

No reply. The Zilka, the taller of the two, leaned over and drooled a greenish gob of sputum into the stranger's drink and then stepped back, smirking, awaiting a response.

Nothing. The musicians continued to play their percussion and wind instruments, and the dancers writhed in display of skill. The murmur of conversation and the clink of glasses and cutlery continued as if nothing had happened. When the stranger didn't react, the shorter said, "He's a brave one."

They chortled, jostling each other merrily as they left.

Huh. Did they think the stranger was afraid of them? Or had they sensed the same danger signs that had raised his own hackles?

The stranger calmly pointed again, raised the same finger a second time, and slipped a coin onto the bar.

This one is interesting, Vin-Vin thought.

The dark, strong face exhibited no fear and no anger in response to the provocation. In fact, there was no reaction at all.

"What brings you here, *ssstranger*?" Vin-Vin asked, the sibilant hiss typical of his species lengthening the last word.

"Heard there's work."

The bartender polished a glass. “For the right kind of man.” He chuckled slyly. “Or maybe the *wrong* kind, if you know what I mean.” Vin-Vin gave a practiced wink.

The stranger raised an eyebrow. The rest of his face didn’t move. Impressive.

“How about one who doesn’t mind dirtying his hands?” the stranger said.

Maya-12, a holodroid who appeared to be wearing a business suit, sized the stranger up. She morphed her appearance to resemble a severe, alert dark-skinned human female and approached him. She was a regular. Her “sister” droids Maya-8 and Maya-14 were the acrobatic dancers in the Xaxxis Axis.

Maya-12 used Vin-Vin’s Wheelhouse as a base of operation, connecting with clients for everything from bodyguarding to therapy, language lessons, massage, and private investigation. She and her sisters had never created a problem for Vin-Vin, and that was mostly what mattered.

“New here, stranger? Need orientation? A tourist guide? I have connections to the Sa’ad. Care to meet a spider-worm?”

The stranger smiled. “Not at the moment. But if I did, you’d be the one. Here, please. Whatever the lady wants.”

He placed another coin on the bar.

“Lady...?” the droid said, surprised.

“To my eyes, yes.”

Right answer. She slid in next to him. “My name is Maya-Twelve. You’re new here.”

“Just a tumbling fasha-weed, looking for a place to root awhile.”

She lowered her voice to a near-whisper. “It isn’t safe here. Not for a... gentleman. Might be better to move on.”

“Appreciate the advice.”

She pocketed the coin, shrugged, and spotted a table where the two other Maya-series holodroids were hailing her. The music had paused, and they were taking a break. Maya-12 headed over.

The stranger slid another coin onto the bar.

“The *sss*ame?” the bartender asked.

“Information.”

Vin-Vin wiggled his claws, and the coin disappeared. “About what?”

“The layout hereabouts. What might a fellow seeking employment need to understand?”

“Well, now. Information. I can do that. New *Xaxxisss* is a *sssnake* with two *headsss*, and *sssooner* or later anyone who *kissesss* one gets bit by the other.”

“Who are you aligned with?”

“Oh, I’m happy where I am, friend.”

“So what are these two heads?”

“Chulok and *Sssybil*. Everyone *knowsss* that.” His forked tongue flickered to lick thin reptilian lips.

“Hiring?”

The bartender laughed. “*Sssybil* rarely *hiresss* other than her own children.” He paused, wondering if he should say the next thing, and then decided to. “Sometimes her *children* hire *outsiderssss*.”

“Got a lot of kids?”

“A new one almost every day.”

“Busy lady. And this Chulok?”

“Oh, they hire. When *there’sss* an opening.”

“And how often does that happen?” He raised that isolated eyebrow again. Again, the rest of his face didn’t move. Either nerves had been severed in that dark flesh or the stranger had a unique level of muscle control. Vin-Vin considered such a man, even one centimeters shorter and kilos lighter, to be extraordinarily dangerous. His hackles trembled.

“Haven’t heard of anything recently. And even if there were, you’d need to be recommended by *sssomeone* they trust. *Ssshow* some *unusssual ssskill*.”

“Huh.” Something happened behind the dark eyes. And to them as well. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but the brown irises had deepened to black. Vin-Vin had the sense that some relays had clicked in the stranger’s brain. Some decision had been made. And not a pleasant one, either.

“*What’sss* your name, friend?”

The stranger didn’t answer.

“All right. Maybe the wrong question. *What’sss* your *professssion*?”

“Problem solver,” the stranger said, then pushed away from the bar.

“Where are you going, Problem Sssolver?”

“To solve my problem.”

Vin-Vin watched him leave. A spot of moisture remained on the bar, and the reptilian smeared it away with one scaly finger, as if it had never glistened there at all. A moment later, he’d erased the stranger from his mind just as completely.

There were new tough guys in New Xaxxis every day. Most didn’t make it to breakfast.

—

THE CAVE HOLDING nearly a million New Xaxxan citizens was clicks wide in all directions, so large that the farthest edges seemed to mist like a horizon. Commuter speeders buzzed around the periphery in their own traffic patterns. New Xaxxis existed in nothing less than a stupendous geode, gigantic crystals projecting from the roof and walls, while those on the ground had been mined, plowed, or built around for years or even ages as the city expanded into a gigantic pie shape. Major roads and canals met at the center, dividing it into wedges.

At one outer northwest edge, a branching path led to a bridge above a burbling stream that led to a well pond. Access to that well was guarded by three ruffians, the same who had challenged the stranger on entry to the city: two Zilka and a human the stranger didn’t recognize.

As the stranger approached, he heard and saw them hassling a silver-furred Tynnan and her three children. The mother was in white mourning garb. Her children were crying, from old wounds and new. Each carried a water jug carved from some kind of grainy wood. They were empty, by the heft of them.

“It’s Marzi again,” a Zilka said, waving his shock prod. “We told you, you need to pay the toll.”

The old woman blinked plaintive, milky eyes. “Just seeking water. We haven’t had water in two days.”

The human laughed, a metallic, pitiless sound. “This is our bridge. Go around if you can’t pay the toll.”

“My leg is bad. My children need water.”

“You should have chosen a better mate. Old Kassis owed us money. Which means that *you* owe us money.”

She bridled. “You killed him!”

“He should have paid. Now go around. Shouldn’t take you more than half the day.” The other, larger Zilka reached out and gripped her with suckered fingers.

The stranger took this moment to interject himself. “Is this how men treat widows and orphans in New Xaxis? The tourist guides should mention such entertainment.”

The halberd-holding enforcer laughed. “There’s the brave one!”

“Whattaya want, nerf herder?” the human asked.

“Why do you interfere with our business?” the second Zilka asked.

The stranger tilted his head slightly, as if seeking a different perspective. “Oh, I don’t give a kriff about her. But you owe me a drink.”

They stared incredulously. “Unless you think this a good day to die, stranger, you want to watch that mouth.”

The stranger leaned on his staff. “You don’t look like brothers. I doubt you knew your fathers, but I don’t think any one woman could birth so much ugly. I figure you work for Chulok?”

Then they moved.

And what happened next was argued about for years, for every witness saw it differently.

Some thought that the stranger hit the Zilka behind him with his staff, then kicked the human, and then smashed the first one with the staff. Others said that no, it wasn’t his staff, but rather the stranger disarmed the Zilka with the halberd, then kicked the one behind him, and then hit the human with the blunt end of the halberd. Neither of these witnesses could explain how the first Zilka went flying off the bridge.

All they knew for sure was that the stranger seemed to be moving slowly and everyone else was flailing at top speed. Somehow, though, in the blink of

an eye, all three were down and unconscious: one with a paralyzed diaphragm, one with a knot on his skull, and the third with a month's worth of healing to do.

In the blink of an eye.

The witnesses gawked as the newcomer reclaimed his blaster from the twitching fingers of the larger Zilka.

"I didn't get an answer," the stranger said, dropping the halberd. Setting it down, he retrieved his staff, which leaned against the bridge's rail. When had he placed it there?

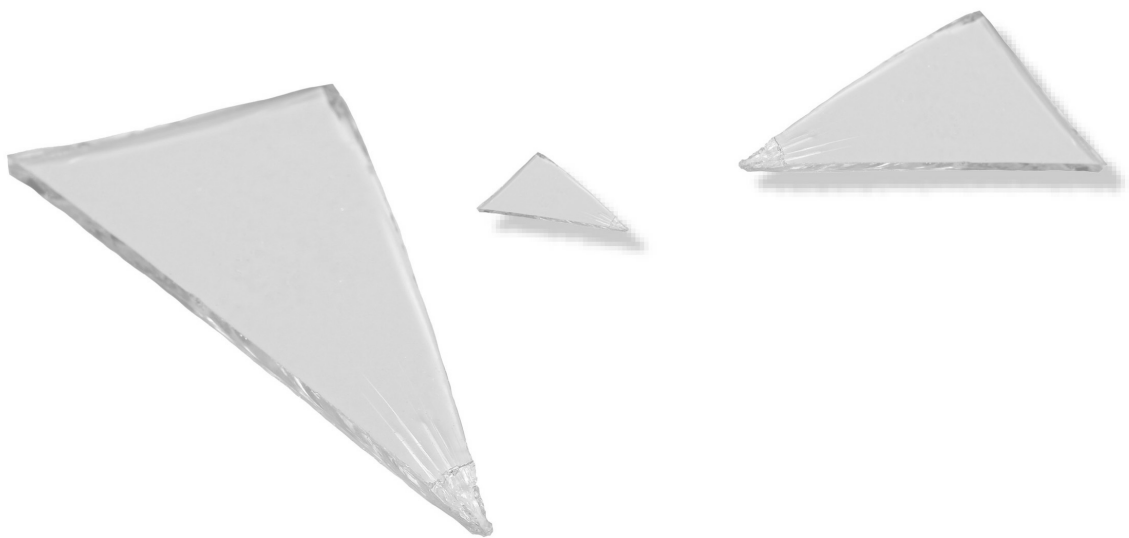
No one could remember, as the entire event had been so sudden.

"What...was your question, mister?" a bystander asked.

"Who'd they work for?"

"Why...Chulok. The Jedi Killer."

Mace Windu's eyes flamed, and then that fire was swiftly masked. "Tell Chulok to come and sweep up my credentials."



CHAPTER TWO

THE FUNERAL

Naboo, a week earlier...

Lush and green and peaceful, Mace thought. Qui-Gon wouldn't have cared for this.

The cremation spot between four-meter statues of winged guardians was one of the most honored locations in Naboo's royal cemetery. Qui-Gon Jinn's body rested atop a wooden pyre, his hands folded across his mighty chest. In one sense, it was the perfect place for his mortal remains to be consumed in flame, here where so many great warriors had been laid "to rest." There was no real way around it, but Mace suspected Qui-Gon himself would have enjoyed the irony.

The Jedi Master had met his end at the hands of a Sith while helping Queen Amidala liberate her planet. Death was always and ultimately a private affair, but a Jedi's death often became a matter of public mourning and official sobriety. So the funeral pyre was attended by key dignitaries from the Galactic Republic, the Jedi Order, and the people of Naboo.

Mace Windu did not dwell upon the city of Theed's natural beauty, all flowing water and greenery, but it did not deceive him. His face may have been peaceful, but his heart roiled with the realization of the *real* implications of Qui-Gon's death: *the return of the Sith*.

Qui-Gon's former Padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi, dressed in the ceremonial plain cloth of traditional Jedi robes, was speaking of his mentor, but Mace heard only snatches of the eulogy.

"He was the greatest friend imaginable, for any who knew him. A mentor who saved my life more times than I would want to remember, a man of deep wisdom and a warm heart. He seldom smiled, but when he did, it was like the sun emerging from behind a thunderhead..."

And so he continued. It was all sincere and all true.

None of it comforted Mace.

Obi-Wan had killed the mysterious Sith, a feat of skill that made Mace proud. So their adversaries were not the immortal monsters some feared, but creatures of flesh and bone. Flesh could be seared, and bones broken...

His thoughts had drifted in that direction when he felt a gentle nudge from Master Yoda at his side. The Grand Master Jedi was a fraction of his size with twice his wisdom, Mace was convinced. If there was anyone in the galaxy whom Mace Windu looked up to, it was this little green titan.

Even a hint of Yoda's disapproval caught Mace instantly, and he snapped his attention back to the ceremony.

Obi-Wan had just finished recounting Qui-Gon's wisdom, dedication to the Force, and commitment to his personal version of the Jedi Code. As a symbol of respect, in sync with the others, Mace drew and triggered his lightsaber. All were raised high in a bouquet of sacred fire, casting a reverent glow over the gathering.

Queen Amidala then added her thoughts as the lightsabers blazed. Mace later remembered something about sacrifice and duty. The rest slipped from his mind. Even in one so young, the familiar cadences of politicking had been learned by heart. Politicians were necessary, he understood, but politics was not his natural mode of thought and emotion. He considered it an art of compromise and deception, one that could be, and had been, corruptive to those walking a higher path. It was ironic that politicians so often mocked the warriors, then demanded they bleed to correct political misfires.

Some even thought that the Jedi should lead the Senate. That was another potential disaster. Power might not corrupt absolutely, but it was like sun and rain, facilitating the growth of whatever lurked in a soul's shadows. Mastery of the Force was already temptation enough.

The funeral concluded with a traditional Jedi ritual: Master Yoda ignited the pyre with Qui-Gon's own lightsaber. As flames rose, the attending Jedi collectively meditated, focusing their energy on Qui-Gon's journey into the Force.

This, finally, resonated with Mace Windu, in tune with that deep sense of calm within him that some mistook for detachment. Enemies who had

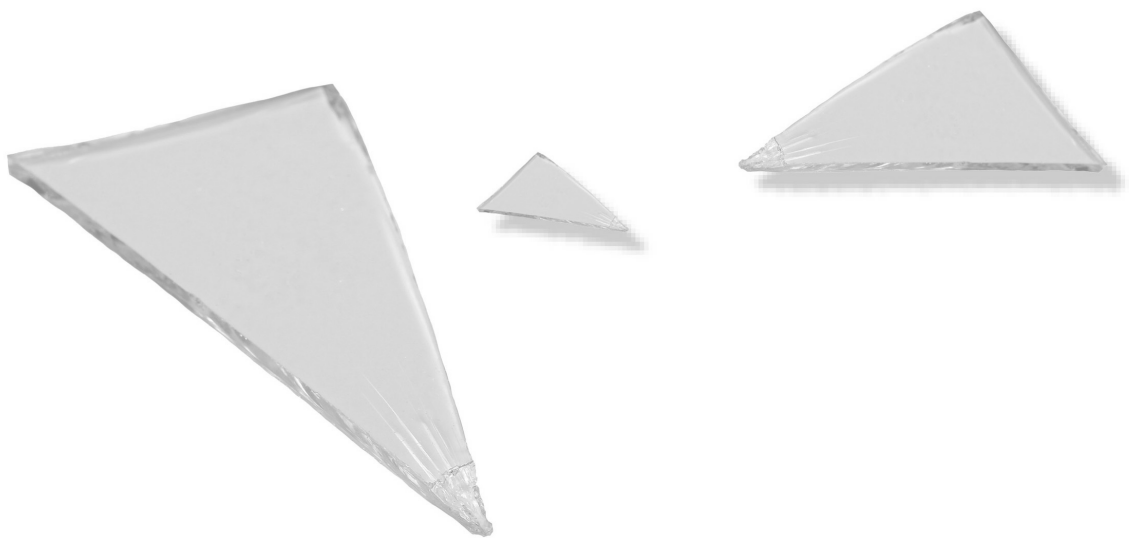
mistaken that calm for weakness had paid with their lives more times than he wanted to count, but fewer than his future dictated.

Something was coming, he had no doubt. The return of the Sith portended greater conflicts ahead. And the Jedi had just lost one of their stoutest allies.

As the flames dwindled, aided by special potions within the wood and within Qui-Gon's body itself, naught remained, save ash.

Mace bid a silent goodbye to his old friend and comrade. Then, while the others milled about and conversed, he returned to his ship as soon as decorum allowed.

Public mourning was not his way.



CHAPTER THREE

THE FINAL FAVOR

Coruscant

Coruscant's Jedi Temple was an iconic and historic structure serving as the spiritual and administrative center for the Jedi Order. Most considered it a grand, awe-inspiring edifice that reflected the Order's principles and values.

For Mace Windu, it was the only home he had ever known.

The Temple was situated in a prominent location known as the Jedi Temple Precinct. The structure occupied a square kilometer within the broad cityscape, towering above the bustling urban sprawl.

Returning to this sacred place always calmed Mace. The architecture was a blend of classical and modern styles. The immense ziggurat-like Jedi Temple itself scraped the clouds, with each level up to the pinnacle becoming smaller and more ornate. The exterior was constructed of pale stone mined from private Coruscanti quarries, giving it a uniquely noble appearance. And the fact that the stone was so dense as to be impenetrable to all but a planet-busting weapon was no coincidence.

The Temple's central spire was capped by a majestic conical roof pierced by transparisteel windows that allowed natural light to flood the inner chambers.

Mace dropped his ship through Coruscant's atmosphere, peering at the Temple grounds as he approached. Numerous splendid courtyards and gardens provided peaceful retreats for Jedi, some of whom planted and pruned as part of their discipline. These spaces were adorned with statues, fountains, and a variety of plant life, creating a harmonious environment for meditation and reflection.

He touched down on the private landing pad closest to his own chambers and set the autopilot to take the ship to the main hangar sixty seconds after

parking.

His walking path led through corridors branching off to every major nerve center of the Temple, including the Jedi Council Chamber, where galaxy-spanning decisions were made.

The training grounds, the site of thousands of hours of grueling practice, came next. Spacious halls and dojos featured the most advanced mind- and body-training equipment in the galaxy, including state-of-the-art lightsaber training tools that would have astounded even the Czerka Corporation's weapon experts. Here, Jedi younglings and Jedi Knights honed their combat skills against targets, droids, and one another—with wooden training staffs, not lightsabers, of course. The design was both functional and symbolic, emphasizing the Jedi's commitment to peace through preparedness.

One of his very fondest memories had occurred here: the first time a young Mace Windu had bested one of his Jedi instructors. The look of astonishment, surprise, and genuine respect on T'ra Saa's face had been gratifying. Indeed, Mace's entire Jedi family had welcomed and embraced his excellence. There had been no envy or jealousy. Just "*Welcome, brother.*"

Perhaps the most renowned part of the Temple, the Jedi Archives contained an immense collection of holocrons, scrolls, and datacards. The archives were divided into numerous sections, each dedicated to a different field of knowledge, including history, diplomacy, and the mysteries of the Force.

At the summit of one of the exterior spires sat the Council Chamber, a circular room where the Jedi High Council convened. The chamber was furnished with a central dais and twelve seats for the Council members, each with its own purpose and design.

In Mace's heart, Coruscant's Jedi Temple wasn't just a physical structure; it was also a place where Jedi Knights trained, mentored, and prepared to safeguard the galaxy, preserving the balance of the Force and ensuring the galaxy's prosperity for generations to come.

And more than any of that, all of that...it was home.

MACE'S LIVING QUARTERS were just large enough for a bed and a meditation mat for morning ablutions. To an outsider, the accommodations would have seemed poor indeed. But then, Jedi didn't live where they slept—they lived in the Force. A Jedi was not his body.

His chambers befitted his status as one within the Jedi Order. The outside world knew little about such things, and Mace found some of the wilder speculations palely amusing. Jedi quarters were typically modest and functional, reflecting the Order's emphasis on discipline. His own were no exception.

He pressed the exterior door control, and the panel slid open. The short entryway led to a meditation alcove. He preferred this. Upon entry, he enjoyed pausing to center and reflect before entering his living space. Today, he did this standing, but he often sat cross-legged upon cushions.

Turning, the next thing he saw was a plexisteel display case. Here Mace stored past lightsaber hilts, from his first half-scale weapon he had built in childhood to several models he had shaped over the years, utilizing the kyber crystals of Ilum that had called to him. His personal designs had evolved, as was tradition.

A Jedi's lightsaber was functional art, and the purple glow of his own was both aesthetically pleasing to him and a warning to all who had heard whispers of his unique mastery of the Force. More than one opponent had simply thrown down his own weapon the instant Mace's blade appeared. The color of his blade was uncommon among Jedi. Some had suggested that he took too much pride in his weapon's unusual appearance. He could understand that perception, but he was unconcerned with random opinions.

All his blades had served him with honor. This special case kept them safe and easily accessible.

Mace also had a well-loved repository filled with holojournals. These storage devices contained a wealth and breadth of knowledge of the Force, second only to the Jedi Archives themselves. In them, exhaustive accounts of his thoughts and adventures were stored forever, indexed for rapid reference. The rigor with which it was all organized reflected the machinelike precision of his mind.

A small training area in one corner of the room held a square mat where he performed a quick series of stretches and strengthening exercises every morning upon rising and every night before retiring, without fail. Uneducated eyes would have been astonished.

Today, his heart was troubled, and the proper use of emotion...was motion.

After his body was sheened with perspiration, he drew his blade and began practicing a spontaneous Vaapad lightsaber routine. Vaapad was an advanced and dangerous form he had created with Sora Bulq, his longtime friend and fellow Jedi.

Form VII was known as Juyo. Vaapad was an offshoot of this, a highly aggressive and intense form that was perfect for his current mood.

He practiced now with long, powerful strikes and quick, decisive movements. Each one struck at the cables of grief binding his heart. *"Turn pain into power,"* Qui-Gon had once told him.

Mace missed his friend.

When he had vented enough emotion to breathe smoothly, Mace extinguished his blade and continued with empty hands, tightening the arcs and spirals down to eye-baffling and bone-breaking precision. This was how he dealt with grief. He turned emotion into motion and motion into preparation for dealing with whatever triggered the initial grief.

Known for his exceptional lightsaber skills, Mace was more than merely strong in the Force. Even without its power, he'd have been one of the greatest human athletes in the galaxy, although he never boasted of this fact or even displayed it. There was one exception that he rarely discussed: There had been a time when, incognito, he had entered the great Heptathlon on Fasha IX. Without using Force powers at all, he had dominated every event before deliberately losing to the best non-augmented competitors. Fair was fair, and he had done it to amuse himself and determine his level of basic fitness.

Bladeless now, he punctuated his flow with moments of furious and violent focus, eventually ending his empty-handed practice with a 720-degree leap and spin, snatching his unignited hilt in the middle and whipping it

through every major angle of attack before his feet hit the ground again. He holstered the weapon, satisfied.

Mace's living space was bare, and his clothing simple. But in his heart of hearts...yes, his blade's color pleased him. It was, as youngsters were fond of saying these days, "sync."

Yes. It was totally sync. And that brought pleasure and peace to a heart forged in war.

—

A FLASHING LIGHT and reverberating tone announced visitors. Mace paused. At the door stood Obi-Wan and Kit Fisto, stout Jedi and dear companions.

"May I welcome you in?" he asked.

"Our business is brief," Fisto said. He was a Nautolan Jedi Master known for his exceptional skills in lightsaber combat and his winning smile. His gogglelike eyes and tentacled head appendages were distinctive, but his aura of acute awareness was what Mace most commonly remembered. Fisto was pure loyalty to his comrades and pure danger to his enemies.

"Here." Obi-Wan extended his hand. He held a disk-shaped package wrapped in some metallic foil. Mace could see the dark circles of sleepless nights beneath Obi-Wan's eyes. But Obi-Wan bore the weight of his new responsibilities as a Jedi Knight with a quiet resolve. "Qui-Gon's lightsaber is now resting in the archives, but it was his wish that you receive this after his death. I know you were friends."

Mace received the package from his fellow Jedi with infinite gravity. How unusual! A message of some kind. Qui-Gon and Mace had indeed been close. They had recognized and relied upon each other's courage, intelligence, and combat wisdom. But Jedi left little to be said to one another in case of death. Intuition told him this was more than a mere sharing of sentiment.

"Lose to a man at top-level dejarik, I guess, and you have either an enemy or a friend...for life."

"That must have been quite a game," Fisto said.

“We made it to the semifinals in the tournament, and we sweetened the deal just to make things more interesting.”

“What was the wager?” Obi-Wan asked.

“A favor.”

Fisto gave them a radiant smile. “What favor?”

Mace smiled in return. “He didn’t specify. Just that the loser would owe the winner. He won with a Savrip sacrifice but refused to name the favor.” He shook his head. “One of a kind.”

“And if you’d won?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Never really considered that possibility. I knew he’d win.”

“Why’d you bother playing him then?” Fisto asked.

“I wanted to see how badly he’d beat me.”

—

AFTER THEY DEPARTED, Mace sat on the floor and examined the package. It had been wrapped and tied with great care. Mace might have recognized the sender from the elegant knotting alone. He opened it, and as he expected, it contained Qui-Gon’s dejarik practice set, a present from the ruler of some grateful nation. He was wondering about the best alcove in which to create a little place of honor when its holo triggered to life. A human male appeared with flowing salt-and-pepper locks and a matching beard. His piercing blue eyes and calm demeanor suggested the eye of a storm.

Qui-Gon Jinn.

“Greetings, Master Windu, my old friend. If you are seeing this, it means that that day we all prepare for has come.”

“It has, old friend,” Mace replied, more to himself than to the holo.

“And now it is finally time for me to call in that favor. There is a planet on the Outer Rim called Metagos.”

Metagos...? He didn’t know it.

A planetary holomap appeared, rotating on its axis. It zoomed out to reveal a star on the galaxy’s Outer Rim, then moved in again to reveal a planet that looked like desert burned to the color of coals.

“It was first colonized some thousands of years ago. In more recent centuries, it has thrived as the source of Hillian fiber. Then fifty years ago, the surface dwellers suffered a disaster and had to move underground. In the confusion, the criminals who controlled the underground seized power.”

Qui-Gon’s hologram smiled ruefully. “I had dealings there, pursuing an assassin and smuggler who was providing contraband weapons to political agitators. In the process, I almost died. There is a gangster there named Chulok. Beware of them. You will learn. Just know that their clownish act conceals a warrior as deadly as anyone the Jedi have faced. It is their power, and that of the creature called Sybil, that you must break.”

Mace calmed his breathing. The shape of the mission had begun to emerge, and it was daunting.

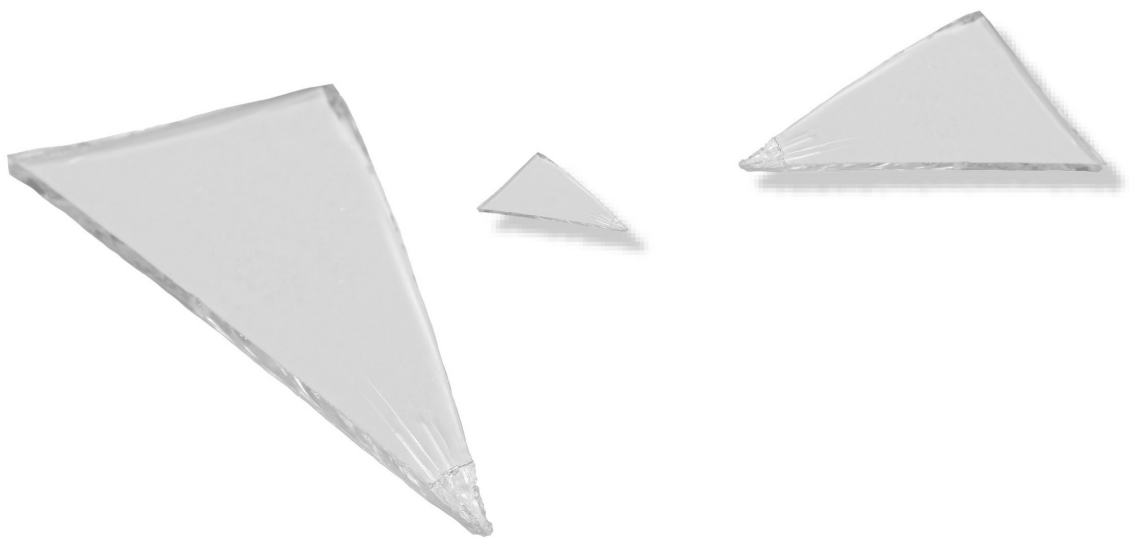
“You will need to make contact with KinShan Nightbird, of the Spinner clan. The Sa’ad. She will tell you the rest. I made her a promise, and her request for aid has reached me in the midst of another quest. If all goes well, I will complete that, then turn to this. But if you are watching this, all has not gone well. I must go now. But the fate of Metagos is in your hands, old friend. And unless I am much mistaken...they are good hands indeed. I will tell you more if I get the chance.”

The holo faded. Then flickered back. “There is another message. But one I ask you not to open until you have completed this assignment. Remember... you owe me.”

Mace Windu listened to the first message again, committing it to memory. As he listened, he noticed an engraved crystal the size of his thumb buried within the package. At first, he thought it a precious stone, but a closer inspection revealed a more common glasslike substance. He held it up to the light and saw within it a shadow of...something. A spider? A worm?

Huh.

He needed to talk to Yoda.



CHAPTER FOUR

YOUNGLINGS

The next morning, Mace sought out his friend and mentor in the Jedi youngling training room. There, Mace found Yoda supervising an exercise for a trio of candidates.

The child whom Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had brought to the Temple from Tatooine, Anakin Skywalker, was one of the three currently training. Mace watched the boy. Small for his age, he had dark-blond hair, blue eyes, and an adventurous personality. So fierce. So intent. He listened to every word and actually worked harder than requested. So much drive in one so young was... almost disturbing.

Mace greeted Yoda and told him his initial thoughts about Qui-Gon's request. "This does not feel like Jedi business," Mace said.

"Tell me of this task."

"There is a planet called Metagos, plagued by gangsters. He wants me to free the people from their control."

"Metagos. Heard of it, I have. Qui-Gon chased a terrible assassin there. Terrible. Barely survived, he did. Curious, this is," he said, then echoed Mace's statement: "Not *official* Jedi business."

"No. And this feels...poorly timed. I have had disquieting dreams. And in those dreams, I can see something terrible drawing closer and closer."

"And where are you in this?"

"This mission could be my end. I can feel that potential, but Qui-Gon would not have asked if this mission was not vital."

"Death comes to all. Even Jedi."

Mace nodded, although there was no need. They knew each other, and they knew this sacred path.

Mace said, "We were wrong to dismiss Qui-Gon's concerns about the Sith. I will not repeat the mistakes of the past. Perhaps I can find the root of

this trouble and cut it off before it spreads.”

“Ah. Well. Without peer, your skills are.”

“You are too kind, Master Yoda. But they can always be sharper.”

“Foolish, Qui-Gon was not. Reasons he had, for choosing you. Go you must.” He paused, then in a curious tone said, “Young Jedi...what do *you* say?”

The other candidates were both Umbarans, close in age. Although they were not siblings by birth, Frisk and Kiest were rarely seen apart. “Jedi go where the Force leads us,” Frisk, the older one, said. A standard, safe answer.

“It’s sync,” Kiest panted.

A bit too flippant, Mace thought.

Little Anakin glared at his companions, as if disapproving of Kiest’s lack of reverence. “We are Jedi! There is no other path.” He looked almost absurd, trying so hard to stand straighter and taller than he was. His left hand scratched at his ribs.

“Does that still sting?” Mace asked.

Anakin was worrying the site of a medical incision, the wound where a slave tracker had been removed from his body, a painful reminder of his obligations to his master on Tatooine. Some thought the wound would remind him of the injustices in the galaxy. Mace feared it would only serve as a reminder of the Jedi’s limitations. They had saved Anakin yet were unable to end the unconscionable practice of slavery outside of the Republic.

“I can endure anything, if it makes me a Jedi,” the boy said. “Jedi must ignore their feelings.”

“That is quite a statement. Is it your own?”

“Yes.” Then the boy considered. “Well...Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan said much the same.”

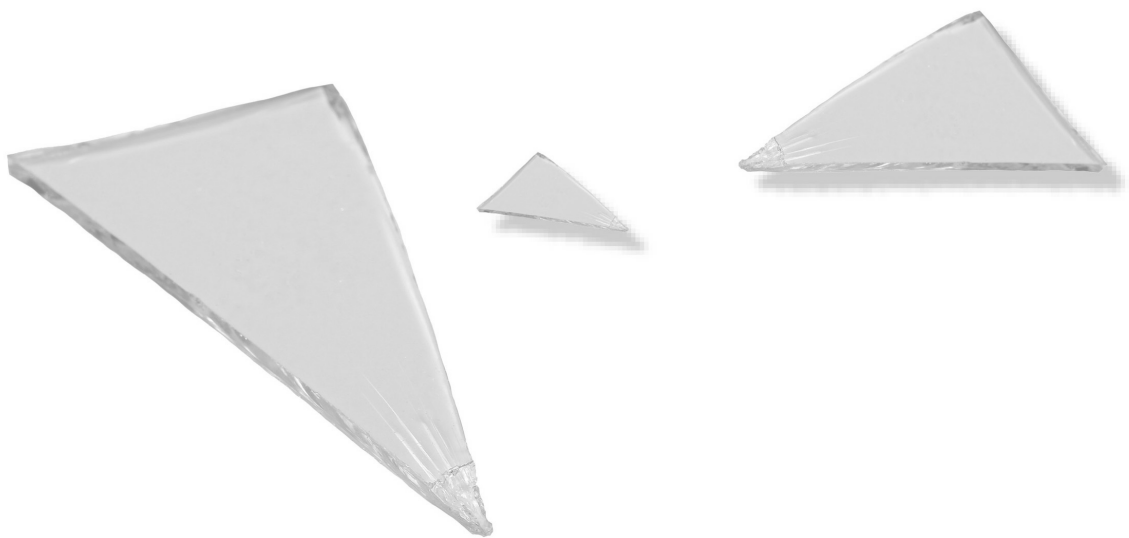
“I think you misunderstood,” Mace said. “Jedi do not ignore their feelings. They integrate them. Own them. They fear, but they are not afraid of their fear. They grow angry, but they allow their anger to motivate only honorable action. Do you understand?”

The boy nodded, but Mace knew he did not—yet. There was time.

“One more thing,” Mace said. “Master Yoda...there is a second message, one to open only after the mission is complete.”

“Odd, that is,” Anakin said, perfectly straight-faced. So serious. Mace restrained laughter. Yoda seemed unconcerned, but Mace wondered, just a bit, if Anakin was making a joke at the Jedi Master’s expense.

This boy would bear careful watching.



CHAPTER FIVE

A DEVOURING UNKNOWN

For Mace, traveling at hyperspeed was always a thrilling endeavor, never exactly the same twice. His precise and calculating mind enjoyed the strangeness of this unfathomable space. He was piloting a sleek Delta-12 Skysprite—a craft known for its agility and speed, making it perfect for navigating the currents of hyperspace.

Mace had always considered ships similar to fathiers, the best mounts in the galaxy. The synergy between being and machine was much like that between beast and rider, and that magic was as important as the engines themselves.

Mace input specific coordinates into the ship's navigation computer. He had calculated these coordinates based on known hyperspace routes, avoiding obstacles like gravity wells, stellar bodies, and other hazards.

Then he engaged with the hyperdrive ring, locking into the powerful external engine. With the press of a button, the stars elongated into streaks as the ship accelerated to lightspeed, and the transition was accompanied by the familiar blue-streaked tunnel of hyperspace.

As he flew, he searched through the ship's internal database, looking for any information to help educate him about his destination.

Metagos was once a thriving world. Only fifty standard years ago, solar disturbances sent powerful waves of energized radiation into its atmosphere, boiling its seas. Three-hundred-kilometer-per-hour winds swept the surface, scouring it to glass. Ninety percent of the population died. Billions. But millions went underground into networks of caves and tunnels.

The file went on to describe the city's primary factions and local industries, even giving enough detail to suggest a landing spot and a place to hide his ship, one near enough to a cave entrance to traverse safely.

THE STARSHIP EMERGED from hyperspace into a web of blurred stars slowly congealing from streaks into points of light. The guidance system continued to educate Mace as he flew.

He followed the nav grid down through the clouds. Metagos's landscape was tan, almost devoid of green. Shadows of night dappled the surface, but brown fingerlike patches suggested dead vegetation. Not much plant life. And that meant not much animal life dependent upon plants...or the things that eat them.

He passed the ruins of a great city, perhaps ten thousand square kilometers including the outskirts and suburbs. Once it might have sheltered millions; now its lights were almost completely dim. A few little glowing points suggested that someone—or something—still lived within. Miserable refugees or scavengers?

He concealed his ship in a polished crystal crevasse. The ship wasn't cloaked, but it fit neatly into a gap between two crystallized trees. He briefly considered setting the starfighter's auto-self-destruct feature, then decided it was uncalled for: While there were spare tools and equipment in the cargo bay, none of it was secret technology. In fact, there was nothing, save his lightsaber, to indicate he was an agent of the Republic.

Exiting the craft, he spent a quarter hour climbing up out of the fissure where he'd landed. Then there was nothing to do but begin the nighttime hike across a deadly span of irradiated ground, past frosted, twisted domes and the shattered rectangles of abandoned and destroyed buildings. One area held a topiary of human and several unfamiliar life-forms turned to glass by the radiation storm, like citizens of an ancient city engulfed by ash and lava.

His mind sorted through all of the new data, placing it in proper sequence and perspective. This was the game board on which a great drama would be played—a game of dejarik holochess with a planet at stake. Qui-Gon would have been palely amused by that image, Mace decided.

Welcome to Metagos, he thought. The databank's cold description had hardly prepared him for the austere beauty and eerie desolation of the planet's

ravaged landscape. On this planet, the surface had been scoured into a realm of glass trees and crystalline buildings.

The most striking feature of Metagos's surface was its forest of crystal trees. They seemed formed of translucent glass, their trunks and branches reflecting the triple moonlight in a dazzling display of colors. Some had smooth surfaces, while others were adorned with intricate patterns and textures formed by the relentless solar storms.

Rising from the sparkling ground were other crystalline structures, monuments to the planet's former surface dwellers. He suspected the desperate inhabitants had built them from standard materials that had then been crystallized by the solar storms. That made more sense than the alternative scenario: driving crystal nails through glass planks.

Everything glistened in the moonlight.

Several species of plants had apparently adapted to the conditions. A tiny percentage? Or did Metagos's flora have adaptation in their genes? How often had this nightmare happened in the past—often enough for the majority of plants to have dual expressions? Glassy flora could be found throughout the landscape, their translucent leaves and petals capturing the light and creating a kaleidoscopic effect.

The few small ratlike fauna scurrying about seemed equally remarkable. Their appearance suggested unique adaptations to survive the planet's extreme conditions, such as radiant, heat-absorbing exoskeletons and the ability to photosynthesize through their transparent skin. Such rapid adaptations!

One of Mace's hobbies was speculating on the origins of life from one planet to another. The changes he saw here on Metagos could not have happened so swiftly unless the potential was already within the creatures.

This suggested that whatever had happened here had happened before, possibly countless times over millions of years. Some kind of repeating macrocycle. And only the life capable of adjustment survived and thrived.

What he had seen on descent and now afoot of the settlements on Metagos was sobering. These people had been quite advanced, but they were unable to prevail against the power of nature.

Their proud architecture was now abandoned, with one exception: Rows of huge solar panels lined the landscape, the metal uncrystallized except for dusting. It implied that the panels had been erected since the major storm and were used by the surviving population for energy.

The inhabitants of Metagos seemed to have developed advanced technologies to harness the energy of the sun, using the frequent solar storms to some advantage. Solar panels and energy storage systems would have been seamlessly integrated into their buildings, making the settlements entirely self-sufficient.

Metagos was now a world of stark contrasts. The relentless beauty of the landscape was juxtaposed with the harsh reality of constant solar storms. When milder storms arrived, had the inhabitants retreated to the counterfeit safety of their crystallized buildings? When had they realized that the same radiation that changed their metal and wood to glass would kill them?

What had happened here was far beyond merely dangerous. This had to be world shattering, the sort of event that took place once in a thousand years, for which no civilization could really prepare.

Metagos was a testament to nature's ability to shape a world in extraordinary ways. He was glad that the ground he had to traverse was cloaked with night. During the day, deadly storms still scoured the surface and might for decades still to come.

—

MACE HIKED ONWARD, following his mental map, his boots sinking and sliding into the surface, which seemed covered by powdered glass more than sand or soil. Then without warning, he felt a tremor in the Force, just at the edge of his peripheral perception, before a solitary armored creature of some kind wobbled into view—human-sized but four-legged. Shaggy pale fur and massive curved tusks gave it a fearsome appearance. It snuffled at his tracks, then lowered its head and stared with deep, snot-rimmed brown eyes.

Mace remained calm and still but kept his senses extended. This lone creature presented little threat, but it would not be wise to be distracted

enough that its fellows might sneak up behind him. It approached no closer than three of its body lengths, and he sensed no intent to attack. It was curious. Still, he kept one hand on his lightsaber. You just never knew.

Common sense and experience told him that every step moved him deeper into enemy territory, as defined by Qui-Gon Jinn. There would hopefully be allies ahead, but for now he had to assume he faced enemies on all sides.

This was a world that would kill for the slightest error.

He was puzzled, more than apprehensive, when he heard a voice ahead: “Oh dear. Oh my. So much to clean, so many things to do...”

To Mace’s utter astonishment, a tractor-tread cleaning droid, battered and sun-bleached but still mobile, scooted around, raising a cloud of dust. “Oh my,” it continued, pushing the dust up into a little hill on one side of the street, then pushing it back to the other side. Mace stopped, curious but not alarmed.

And then he realized that this poor thing was solar-powered. It might have been pushing the dust back and forth for decades, cleaning for masters who would never return.

“Oh my, oh my.” It suddenly noticed him. “Master!” it said. “Oh no. You are not my master. I am...I am...” It stopped, as if struggling to fire rusted circuits. “Oh my. I don’t remember who I am. That is troubling.” It seemed sad but then perked up hopefully. “Do you know Tappan Quezel? Surely you do.”

Mace knew with certainty that this Quezel was long dead. What was kindness here? To share this sad reality and take away this droid’s only source of meaning? He didn’t know.

“No, I don’t,” he said. “But I’m sure he will be pleased that you are still on the job.”

“Oh yes, oh yes. On the job. Always on the job...”

Mace sneaked away. Perhaps on his return he would think of a way to help it.

If he returned.

HE MOVED ONE careful step at a time. Mace had been forced to park his vehicle far enough away to avoid immediate observation, and that meant a long exposed walk.

The stars above were unblinking and pitiless. Metagos's triplet moons cast strange fractured shadows upon him. He was alone yet felt as if he were a multitude. Something appeared up ahead that wasn't close enough to be seen clearly—perhaps a village of some kind. Faint outlines of cubes and domes clustered on the horizon to the west and south, but the only sign of life was a single distant twist of smoke. Otherwise, he saw no lights, heard no sounds, and saw no people along his chosen path.

It was easy to imagine that whatever lay ahead would be most unpleasant. As he trod forward, his sense of moving into a shattered and desolate area increased.

His head flickered to the right before his mind supplied a reason. He could have *sworn* that he saw movement—but only out of the corner of his eye. Years of training and discipline had earned Mace a heightened awareness of his surroundings. Combined with his attunement to the living Force, Mace's senses extended far beyond that which his eyes could see.

Something was near. Whether friend or foe remained to be seen.

A cluster of domes grew clearer up ahead, as did the sense that he was being observed. It looked as if this might once have been a mining town, something thrown up rapidly, a series of domes that were then sprayed with some substance that hardened like rock.

Mace pushed at one of the first shelters he reached. No taller than him, it was hard, like concrete. It didn't move even if he shoved *hard*, which implied that its foundations had been sunk deeply into the ground. This was expert construction, even if it had been done rapidly. It was not crystallized, which implied construction after the great burning.

He wondered if this could have been a refugee camp erected by desperate people fleeing the burning city. He bent down and crawled through a short tunnel into something that reminded him of the ice-dome hovels in arctic climes.

His lamp cast light on the inside. There was food on the table and a corpse—no, two corpses. People who had been caught up in events had been blasted into crystal. So their attempts to build a shelter that would block the sun's rays had been inadequate. Scavenged materials had not survived subsequent solar blasts. Beings and the shelters they had created...both had transformed to crystal like ogres in a child's story, turned to glass by the touch of the dawning sun.

This was part of what Qui-Gon Jinn had warned him about. He took a closer look into the eyes of one of the withered things sitting at the table. The flesh was transparent. Clear eyes like marbles stared beneath useless transparent lids. Lips turned upright in a frozen scream. Perhaps those tortured sounds had been caught in the crystalline throat. This was death. Why had these people sought such miserable shelter? Why had they not fled into the depths with the others?

Wondering about that, he backed out of the house, feeling just a little sick.

Mace retreated from the hut and walked out of the sad little town. There were larger huts where people had gathered in groups, as well as the smaller individual homes. Between two of them, he saw something surprising: the corpse of an animal.

It was similar to the creature that had retreated from him, but dead and turned on its back. Spiky crystalline scales, four knobby legs, and no visible eyes. Its belly had been ripped open, and its guts scooped out. The soil around it was splashed with half-digested meat. Something had gorged and then purged. Had the flesh been toxic, or had the killers simply been too sick to digest it?

Another sound. He saw nothing moving, but the hair on the back of his neck was aflame. He walked back out into the street. His eyes had played tricks upon him. There *was* something standing on the other side. It had once been an animal similar to an outsized duracrete slug, but something had happened to it. Now its glassy flesh was so clear that he could see muscle and crystalline bones through it. It made a move toward him. A second appeared. And another! He realized that the clear brittle flesh had provided a sort of camouflage.

Their movements seemed slow and painful. Did that imply that the dead one had been sicker and weaker still? He needed to end this now, before they came for him.

He drew his lightsaber and triggered its purple blade. “Do not test me,” he said. “I am no one’s prey. I do not wish to kill you, but I will.” He doubted they could understand his words, but his tone and posture spoke for themselves.

They did not seem to hear him, or perhaps they were too hungry to care. The pack shuffled forward. A sound rose from among them, a howling like the wind that continued until he wasn’t certain whether it was the wind or the sound from their throats that was prickling his skin.

“Get back!”

One of them shuffled closer, its pseudo arms reaching out for him.

With a sense of regret that he rarely felt, Mace slashed, and the glassy flesh *sizzled*. The creature howled as it dropped to the ground and shattered, chunks of once-flesh flying in all directions like broken shards. It howled again, and the wind howled, and all of them howled and backed away.

Mace turned to look at them. There was such pain in those faces and those dead eyes. He knew somehow that these creatures were blind. So how had they found him?

Then he had the answer. They had *heard* him gag. And then had heard him speak. And heard the thrum of his ignited lightsaber. Mace slid several steps away and stopped.

The demi-slugs nosed about blindly. They moaned, turning in different directions. They took halting steps toward where he stood, but it was clear that the wind had masked his steps so they could not find him. In time, they began to lose purpose and wandered away.

His mind filled with unanswered questions. Had the meat been corrupt, or was it possible that these creatures had lost the capacity to digest animal flesh? And if they couldn’t eat, then why hadn’t they all starved? He just didn’t know. There was so much he didn’t know here, but this was genuinely disturbing. It was not the way he had wished to start his mission.

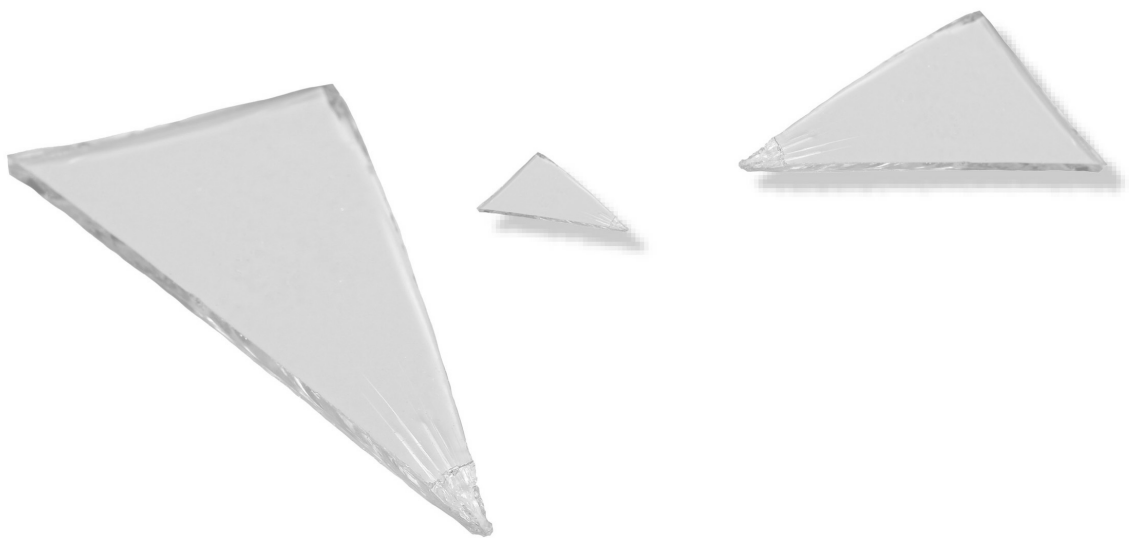
That feeling deep within himself was a sense of danger, of a devouring unknown. Something had made these demi-slugs take the risk of staying in the open after their cities had been destroyed. Had they once been thinking creatures? Had another wave of solar radiation done this to them? How long ago? Maybe they hadn't had time to starve yet. Was it possible they didn't need food? Or perhaps they required a different form of nourishment, something unknown to him. By the Force, it was possible that they were living solar cells. The galaxy had shown him stranger things.

He needed to leave. This was not a place for the living.

The last of the demi-slugs was now disappearing around the edge of the buildings behind him. One turned back and made a bubbling sound at him.

Mace was not to be trifled with. "Not today," he muttered.

Agreeing, it scampered away.



CHAPTER SIX

THE TUNNELS

Metagos

Walking toward a distant object can be an odd experience. Sometimes, it begins as a speck, then gradually increases in size. At other times, it seems to slowly rise before you as if pushing up out of the ground.

Before Mace was the string of saw-toothed mountains that he'd observed prior to landing. As he approached them, the center mountain rose and swelled until it looked like someone had taken a bite out of a rock and then pushed the rock halfway into the ground.

If he was close enough to see his destination so clearly, any potential enemies could see him as well. For that and other reasons, he had to be careful. Eyes could conceivably be upon him even though he was approaching from a direction the ship's data indicated was safe. Had they seen him spiraling down from orbit? Parking his starship? He couldn't say, but he knew that from this point onward, he had to assume he was being observed.

As he drew nearer, he detected other footprints in the crystallized dust: prints of numerous creatures of a wide variety of weights and sizes. At some point in the past, this plain had been densely populated. People had swarmed toward this mountain and its caves, perhaps a perceived route to safety. He was clearly not the first to seek shelter here, and he would not be the last. He was just the next.

In less than an hour, Mace reached an entrance tunnel to the underground. He slowly descended into an expanding underground civilization, New Xaxis.

The ship's databank contained instructions about the paths to take, the branches marked by written and carved signs. The path underfoot was rough

and uneven, insufficiently smoothed by the friction of countless passing feet. He traveled deeper and deeper along the underground switchbacks.

From time to time, there were holes torn in the rock walls, through which he glimpsed sections of the different levels. The first was crammed with detritus, like a vast junkyard. Perhaps it just served as a buffer to the surface radiation.

The second level had some makeshift dwellings, and he glimpsed a few miserable people cooking or otherwise scratching out a subsistence living. They looked sick to him. Radiation sickness, he guessed. They were too close to the surface.

The third level was a hangar holding a wide variety of speeders and cargo vessels. Turbolifts brought goods and people up from the lower levels or raised them to the surface.

As impressive as this was, it was nothing compared with the fourth level, vastly larger and the site of a great city: New Xaxxis, successor to the ruins above.

It looked to Mace as if New Xaxxis had been built within a breathtaking geode, one many clicks in breadth. Entire sections of the city were suspended from the cavern roofs by enormous cables. Titanic crystals grew everywhere, sprouting like kultu vines around the apartments and skyways, and droids were climbing and pruning. Seeing it all, he could guess the origin of the cavern's ancient nickname: the Glass Abyss.

Mace followed a branching, winding series of tunnels, following his mental map and carved wall markings. From time to time, he caught more glimpses of the city through breaks in the rock, then sank beneath that level. Had that been the third or fourth level down? He was descending more rapidly, the path steeper. Instead of a city, he glimpsed now, when gaps in the wall allowed it, what seemed to be industrial levels. Hundreds of workers, droid and biological, worked at vast curing and weaving facilities.

Some tunnels were natural paths carved by water erosion or volcanic activity. Others had been created by mining machines. Some were coated with some kind of glassy substance. He suspected this was the result of some living creature chewing and digesting its way through rock. According to the

ship's databank, Hillians were the creatures that produced one of the most valuable consumer products in the galaxy: Hillian silk. They were said to be large enough to have needed a network like this to travel through—but did they have the ability to create it?

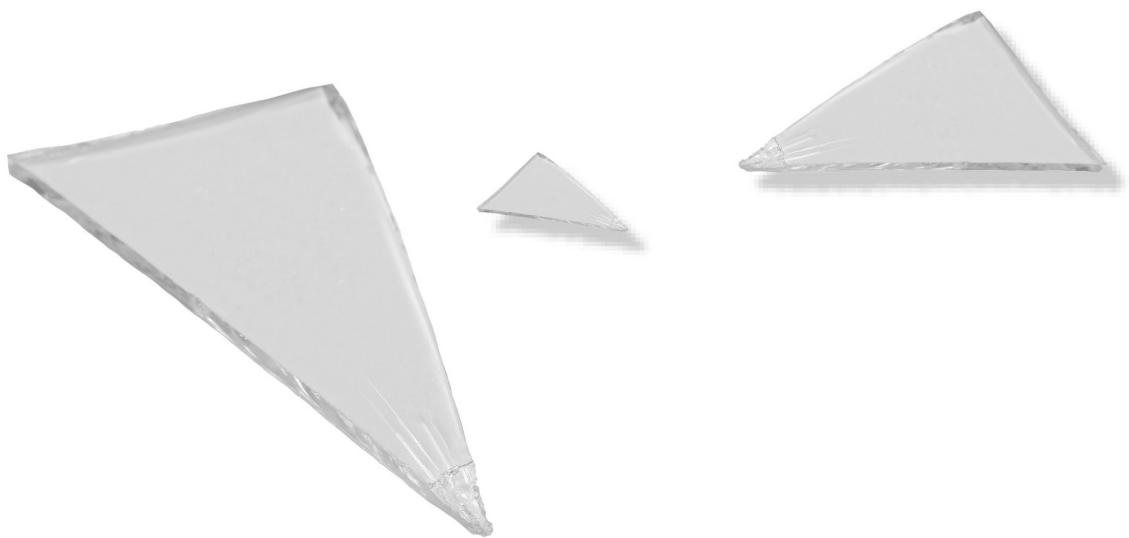
Little was known of these creatures, and some of what was “known” was almost certainly incorrect—an inevitability in a galaxy so vast. Some called them spiders, others a species of worm. What was certain was that they produced silken cables strong enough to anchor or suspend floating cities. According to reports, Hillians could feel and sense the world, possessing great intelligence, but could not truly think.

His mind combed through what else he'd been able to absorb on the flight here. The Metagosan depths were rumored to be crawling with creatures of multiple limbs and endless hunger. Insectile, eel-like, and sando-aqua-monster-like beings were said to live in vast, uncharted underground lakes and rivers. The word *nightmarish* was often used to describe the creatures, a rare poetic description from the ship's otherwise dry databank. Perhaps no one who had seen those depths directly had survived to testify.

Interesting. According to the databank, only levels four through seven were totally safe. Mace assumed the top three were vulnerable to solar radiation. But what of the bottom three, levels eight through ten? According to his old friend, survival in the depths meant following the Path of Sa'ad, the matriarchal clans that tended the spider-worms. The Sa'ad had lived underground, in balance with these life-forms, for thousands of years. The flood of beings had overloaded and upset the ecology, and straying outside the safe zones was perilous...or so it was said.

Mace suspected he would soon learn this for himself. He was already starting to build an internal map of this world: ten levels, each roughly disklike. A stack of dejarik boards, perhaps.

Qui-Gon would have approved.



CHAPTER SEVEN

HILLIA

Cool, moist air dampened Mace's skin as he reached the outskirts of the central Sa'ad village, known as Hillia in honor of the silk weavers.

Hillia lay at the heart of a vast and mysterious mushroom forest on level seven. Much like New Xaxis itself, it was nestled within another massive geode, this one perhaps a fifth the size of level four. The golden-skinned Sa'ad and their housing were surrounded by luminescent mushrooms as low as stools or as tall as several people standing on one another's shoulders. Some reached heights of over ten meters, dominating the landscape. These colossal fungi were of myriad shapes and colors, from majestic, iridescent caps to soft, furry, bioluminescent mycelial undergrowth.

The village's houses were built into and around the giant mushrooms. The mushroom caps served as roofs, providing natural shelter and camouflage. These mushroom houses were connected by a network of wooden walkways and bridges that wound their way through the forest.

The footpaths within level seven were made of crushed, luminescent crystals. Their soft glow gave the narrow caverns an ethereal, inviting glow. Almost magical.

At the heart of the village stood a central plaza adorned with a grand, ancient mushroom tree. This tree was surrounded by benches made of giant mushroom stems, providing a peaceful place for villagers to gather, perhaps share stories, and enjoy the natural beauty of their surroundings.

The Sa'ad wore simple loose clothing, fit for work or play. But there were others down here wearing gaudy and expensive garb, carrying holorecorders and speaking in harsh accents. They pushed, demanded attention, and seemed to have little respect for the natives.

Tourists, Mace thought. Offworlders? New Xaxxans? It was hard to tell from their behavior. But such dilettantes were the same all over the galaxy.

They wandered and poked around, buying trinkets and acting as if the inhabitants were mere curiosities.

“How much for this bracelet?” a portly avian asked the owner of one sales stall. The owner politely quoted a price, and the avian squawked and flapped, swearing she could get it cheaper just a few steps away. Mace hoped the vendor would tell her to do so, but instead, he lowered his price.

A brood of four demanding children surrounded her, and Mace saw one of them steal a few beads. The vendor noticed, a remarkably kind smile splitting his golden face. “Now, give that back,” he said. “Or you might go behind the gates.”

The feathered boy shrieked and threw the beads back. His mother gave the vendor a venomous expression, slapped a few coins down, and stalked away. The vendor barely noticed.

Mace nodded to the vendor in support. This man had the patience of a Jedi. Hillia’s marketplace featured stalls and shops that sold a variety of unique goods, from mushroom-based crafts and elixirs to enchanting forest trinkets. It seemed these folk had a deep connection with the forest and its stalked fungi.

Some seemed to be skilled herbalists, potion makers, and foragers who had learned to harness their underground world’s exotic properties. If not for the invaders from the upper levels, they might have lived in harmony with the unique environment, respecting and nurturing it.

The village’s culture seemed steeped in mysticism and a profound reverence for nature. Certain patterns repeated across the galaxy, and it was wise to notice and anticipate.

He’d seen artificial lights in his glimpse of New Xaxis. Hillia in comparison had harnessed the natural bioluminescence of the mushrooms. Special crystal lanterns hung from the mushroom houses and pathways, providing gentle, natural illumination.

Wealthy tourists from the central levels seemed to find all this quaint and curious. He pegged them as nature enthusiasts and fans of mysticism and adventure, slumming here in the depths before returning to their proper little lives.

He found it all vaguely distasteful. This place was a village, not mere entertainment. He could see that the villagers' smiling, courteous responses to the provocations were mere artifice, and it disgusted him.

He sat quietly, withdrawing his energy to create little notice. But as he might have expected, one of the Sa'ad, a slender man with milky eyes, grew curious and approached him.

Mace said to him, "I seek a woman named KinShan Nightbird."

That pale gaze focused upon him. "Who would speak to the Webkeeper, Upworlder?"

"My name is for Nightbird alone," he said. "This business is between the two of us. Tell her, 'Qui-Gon pays his debts.' "

Mace sat on one of the waist-high mushrooms, waiting. Hillian children giggled at him, filled with health and life and energy. It was a joy to witness: Mace rarely saw normal children simply living their lives. Everything in the Jedi Temple revolved around purpose and duty.

A magnificent golden woman approached with a winged, hovering medical droid at her shoulder. No—not a droid, a Ruurian. The beautiful chroma-wings were unmistakable, but this Ruurian's speckled, mothlike body was melded with cyborg plates and enhancements. The being's compound eyes were partially obscured by a pair of glass lenses that lent him a studious appearance.

The woman's eyes carried a milky sheen, similar to what he saw in about one in seven of the children. He knew at once that she was blind.

Mace stood in respect. Despite her cane and milky eyes, the woman was sure-footed. He guessed that beneath her belted robe her body possessed the melded potential of a dancer and a rock climber—high-level functioning indeed. Her face was a poised and alert oval. "I am KinShan Nightbird, Song Chief of the Sa'ad. My friend is Woolif."

"Greetings, sir," the Ruurian said. "I am responsible for the medical care of many here in New Xaxis. I have served on a dozen planets as both larva and chroma-wing. I know your species, of course, and I detect a slight list, as if you were sitting for an extended period, then failed to stretch before you walked. Might I offer you a back adjustment?"

“Perhaps later. Do you serve down here exclusively?”

“Oh no, sir,” he replied. “I go where I am needed. I am bound to the medical contracts of the northeast sector but provide gratis services to the needy and worthy whenever I can.”

“A well-traveled Ruurian?” Mace knew that after their final metamorphosis, most Ruurians returned to their homeworlds for a life of eating, mating, and rest. Clearly, Woolif had chosen a different path.

“Indeed. As a larva, I served on Zygerria, Mon Cala, and Lothal before cocooning and promotion.”

Useful. This creature had emerged from its larval stage with memory intact. He guessed little Woolif was of unusual quality. If KinShan had chosen her “friend” well, this could be an advantage.

Mace handed her the crystal token contained in the package Obi-Wan had delivered to him. “This crystal was entrusted to me by Qui-Gon Jinn.”

“I see,” she said without looking at him. She rubbed her thumb over the surface, as if seeking the warmth within.

“What was the debt he owed you?”

“I saved his life. In thanks, he gave me his bond. It doesn’t seem to have meant much to him if he passed it to another so cavalierly.”

“Your message reached him as he was completing another mission. He would have come to you immediately after, but death has its own plans.”

That softened her attitude in an instant. “Dead? How?”

“Duty.”

She made a clucking sound. “Yes, I believe you Jedi are always dying or killing for duty.”

“For honor,” he said, correcting her, then added, “which demands duty.”

“The Sa’ad do not offer their bond casually. I hope you Jedi are the same.”

“I am here.”

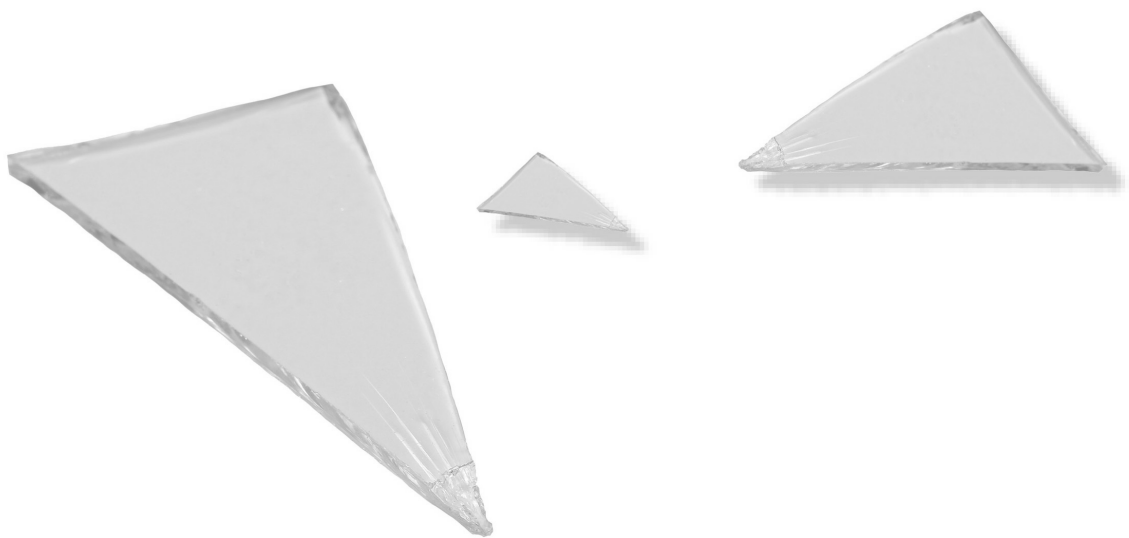
“I wonder.”

“If I am to help...I need to understand your world as you understand it. And quickly.”

“That may not be possible,” KinShan said.

“Qui-Gon believed it was. And I am the one he sent. My name is Mace Windu.”

She paused, considering. “Fair enough, Mace Windu. Then come with me.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

DEPTH DWELLERS

“These are the spider-worms,” KinShan said. “For generations we have cared for them.”

Although Mace had entered the cave prepared for anything, he was still surprised.

The giant, intelligent hybrid of spider and worm inspired awe and something close to reverence. Its immense size—twenty meters in length and four in height—might easily have struck fear into the weak. It was stationary, but he observed its breathing and saw a lightness that suggested great strength and potential mobility, if only in its larval form.

The body of this hybrid was a fusion of a massive spider’s thorax and an elongated, segmented, wormlike abdomen. The exoskeleton was a patchwork of hairy, spiderlike chitin and smooth, moist, wormlike skin. Multiple jointed legs extended from the thorax, each ending in sharp, agile claws. This suggested that a less bulky, perhaps younger version would move with surprising speed and dexterity.

At the front, the spider-worm boasted a set of multifaceted eyes. Mace suspected its sensory perception combined the acute vision of a spider and the vibration-sensitive capabilities of worms. He found it likely that in its earlier form the Hillian was a formidable predator.

Was it still?

Despite the creature’s drowsy appearance, Mace had the impression of great awareness. It might have been an illusion, but he sensed it was concealing its true being. He would have to earn its trust.

Throughout the galaxy, you could find life-forms that had migrated to a given planet, and others that had evolved there. Judging by the mycelial cud it chewed, the claws that fit so neatly into the stone fissures, and the ancient tunnels they must have created, Mace guessed that these Hillians were native

to Metagos. He filed this assumption away for later verification. Such knowledge, if accurate, could prove useful.

Such a creature might seamlessly transition between crawling like a spider and burrowing through the soil like a worm. Under the wrong conditions, this might be a versatile and elusive adversary, one easy to underestimate.

KinShan took his arm and led him to an outer chamber, one in which central-level tourists laughed and applauded as a dozen smooth-muscled Sa'ad danced with adolescent Hillian grubs who balanced on their hind legs and swayed to the music.

The Sa'ad skin colors ranged from light gold to burnished copper. They were slender and lithe. Mace suspected the Sa'ad were of humanoid stock that had diverged a bit from standard, perhaps due to living so far beneath the surface.

“What are they doing?” he asked KinShan.

“Our charges live in a state of dream. Our world is not quite real to them, I think. We sing to them, and that singing shapes their dreams. They give two kinds of silk: one for cocoons, another for webs.”

“And the difference?”

“One is tensile strength, and the other...Perhaps if I knew you better.”

Mace smiled. “You don't like me much, do you?”

She was unfazed. He liked that. “I have little reason to trust Upworlders, but Qui-Gon respected you. That will have to do.”

“You liked him?”

“He handled pain well. A sign of character. Pain sharpens the senses.”

That was reasonable. “Help me sharpen mine.”

“Betray me, and you will have all the pain you could ever want.”

—

SHE LED HIM to a shadowed room. Rows of skullcap mushrooms glowed intensely from the walls. A holographic display of the web of tunnels running through the planet filled the cavity.

KinShan's dim eyes were enough to guide her. "For thousands of years, the Sa'ad have lived here. Some never saw the sun. The mushrooms were the only light we needed."

"What happened?"

"Our sun. Every few thousand years there is a great solar disturbance—"

Images on the map depicted the sun's outer layer peeling away and washing across the solar system.

"The latest happened fifty years ago. Billions died. Those who survived fled into the caverns. There they found three groups. Our people, the Sa'ad, came to this planet some three thousand years ago, fleeing persecution. We found the caves more agreeable than the surface. Here we met the Hillians, who befriended us. But the third group were criminals, fleeing surface jurisdiction. They were allowed to live up on level three or four.

"The scum of a dozen worlds had found refuge in these tunnels, and before the latest disturbance, we had lived in an uneasy truce with them. We sold silk to the surface, but also provided some inferior product for the smugglers."

"They smuggled to avoid Republic tariffs?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Allowing them to sell below ordinary market costs. Those who did not care about the difference in quality were happy to buy it."

"And then?"

"And then," she said, "the criminals who had hidden in the caves suddenly found themselves with power over those who had driven them here. They became gatekeepers to a terrified and broken population. They fleeced the surface dwellers, and in a few short years, the masters had become slaves...or despoiled." She put a peculiar emphasis on that last word. "There was no mercy."

One after another, she played a series of holoclips from half a century before that depicted desperate surface dwellers flooding down into the depths, paying all they had for safety. As far as Mace was concerned, there were few things more terrible than a mass exodus. There had once been thousands of cities on the surface of Metagos. They had clips now from fewer

than a dozen. The survivors had been people who were close enough to one of the entrances to the underground to be able to escape.

Ships tried to take off, but radiation from the solar storm destroyed their navigation and electronics, causing them to crash into one another or into the ground. The sky bled fire and splintered steel.

The plain that Mace had traversed had indeed once been clotted with refugees. He saw that even the bottleneck of the cave entrances was not the worst of it.

Most citizens of Metagos had been good and decent people, but as their skin fried from the radiation washing over them, they became desperate. Some grew violent, striking at one another, fighting and clawing to get underground. When the criminals inside the caves demanded their possessions, they were already prepared to turn against their neighbors.

What happened after that was not much better. Criminal labor was common across the galaxy, even if Mace considered it too much like slavery. That was punishment for crime. This was servitude in exchange for basic shelter and safety.

Vile.

To gain entrance into the caves was one thing. Earning a place in an utterly corrupt society was another. Criminals from a dozen planets across the Rim flocked to the crippled planet, glorying in their newfound power. Their ability to extract wealth and favor from their former masters had proved even more corrupting than their base natures.

The new lords of Metagos had been absolutely pitiless. The wealthiest people either joined the criminals or were beaten down into poverty.

The most despoiled leapt at the opportunity to rise. That explained what was happening in New Xaxxis itself. Who lived in which district of poverty or wealth was determined not by capacity or commerce but rather by how prepared people were to steal or kill in order to gain position.

This was the world Sybil, the Worm Queen, had created, and her greatest rival, Chulok, now sought to control it. Chulok had risen up from the criminal class. Perhaps Sybil had lived in the depths. She was possibly distantly

related to the spider-worms, but no one was certain of her actual species. Her offspring were often simply referred to as Syblins.

Mace closed his eyes, visualizing a stack of ten dejarik boards. The top three had received too much solar radiation. The bottom three? Something down there was horrid as well. But levels four through seven were habitable. Level four was the most populated. Level seven was the most productive and the most free. The distinctions were still hazy, but he could fill in what he needed to know over time.

“The chaos and slaughter,” Mace said, “must have been almost unimaginable.”

“Yes. The worst among them were already known to the criminals, and their alliances became law.”

“And the best?”

“Broken. If they would not become criminals themselves, they were consigned to the most menial occupations. You can see all of this if you take a look at level four.”

Level four. That was, he intuited, the knot that would need to be untied. “I can see why you called for assistance.”

She shook her head. “You do not yet understand,” she said. “But you will. Come with me.”

—

MACE AND KINSHAN traveled down through three levels of tunnels to the very bottom of New Xaxis. As they sank past level eight, he glimpsed some squatter cabins, probably people who could not afford to live on levels four through seven. Level nine was crowded with storage canisters and spools. Level ten was the very bottom, the ceiling almost as high as that on seven, perhaps a third as high as the ceiling on level four.

The lighting was spotty and the air foul. The floors were covered with mud, and in that muck, a few dozen workers shoveled endlessly into droid-operated rail-trucks. Beyond the mudflats lay a series of gigantic gates, each as tall as five humans, with crossbars that would exclude anything larger than

a house rodent. Ancient, rusted chains connected to the gates' massive gears looked as if they had been motionless for ages.

"What is behind the gates?"

"We call them Depth Dwellers. Hope you never meet them."

The workers were driven on by guards with shock prods. One beat a drum to mark the time. Miss a beat, or fail to put enough muck on the shovel, and you earned a lash.

He could feel KinShan tense beside him. "It used to be that our silk was the most precious thing on the planet."

"No more?"

"No more. The angry sun changed everything. The base ore that will be refined into something called Glassbane is mined here. It protects against the radiation of the planet's core, as well as the burning daylight sun. The flare lasted almost thirty years. The radiation has been dropping steadily since that time, but it's still lethal on the surface, and there are intermittent flares. You need Glassbane to live near the surface or the depths. The heart of a planet beats to the heart of its star."

"What is this substance?"

She turned slightly away from him. Was that a smile? "For a future discussion. It is a natural resource, used now for luxury makeup by the wealthy and as a critical life defense by the poor."

Mineral? Vegetable? Animal? Well, every group had its secrets.

"What of these Depth Dwellers? What are they, and how do they survive?"

"Every planet is a cooling bit of star, and at the greatest depths, that heat has the same solar power. It...changes life. And there are things that live here that would be aberrations anywhere else. They eat fungus, and under certain circumstances, they become infested by it. The Sa'ad believe the fungus is safe to eat if cooked, but they rarely take the risk. The Depth Dwellers eat other things as well."

"They eat one another?"

"And anything else they can find."

"So these prisoners..."

“Yes. They mine Glassbane here.”

Mace had seen prisoners used for labor before, of course. Jedi had to obey the laws of diplomacy or they risked becoming an autonomous army, ultimately powerful and risking ultimate corruption. In addition, Metagos was outside of the Republic, and therefore outside of the purview of the Jedi. Any interference from Mace would be met with heightened scrutiny here. His soul chafed at this understanding, but so far he had remained within its implied limitations.

But when cultures passed laws that allowed them to turn criminals into indentured servants, the predictable result was class and species warfare—and its attendant, cruelty. “How long has this situation existed?”

“Originally, only the worst criminals were sent down here. Then fifty years ago, after the flare, things changed. Now you can be sent down here if you’re a debtor or political dissident, or if you’ve trespassed in any of a dozen other ways against the masters of the Abyss.”

From his elevated vantage point, Mace could see the miners stripping spongy muck from the ground and the brutal guards wielding shock prods. Over all of it loomed those great gates.

The injustice gave his intention focus. This would be the best place to start.

Mace grasped his lightsaber and prepared to jump down to confront the guards for more information. KinShan grabbed his right elbow and held on tight. “No!”

“Why?”

“Because no one must know that a Jedi is among us.”

“But—”

“But nothing,” she said urgently. “I beg you to respect my wishes. Until you understand this planet more deeply, conceal your presence. There are other lives at stake we have not yet discussed.”

“Are there other Sa’ad across the planet?”

“Yes, smaller settlements. But the original Xaxxis was built above our largest community.”

“I had no idea.”

“The world does not. By design. The silk flows, so no one knows how bad it is. I wonder if they would care if they did.”

“I care.”

Her pale eyes seemed to focus on him. “We will see.”

—

SOME OF THE tunnels had been dug, while others formed naturally. Their next destination had been created by hard work and serious intent: a mine.

Most of the mining sites seemed deserted, but the transportation system servicing them still existed, powered by batteries charged by reactors or solar cells.

They were able to take a standard mine car most of the way. KinShan gave a directional chip to the copper-skinned mining droid that piloted it. The droid had jerked upright and immediately took the cart down the track, while they seated themselves on the narrow metal bench behind it.

They had traveled thusly for the better part of an hour. Mace knew they were heading toward one of the major satellite suburbs of New Xaxis, one called Nexus. *Ironic*, Mace thought. Nexus likely earned its name generations ago, but it was probably no longer the center of anything.

Two-thirds of the way there, the trolley finally shuddered to a halt, sighed, and sank to the ground. “We walk from here,” KinShan said as they got out. She then directed him through a series of narrow passages. He wasn’t certain how she found her own way through them.

Despite her blindness, she was as agile as a Corellian mountain goat. Mace was no slouch, but this was still an impressive display for someone who wasn’t a Force user.

Or was she?

“Again I ask, where are we going?”

“For thousands of years, we Sa’ad have cared for the spider-worms. By guiding their dreams, we induce them to produce their precious silk. But perhaps a year ago, something happened. Someone began stealing younglings.”

“Why can’t you simply demand their return?” As soon as he said it, he understood. The Sa’ad could not confront the culprits directly. They couldn’t even admit they knew of the thefts, not without Chulok and their lethal hirelings interpreting it as challenge—and challenge could lead to extermination. It was better to be seen as useful primitives.

He remembered the damn tourists. And those proud people, grinning and shuffling for the pleasure of the Upworlders.

—

KINSHAN SEEMED TO know every tunnel and branching path, and he was shocked that after the first few minutes, he started relaxing. A movement in the Force or—

“The mushrooms,” he said. “Some of them glow. Do they glow in a nonvisible spectrum? Is that the secret?”

She nodded. “You are quick.” They had traveled afoot for almost two hours, enough time, he calculated, to reach the city of Nexus, or at least the outskirts thereof.

The footpath ran into a rock wall, but the wall was cracked. She motioned him to peer through. He did and then he wished he hadn’t.

Gazing through the crack, Mace saw a vast farm of infant spider-worms, serviced by some sort of simple astromech units. There were at least a hundred adolescent specimens locked into machines and forced to produce silk. Horrible.

Mace felt a surge of rage. This planet was getting to him. He wasn’t used to being so personally offended by misery and cruelty. “Who is doing this?”

“We are uncertain. It could be Chulok, seeking to undercut Sybil. It might be Sybil herself, seeking to cut us out of the loop.

“I beg you,” KinShan said, continuing. “Help us. The spider folk will be imprisoned by cruel masters. And without the protection of the Hillians, my entire lineage—a thousand years of history—gone as if it had never existed.”

Mace considered. “So what, specifically, are you asking from one man?”

“Find the traitor who stole the eggs. And if you Jedi are everything Qui-Gon said you are...find a way to free us from these criminals.”

Mace paused. Confronting Sybil or Chulok could have major repercussions for the people of Metagos—a planet decidedly outside the jurisdiction of the Republic. Some members of the Jedi Council would not look favorably on this sort of interference.

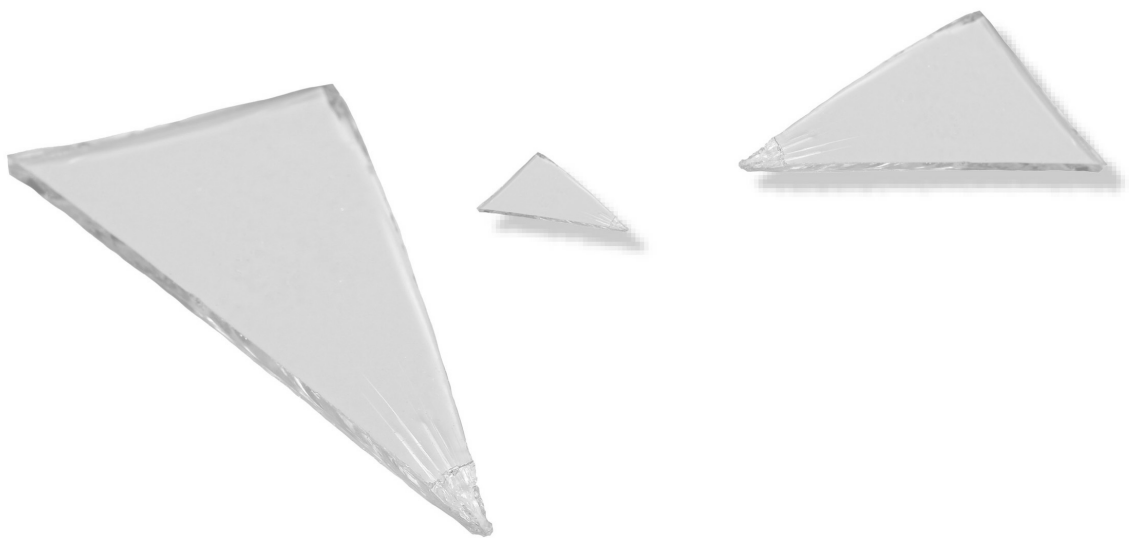
Yet this “interference” was exactly the kind of thing Qui-Gon would have done.

Mace made his decision. “Can you suggest a starting place?”

“No. But I can suggest a person worthy of your trust.”

“Who is that?”

“I suggest you visit the Wheelhouse.”



CHAPTER NINE

ONE PLANET, ONE JEDI

It took Mace and KinShan an hour to return to level seven. Then they walked briskly through branching tunnels and past a studiedly casual Sa'ad guard who turned back wandering tourists. On the way, Mace quizzed KinShan, and she answered to the best of her ability. When her disturbing answers matched what Qui-Gon had told him, he knew she was being as honest as possible. Chulok ruled the northern part of the fourth level, while Sybil reigned in the south.

"What happens if they will not listen to reason?" KinShan asked. "You will kill them?"

Mace frowned. "Jedi are not assassins. But we do...solve problems."

"You may have to change your ways."

"What are you suggesting?"

"First, that you conceal your Jedi weapons and change your mode of dress. Many warriors seek employment with Chulok or Sybil. But a lightsaber would instantly suggest a Jedi, and a Jedi would be immediately exposed as a threat and killed."

"Is that what almost happened with Qui-Gon?"

"Qui-Gon was pursuing a criminal," she said finally. "A smuggler, pilot, and master assassin who fled to the Outer Rim after he deserted from a mercenary army he had joined."

"What Qui-Gon did not know was that this world had become a haven for such corruption."

"An important thing to know."

She continued. "There was government here. Just enough law and order that Qui-Gon made a critical mistake. He went to the leadership and asked them to hand over the criminal. But Qui-Gon's assassin was already in the service of Chulok—and so was New Xaxis's so-called 'leadership.' "

“What is your impression of this Chulok?”

“They are more powerful than anyone else on Metagos, but you Jedi, sensitive to the Web, might be their equal.”

“The ‘Web’?”

“The structure that links all living things. Connects this entire planet.”

Mace laughed heartily. Now, at last, he understood. “The Force!”

“I’ve not heard that term. Is that something in your way?”

He considered. “Yes. All the galaxy knows this.”

An error. She stiffened. “Perhaps you consider those of us on the Rim too provincial for your tastes.”

“I meant no offense,” he said, cursing his clumsy tongue.

“And yet it was given.”

“I apologize fully. In time, you will grasp it was ignorance rather than malice that motivated that comment.”

She relaxed, just a little. Was that the hint of a smile curving her lips? He hoped so. He found himself wishing to see another. “So,” he said. “This Chulok is...Web-sensitive?”

“Yes. No one has been able to get close to them. It is said that they can feel intent, and that they know things an instant before they happen.”

“Dangerous indeed.” He would need to shield himself. He had a dozen ways to do this.

“Qui-Gon made the mistake of trusting Chulok’s words.”

Chulok had deceived Qui-Gon? That implied extreme slyness. Qui-Gon’s intuition had been second to none.

“So he was wounded and escaped.”

“Yes, barely. We healed him and hid him until he was strong enough to sneak back to his ship.”

“But carrying a debt.”

She tilted her head slightly. “Yes. Will you fulfill it for him?”

“I will stand with you. But I require a way to disguise my lightsaber. Can you provide me with a staff to hollow?”

She smiled, and Mace’s breath caught in his throat. This second moment of approval was merely a slight uptick at the corners of those full lips, but the

impact was almost like a blow to the chest.

“A weapon within a weapon? Yes. I will. And trust is earned, Jedi. You trust me with the knowledge of this sacred tool. It tells me that you are to be trusted. Just a little.”

“Right now, a little is quite a bit.”

“When you are ready, go to the northwest sector to the Wheelhouse. We have friends there. For now, come with me to the ironshroom glade.”

The stalk of what she called an ironshroom seemed to be a good choice. It was tough, fine-grained, and strong but had a useful bit of flexibility. Strength without flexibility shattered.

He spent an hour peeling away an appropriate chunk and another hour hollowing it, then inserted his lightsaber within and carefully concealed the opening.

—

WHEN HE RETURNED to KinShan’s map room, she was in conversation with three other women, all older than her. “My aunties,” she said, and he soberly bowed to them. “Perhaps one day you will meet my mother.”

He had the sense that this was a great honor, one not offered lightly, and received the compliment in the spirit intended.

Gaining a deepening overview of the world and its players felt to Mace much like learning the positions, layout, rules, and pieces of dejarik. More than ever, it seemed a tribute to his old friend to think of it in such a way.

Dejarik was played on a circular board with holos of various creatures, each with its own unique abilities. The creatures moved around the board and engaged in battles when they found themselves occupying the same space. The winner of such a battle was not easily predicted, because every turn and choice changed the odds and added or subtracted experience points from the pieces. Players controlled initial placement, but the outcome of battles was generally determined by the creatures’ individual attributes. Different planets had in many cases evolved different rules for the game.

Mace would have to better understand the players involved here before he could set a successful strategy in motion. And the Force help them all, once things were in motion, it would be impossible to control every move.

He would have to choose his pieces carefully.

If he viewed Chulok and Sybil as his opponents, he could not see a winning play. But if he viewed them as opposing each other, might there be a meta game to be played? Three-handed dejarik, as it were, with the players unaware that an invisible hand was maneuvering and provoking?

If he could reinvent the rules, the game of New Xaxis might be won.

Mace had not seen the hologram KinShan had sent to Qui-Gon, but she played it for him now: “Qui-Gon Jinn. Greetings from Metagos. I did you a service. You promised that you would do one for me in return, and now I ask you to fulfill your promise. You know the situation here. But what was bad has now become critical. The Hillian grubs are being stolen, and our criminal element has become even more dominant. I believe that they plan to make Metagos a sanctuary for the scum of the Outer Rim. They have engaged with the Hutts since you left, and this is not a good thing. I believe they plan to destroy our guild. Our lives, our livelihood, our freedom are at risk. I do not know what you can do to help, but ask that you honor your promise.”

Mace turned to KinShan. “Where do we begin?”

“I believe Chulok has some source of information, an agent among us, one who has betrayed our trust.” She took a deep breath. “I think the creature Chulok needs to die. Sybil needs to die. I am in anguish, because this is not my people’s way.”

“Nor is it ours.”

“I know,” KinShan said. “Am I bad?” Her eyes misted, and a single tear welled from the left, caught in her lashes. He resisted the urge to wipe it away.

“No,” Mace said gently, placing a hand on her shoulder. She stiffened a little, then relaxed and let him comfort her. “You love your people, and your heart breaks for them. I will enter the city in disguise and see for myself.”

“Can anything be done? We are so few, and they so many. And you are only one.”

“One planet, one Jedi,” he said.

The very madness of that statement brought an incredulous smile to her lips.

The ground beneath them was strewn with crystals. A bluish one, large as two fists, caught his eye. He picked it up.

“They are everywhere,” KinShan said.

“And hard. Harder than durasteel.” He had thought this, but touching it confirmed it.

“Yes.”

“But if you can understand the crystal properly and find just the right angle—”

He brought his hand down with precise power. The crystal shattered.

Her eyes widened, and for the first time, he could tell she was startled and impressed.

“Everything has a weak point,” he said. “I think I’m ready. Do you have a guide who can escort me to the fourth level?”

“Find brother Chala-Non,” she said to one of her aunts.

“At once, Princess.” She curtsied with a smile and left. Mace followed.

Princess? KinShan’s auntie seemed to have slipped and revealed a formal position. An error? Or a sign of increased trust?

—

AFTER MACE DEPARTED, one of KinShan’s aunts chuckled. “I wonder if his heart has such a weak point,” she said. “It would be interesting to make such a study, don’t you think?”

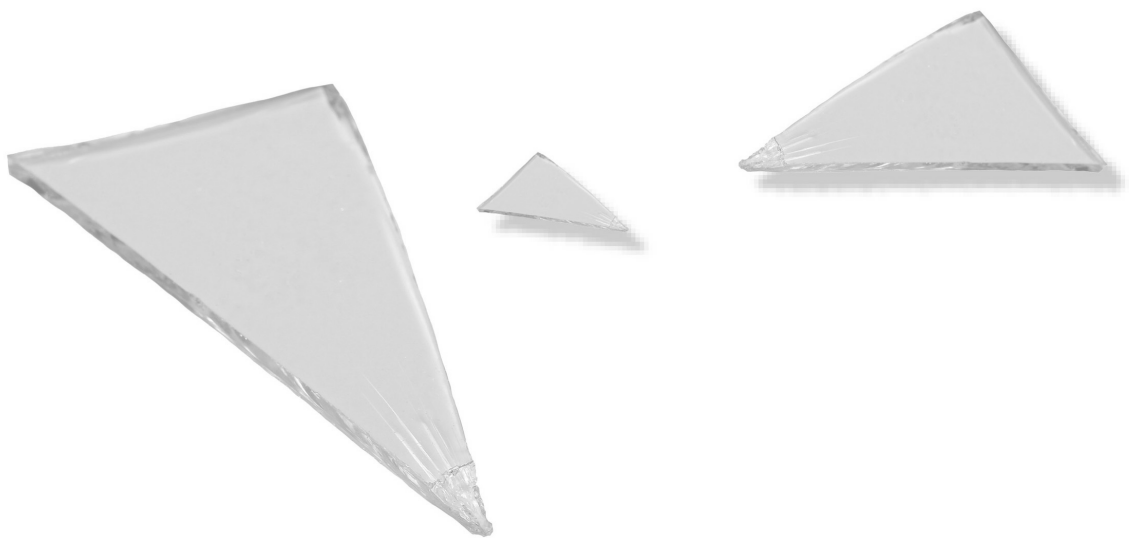
KinShan pretended to glare. “You are full of mischief, aren’t you?”

—

IN A CARGO lift large and strong enough to have carried fifty of him, Mace rose through the upper levels.

As KinShan had requested, he would enter the fourth level in disguise and make connections. The locals called level four “the Great Wheel,” as all the spokes of rivers and roads led back to their central hub.

Then...what would be, would be. As in a game of dejarik, once the pieces were in motion, they were out of your control. So you had to be very, very careful with your opening move.



CHAPTER TEN

MAPPING THE ABYSS

Mace saw the first Zilka's eyes focus on the left side of his head just before the halberd began to move, so he knew the angle. A bare motion of his head and he was able to smoothly deflect and grasp the shaft of the halberd, then low-kick the front leg to freeze the bug's motion long enough to wrench the stick away. Simultaneously he spun, striking the Zilka's head with the flat of the blade and delivering a short rear stroke to the shock-producing bug coming up behind him.

The human tried to step in from the right, but he made the mistake of focusing on the halberd as if it were the threat. It was not. It is the one who holds the weapon who is the threat. He never saw the heel thrust that doubled him over and lifted him off the ground. Mace chose this move very deliberately: He could have "shocked" the man with a snapping blow, shattering bones and dropping him instantly, but efficiency wasn't the most important thing now. He could waste a second to create what he wanted: shock and awe. He needed people to *talk*. And that meant stunning rather than killing.

So rather than simply crushing this man, it was more to lift him off his feet and propel him several meters backward.

That also bought Mace time to refocus on the first Zilka, still recovering from the stunning blow. He lurched forward to try to wrench his halberd from Mace's grip. The Jedi paused a beat to allow the bug's desperate grip to take hold, pivoting to "open the door" and preserve momentum. Then he adjusted his own grip so that his hands anchored the Zilka's in place. The bug couldn't release his grip and was catapulted forward by his own momentum, hips going one way and shoulders another so that he threw *himself* off the bridge, howling until his shoulders struck a slab of glass, and he was rendered unconscious.

The instant that Zilka went off the bridge, Mace shifted his attention back to the human, who was groggily getting to his feet. This was a good time to show off, just a bit. Mace gripped the man's elbow, pinning nerves against bone. At the same time, his thumb dug into the nerve plexus at the hinge of his jaw. Individually, each pain would be debilitating, but put together with precise timing, they created an interference pattern that overwhelmed perception, and the man simply went...limp.

Sleeping before he hit the ground.

The last Zilka was purpling, gripping at his traumatized diaphragm. He gasped and fell. Mace grabbed his left rear foot and struck it sharply, twice. The Zilka gasped again, breathed, then passed out.

A long, silent pause passed. Mace said, "Tell Chulok to come and sweep up my credentials."

A good chunk of the crowd that had gathered followed him to the Wheelhouse bar, cheering and backslapping. As he suspected, there had been no love lost between the local citizens and Chulok's sleeping bravos.

Patrons gave him a wide berth as he reentered.

Maya-12, Maya-14, and Maya-8 had watched everything with fascination.

"I've never seen anything like that," Maya-8 said.

"I may have seen something similar," Maya-12 said, but no matter how much her sister droids urged her to tell them, she only projected a smile.

Mace ordered another drink but was refused the right to pay for it. He took a deep, satisfying swig. *Sometimes*, he thought, *it's good to assume a different identity*.

It was liberating.

Maya-12 slipped into the seat beside him, watching him curiously. For long moments, she said nothing at all.

Finally, he spoke. "Did that offend you?" he asked.

"Why should it?"

"You aren't the sort who'd think I...tried to murder them?"

"No." She paused. "I think that they suffered a critical failure of the victim selection process."

He laughed heartily. "Are you bonded to the Wheelhouse?"

“No,” she said. “I am an independent agent.” This was unusual for droids, but this was an unusual planet.

“Specializing in...?”

She straightened proudly. “I have seventy-two distinct functions. But my primaries include bodyguarding and information gathering.”

“By any chance are you familiar with the silk merchants on level seven?”

“I have acquaintance with KinShan and her people. If you see them, please tell them Maya-Twelve sends greetings.”

A promising approach so swiftly? This was a good omen. “Well, one day I may have some information for you to gather.”

“And on that day, I am at your service.”

—

AFTER A FEW more backslaps and hearty handshakes from admirers, Mace began wandering the city.

He really did find New Xaxxis amazing. Imagine a city nestled in the heart of a colossal geode, a true wonder of the natural world.

The Glass Abyss, indeed. Gleaming crystals and towering mineral formations dominated the landscape. Its dynamism seemed a testament to life’s ability to adapt and thrive in even the most unconventional environments.

New Xaxxis’s bubble had to have been formed millions of years ago as mineral-rich waters seeped into a cavern, leaving behind a breathtaking array of crystals and gemstones. The city’s streets were paved with polished crystal slabs that shimmered and refracted the natural light filtering through the translucent walls. These streets wound their way through the geode’s intricate crystal formations.

New Xaxxis’s architecture was both functional and artistic. Homes, buildings, and even utility structures were crafted from a unique blend of transparent quartz, amethyst, and selenite in the wealthier sections, while the poor made do with scraps of ironshroom, probably grown on the lower levels.

He created a rough rule: The outskirts were wealth, and the center was for the poor. The closer you got to the center, the more extreme was the poverty. The poverty-stricken were not building crystal homes, let alone the palaces in the northeast corner, and certainly not Chulok's personal domain—the Floating Palace, suspended above the fourth level by great cables, rivaling any glittering display of wealth on Coruscant. He recognized the irony: The galaxy concentrated its wealth and power in the Galactic Core. Here, almost as if it were a statement, the opposite was painfully true.

The city's core, while impoverished, was more vibrant, however. Its bustling marketplace was a sight to behold, with vendors displaying goods in rough-hewn stalls. Gems, jewelry, and various mineral-based products seemed the primary trade commodities, and the marketplace was a dazzling display of colors and light.

New Xaxis's most advanced transportation network served the edges of the "dejarik board." Residents used shimmering trams that glided gracefully along tracks laid on beds of crushed crystal. He took one at a whim. The trams offered breathtaking vistas of the geode's inner beauty as they connected different districts.

In between beautiful homes, lush gardens had been planted, nurtured by artificial light and glowing mushrooms. Carefully cultivated crystal formations and vibrant plant life coexisted in perfect harmony. Visitors could relax surrounded by the mesmerizing play of light and color.

The inhabitants of New Xaxis seemed a diverse blend of species from both the Rim and the Core. Judging by posters, the city hosted regular mineral exhibitions, art festivals, and workshops, where residents and visitors alike could learn about the geode's history and its stunning array of minerals.

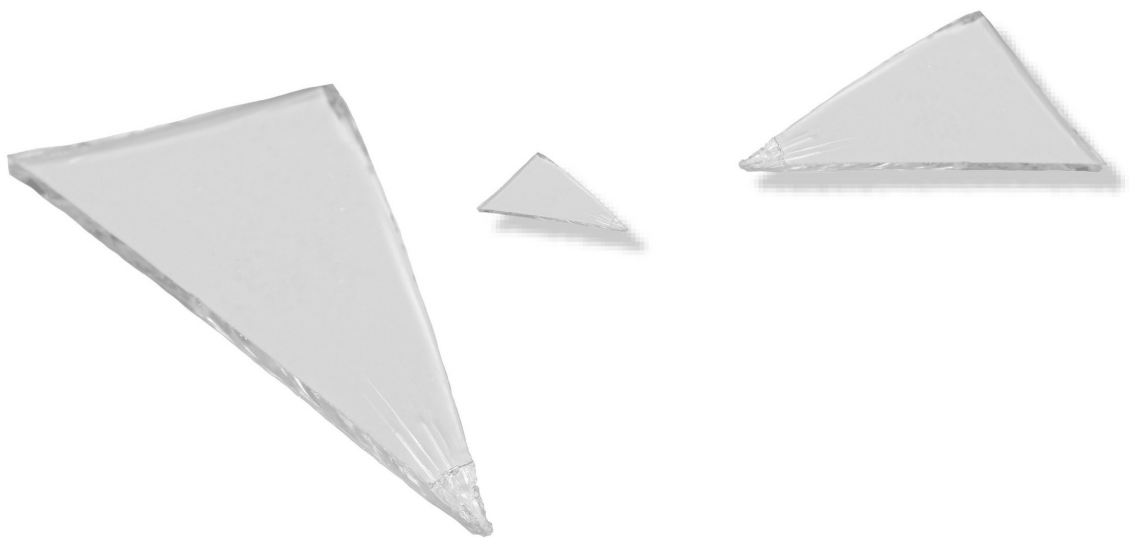
Despite—or perhaps because of—New Xaxis's criminal contingent, the city remained a popular tourist destination, attracting visitors from around the sector who seemed eager to witness the city's wonders. There were probably museums in the wealthy sections detailing the geology and history of this unique place.

Mace wagered that the poor were too busy trying to survive to be impressed.

In this city, the boundary between the natural world and civilization had blurred, creating what could have been a harmonious union of innovation and nature's artistry.

Criminals like Chulok and Sybil had corrupted this, and Mace swore to rescue this world from their shadow.

It was time for New Xaxis and Metagos to return to the light.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHULOK

Deep within the maw of the Floating Palace nestled a series of personal chambers that rivaled those of the Jedi Temple: living quarters, libraries, kitchens, and in the basement, directly beneath the master bedroom suite and connected via a spiral staircase, a great gymnasium.

No windows, just walls lined with weapons, the staircase, and a single door leading to the outside world.

The sounds of combat rang through the hall, and the air reeked of thick, oily sweat. On the mats, a bizarre sight met the eye. A four-armed, four-legged, two-headed creature spun and twirled sticks: one two-sectioned staff—each section a meter in length—and one single stick.

The creature was stripped to the waist, and a careful observation revealed it was actually two beings joined with a thick and knobby bridge of bone and muscle at their shoulder level. While one of the halves was a few centimeters shorter than the other, both were over two meters tall. One half was a Rodian, the other a Farakai from the Outer Rim, a brutal and powerful anthropoidal species known to have clandestine rituals of both war and mating.

They warred with the air and even twisted the flesh bridge to bang the sticks against each other, almost like two children playing a rhythmic palm-slapping game. The slender Rodian was faster and more fluid; he used thrusts more than slashing movements. The bulky Farakai spun his double stick by either end, flipping and slashing in a way that would have utterly baffled a lesser opponent.

These two were having fun, playing an old and favored game. They paused the play, nodding to each other. At one corner of the mat were half a dozen ball bearings, each the size of a human head. The Farakai, Chu, picked one up, bounced it in his hand, and threw it to the Rodian, Lok, who bounced it back and forth between his palms as Chu picked up a second one. Lok

threw his to Chu as his partner threw it back, then snatched up a third before he caught it.

The pair juggled the bearings back and forth, faster and faster, even throwing at each other's heads in a tactic that could have proved lethal to any lesser athlete. Eventually there were four balls in play: bouncing, arcing, spinning—their hands moving in a baffling blur. Then with no prearranged signal, they just...stopped. This was merely entertainment. The warm-up.

“Send in the droids!” they called together, as one voice.

Two black battle droids rolled into the room, uncoiled, and sprang at their masters. The battle was fairly evenly matched...at first.

Protocol droid WRM-2456 watched patiently. He was a golden inverted isosceles triangle on treads and was very used to waiting. Behind him on three stretchers were the unconscious bodies of three of his masters' men. They were patient as well. The sleeping knew how to wait.

Chu grasped his two-sectioned staff, and Lok his single stick. When twisted together, the weapons formed one three-sectioned staff, the notorious Sanchi Kan—“Triple Irons” in Farakai.

The favored weapon of the gods, the Farakai believed.

And again they moved, this time against droid opponents. And this time, three additional droids joined the fight. Even with the additional assistance, the speed and power that Chulok displayed were beyond the droids' capacity. The Triple Irons spun like propellor blades, faster than the eye could see, seeming to strike everywhere at once, and every strike bent steel.

Together, the Farakai, Chu, and the Rodian, Lok—half a head shorter—were unbeatable. All that most citizens knew was that, as the two-headed, four-armed creature called Chulok, they were absolutely lethal.

WRM-2456 bowed politely. “No living creature is your equal, Thane Chulok.”

“That, Worm, is the wisest thing you have said today. Chulok is the greatest warrior in the galaxy.”

WRM-2456 had given up trying to stop Chulok and their minions from calling him Worm. “Yes, my lords.” He indicated the bodies on the stretchers.

“Who did this thing?” When synced, Chu and Lok spoke as a single being, their voices twined perfectly.

WRM-2456 shifted uncomfortably. “A stranger, sirs.”

Chulok examined the wounds on the human. They poked and prodded with four hands.

More elegant and expressive in speech, Lok took the lead. “I believe I see what happened here. Notice the Zilka. Halberd man, I believe. His forearm bones are broken, twisted. A crushed shoulder. This second Zilka took a single stroke to the thorax. Paralyzed his breathing. Huh. He should be dead, but he is only unconscious. Odd. The human...huh. Head bruised, dust-mark footprint on the chest.”

Chulok mimed various combative gestures, moving around the unconscious figures in a circle, humming to themselves and then smiling.

“I think I know what happened,” Chu said.

“I agree,” Lok said.

“The halberd is the danger weapon. Longest, it makes first contact. I think our stranger broke the leg, deflected the halberd, and laid the flat of it along the head. That was a choice not to kill. Such a fighter could have converted that momentum into a butt stroke, but the targeting...the targeting...”

“Sirs?” the droid said.

“In a moment. Somewhere in this process, he kicked the human in the chest. *Then* he later did something to render him unconscious.” The two linked creatures paused, Lok placing a thoughtful finger beneath his chin.

They tittered with delight.

“And this is how we know we are dealing with a master. Listen to me. Killing all three would have been a strong message. But he was respecting *me*, their master. Telling me he respected my property. And anyone who could resuscitate a Zilka would be wise enough to manipulate a human nervous system to produce unconsciousness, most assuredly.”

Chu spoke alone. “The efficiency. This looks like it could have all been a single infinity pattern, a figure-eight loop, along the vertical and horizontal axis, preserving momentum and wasting nothing.”

“A thing of beauty,” Lok said. “We are dealing with an artist.”

“Indeed.” Chu turned to his companion. “You said something about the targeting, I believe.”

“Yes. The one who did this was not merely an accomplished killer but familiar with Zilka anatomy as well. Now, whether that is because he’s been to their planet or simply because he has made a study is a really interesting question. Note that while Zilka have four legs and Syblins six, they are similar enough that I wonder if this man’s specialized knowledge wouldn’t be of use to us.”

Both together said, “We are dealing with a level of lethality that reminds me of...me.” The sight of four hands clapping in delight always gave WRM-2456 pause.

“Now, what kind of a warrior has the speed and fluidity to disarm and render unconscious three dangerous men when killing them would have been simpler? These moves would be intermingled to take advantage of momentum and position. And...don’t you sense a bit of style about this? The sense that he was showing off?”

“For whom, sirs?”

“Why, for us, of course. He was sending us a job application. He was saying, *Look at me! I’m here! And I am a very special person.*”

“An extraordinary stranger,” WRM-2456 said.

“When did he arrive here?”

“I think today.”

“And what is his business?”

“I don’t know, but he said he seeks employment,” WRM-2456 said.

“He may have found it.” Chulok spun their weapon in the air. It hummed. A blur, like the spokes of a wheel. “Did he carry any weapons with him?”

“He carried a staff, I believe.”

“But did not need to use it. Hmmm. A monk’s weapon. Perhaps...a renegade priest?”

WRM-2456 nodded. A reasonable idea. “And if he is?”

“A man who once believed and then turned against his faith...is a man who has found freedom.” They were spinning, throwing, and catching again.

“You are wiser than I.” The droid bowed.

“It would be wise to remember that.”

“Yes, Thane.”

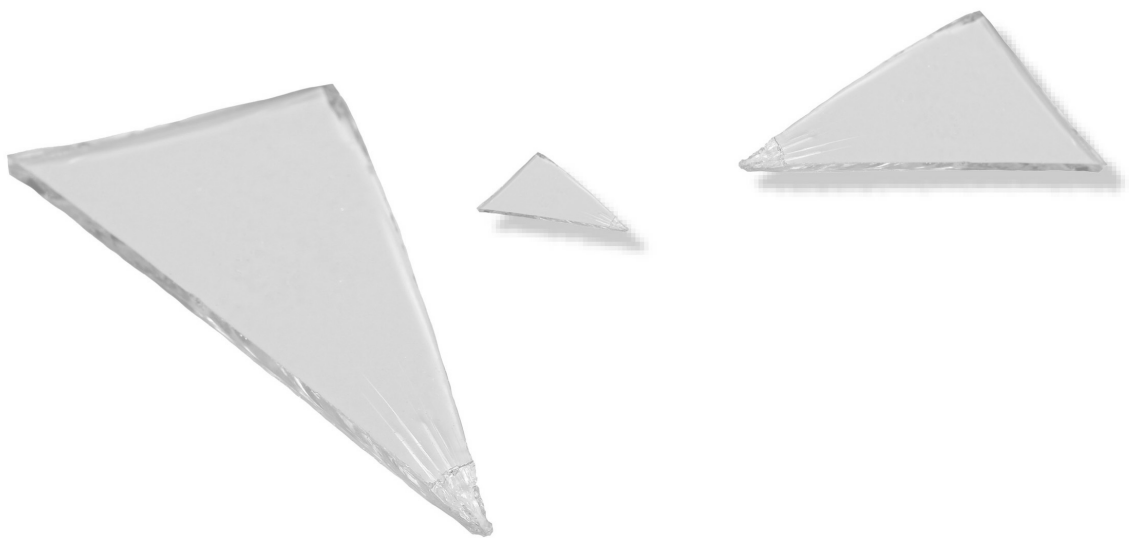
“Find him,” Chulok said. “Bring him to me.” As an afterthought, they added, “And take these to a medcenter. I will want to hear their impressions when they regain consciousness.”

—

YES, CHULOK THOUGHT. *This stranger reminds me of me. And a very few others.*

One in particular came quickly to mind: the Jedi, Qui-Gon Jinn. How simple it had been to trick him.

And how delicious to kill.



CHAPTER TWELVE

THE FUGITIVE

Metagos, months ago...

In accordance with protocol, Qui-Gon Jinn had presented himself to the mayor of New Xaxis and offered greetings from the chancellor and Senate. The mayor, a weak-chinned human named Mignon Fat, referred him to what he called the security chief of the city, giving every indication that this “security chief” terrified him.

This chief was not a single being but a duo, joined by some grotesque bridge of muscle and bone extending from the larger to the smaller at shoulder level.

The duo called Chulok was a formidable presence, but courteous and accommodating.

“We will do what we can to find this Nala,” Chulok said. The two voices twined together so precisely, they were virtually one and the same.

“Thank you, sirs.” Was that the correct honorific? In diplomatic matters, courtesy was paramount. “The Council will be gratified.”

“Indeed. And these days...any reason to be grateful is one to embrace.”

“Some call courtesy the grease that keeps the diplomatic wheels turning.” Qui-Gon was wary but remained formally polite. He was no fool and had begun to realize he was in the serpent’s den. He felt the absence of his Padawan keenly. Obi-Wan was occupied with important work elsewhere, but Qui-Gon wished for the steadying presence of his companion in this moment.

“You represent the Republic?”

“No, I am a Jedi. But the Senate is aware of my mission here.”

Chulok’s throne was double-seated, like one a king and queen or twin heirs might have enjoyed. The beings were playing some sort of finger game using all twenty-two digits in sequence. “Metagos might be ready to join the Republic.”

Qui-Gon felt it was time to show a touch of strength. “I am certain that if you can assist me, I will be able to carry a favorable report back, and the gears of diplomacy can begin to turn.”

There it was—simultaneous threat and reward. Qui-Gon trusted that Chulok grasped the implications: *Help me, and I’ll help you gain protection.* It would be a lonely place out here on the Rim if the ongoing trade disputes got hot.

“There is much to consider here,” Chulok said.

“What are your largest considerations?”

“In any negotiations, there are pros and cons. Short- and long-term benefits.”

“Certainly, and the capture of a major criminal would be of benefit to all.”

“Yes. Of course, of course. Well, while we search for him, would you be my guest, here in the palace?”

Qui-Gon bowed. “I would be honored.”

“Minion, please take our honored guest to the suites.”

Security chief. Hah. This was the real power in New Xaxis. At the very least, a step above the supposed mayor. If there was power at an even higher level, Qui-Gon wasn’t certain he wanted to deal with it.

—

JEDI MASTER QUI-GON Jinn had no possessions to move into the suite, so after making politely appreciative sounds, he excused himself from WRM-2456’s stewardship and took a shuttle down into the center section of the city, generally known as the Children’s Maze.

Qui-Gon moved silently through the dimly lit streets of New Xaxis’s dense and shadowed slum, his senses heightened by the Force. The air was thick with the pungent scent of exotic spices and the distant hum of unfamiliar languages. Qui-Gon’s lightsaber hung from his belt, ready to be ignited at a moment’s notice.

His target, Nalaflita, was known as a deserter, traitor, smuggler, and notorious killer with a penchant for hiding among the diverse inhabitants of

the ghetto. Nala had eluded authorities for far too long by slipping from star system to star system, his superb piloting skills enabling hairbreadth escapes just when all thought him cornered.

Qui-Gon swore this would not happen again. Nala would either be arrested or meet his end. Qui-Gon's connection to the Force guided him through the labyrinthine alleys and crowded marketplaces, his Jedi instincts honed by decades of severe training. Ramshackle buildings loomed overhead, casting eerie shadows on the narrow pathways. Qui-Gon's keen eyes scanned his surroundings, searching for any signs of the pawnshop where, if informers spoke true, he might find an ally familiar with this strange world.

The Force whispered warnings as he navigated the maze of interconnected structures and concealed corners.

The inhabitants, a mix of species from across the galaxy, regarded Qui-Gon with both curiosity and suspicion. Some recognized the Jedi robes, a symbol of justice and protection, while others cast furtive glances from the shadows, wary of the disturbance in their normally clandestine world.

Qui-Gon's senses suddenly tingled with danger. He slowed his pace, his hand instinctively moving toward his lightsaber. A shadowy figure emerged from the darkness, clad in dark robes and a hood that concealed their features.

"Jedi, you should not have come here," the mysterious figure hissed, the being's oddly percussive consonants and clicking vowels betraying their nonhuman origin.

Qui-Gon remained composed, his gaze steady. "Who are you?"

"Nala sends his regards."

Qui-Gon wheeled. The dramatic appearance of the first assassin had been intended to conceal the entry of the second onto the battlefield. Qui-Gon favored precise and extended strokes, keeping enemies at a distance.

A searing moment later, both assassins had lost arms. They dropped to their knees clutching stumps as Qui-Gon watched them impassively. It had been their call.

"Now," he said. "What can you tell me of the one who hired you?"

He had not found the pawnshop, but in the search he had accomplished something almost as important: flushing out Nala's murderous allies.

When he heard where his quarry was hiding, he was disgusted.

OVER A THOUSAND beings lived on the Floating Palace. The fact that this Nala was one of them did not mean his hosts were corrupt, but it certainly implied they were not as competent as some believed.

Following the instructions of the two assassins, Qui-Gon went to the hangars on level three and discovered that his quarry had just descended to the palace. He was on the verge of suspecting a game was afoot when his next clue sent him to a private garage and machine shop on the Floating Palace, and there he found the elusive Nala.

Qui-Gon hadn't needed to check identities or present credentials. The minute his quarry spotted him, the tall, thin, shaggy albino creature fled. Qui-Gon pursued him through the narrow streets, all the way to the very edge of the Floating Palace's platform.

"You will surrender to me to be returned for judgment," Qui-Gon said. "Or you will die. Today, here and now."

Nala looked over his shoulder at the drop that awaited him if he took another backward step. He sneered and spat, his pale-red eyes gleaming and towering, hairy body quivering with hate.

He wore a translator collar that converted guttural growls into passable Basic. He said, "Die in the mines of Klathos or take my chances against a Jedi? No choice at all. I surrender."

Nala slumped in defeat, as if his bones had turned to cheese. Qui-Gon remained alert, too cautious to fall for that. His caution was immediately justified when Nala flipped up his blaster with baffling speed.

Qui-Gon had anticipated this, and even before the blaster was at the level, he cleft its barrel in half with a single swipe of his lightsaber, followed by a front kick to the nerve plexus in Nala's gut that smashed the Gigoran back against the floor, centimeters from the abyss.

Nala panted. "It is true what they say...of Jedi."

"Also what they say of fools," Qui-Gon said, sighing.

“Who is the greater fool, Jedi?” a voice from behind Qui-Gon spoke. “The one who knows he is beaten or the one who thinks himself victorious?”

Qui-Gon spun, lightsaber at the ready. Chulok and five of their cronies had approached from behind, silently enough to surprise him.

“What is this?” Qui-Gon said, although his instinct told him exactly what it was—betrayal. Chulok was correct. He *had* been a fool. Drawing himself up to full height, he spoke, while already certain the time for words had passed. “Both you and the mayor of New Xaxis granted me permission to go about my business. It is done. I wish only to leave.”

Both of Chulok’s heads sneered. “The mayor has no real power, and you know it. I gave you permission in order to take your measure. I have seen. And now I know you, fool. And you know me...not at all.”

“We will see.”

Qui-Gon’s lightsaber flashed as he rushed forward. Only Chulok attacked in return, but the other men watching split Qui-Gon’s attention. Even if they were allowing their masters to take the lead, they presented a threat just by existing.

And it was worse than that. To Qui-Gon’s dismay, Chulok’s tri-sectioned staff was formed of a durasteel core wrapped in zillo beast hide—incalculably expensive, as the beasts were said to be extinct. But the hide was impervious to lightsaber energy. He had to solve this problem and rapidly.

It was no easy feat. Chulok learned quickly, too damn quickly. No tactic worked more than once as Qui-Gon tried changing angles and rhythms and targets, finding this four-armed and four-legged monstrosity to be almost as fast as he was and much stronger.

Still, Qui-Gon was holding his own by funneling all his attention to a single point. In the next moment, he might have severed the connecting chain between staff segments, just—then one of Chulok’s lackeys struck, distracting him for a key moment, and Chulok kicked, wounding him. Qui-Gon plunged from the edge of the platform.

Chulok was furious. “Fool!”

Their Triple Irons flashed, the leathered end striking the hapless henchman’s skull with such devastating force that the man was dead before

he hit the ground.

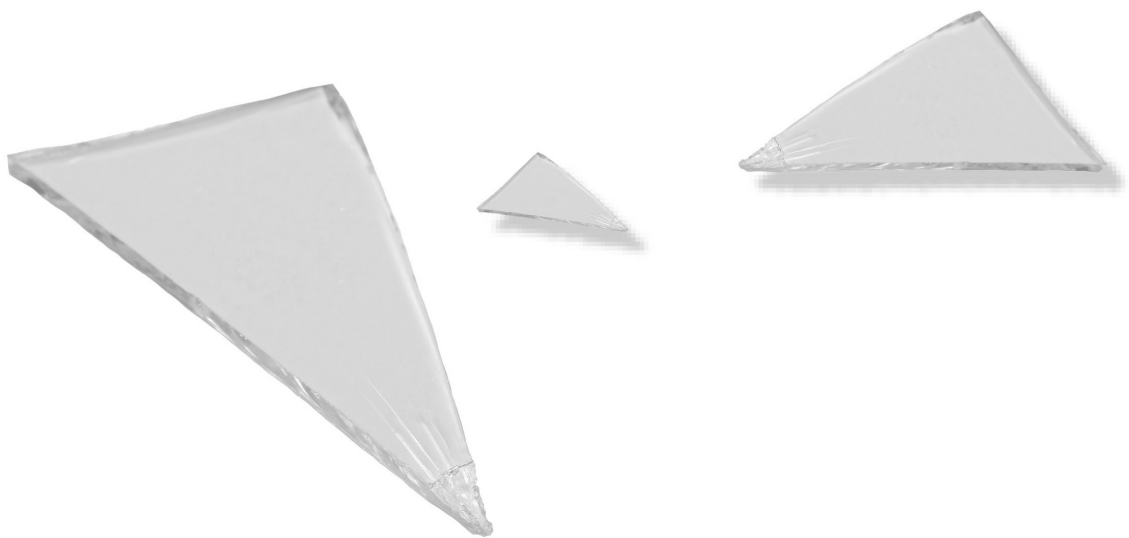
“I am Chulok!” both heads roared. “I was playing with him, learning his Jedi arts. I was ordained to be the Jedi Killer. It was *mine* to kill the bastard.”

“No one will ever know what happened,” one of Chulok’s minions said.

Chulok calmed themselves. “No. No one will ever know. Bring me the body.”

They never found the body. This did not worry Chulok.

There were, after all, meat markets in the Maze.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE DEBT

The wounded Jedi was falling, some instinct triggering his connection to the Force to allow a bit of a glide. Smashing through roofs, he was unconscious before he hit the ground.

A holodroid and her sisters were the first to find him. “What shall we do?” Maya-8 asked.

“We protect him,” Maya-12 said. “Take him to the tunnels before Chulok can send men.”

AND SO THEY did, stuffing the Jedi into a barrel and wheeling it casually into the most direct route to level seven they could find. They went to the northern segment, away from the tourists. They were admitted to this private space due to long association.

The entire section was abuzz with the scandalous news by the time a groggy Qui-Gon awakened.

“Where am I?” he asked.

The woman ministering to him had golden skin, full cheeks and lips, and dark-green oval eyes overlaid with a film of white. “You are with KinShan Nightbird of the Sa’ad.”

“You rescued me?” he asked.

“I have many friends. They are all part of the divine Web. They brought you here, but I used our arts to heal you.”

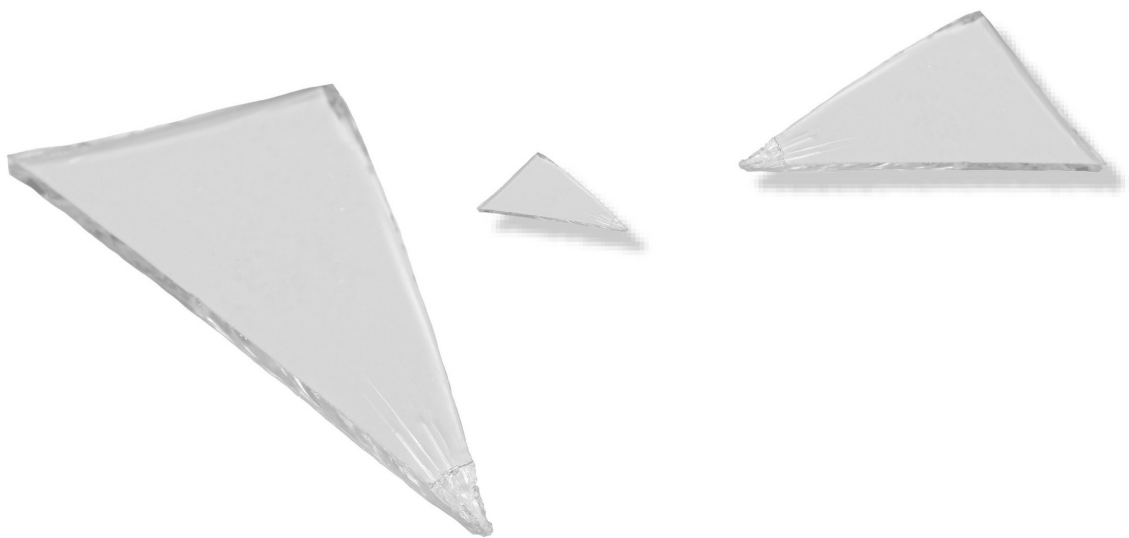
“Why would you do such a thing? Does this not place you and your people in danger?”

She ignored his question. “I need to know...are you a man of honor?”

“I am.”

“I believe you are. I entered your heart as you healed. In fact, that is how I healed you. And I felt your truth. Take this token,” she said, handing him a crystal. Within it was the shadow of something part spider and part worm. “One day I may contact you. And you will remember you owe me a service.”

“I will.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE FLOATING PALACE

Metagos, now

Mace sat at a back table at the Wheelhouse, which had become, informally, his public base of operation. He was talking to Maya-12, whom he found more engaging than most droids.

A triangular protocol droid approached the table, interrupting their conversation. “I am Doubleyew-are-em-two-four-five-six.”

“Hello, Worm,” Maya said, with a thread of contempt in her voice.

WRM-2456 regarded her sourly and then turned back to Mace. “Are you the one called Solver?”

“That would be me, yes. Can I help you?”

“Chulok wishes to see you. They will meet you in the communications center of the Floating Palace, please.”

“Convenient,” Mace said. “I would like to see them. Show the way.”

“Be careful, offworlder,” Maya-12 whispered.

“Sometimes careful isn’t an option.”

—

THEY RODE A tram around to the northeast quadrant and from there, in the midst of wealth and splendor, took a scenic lift up to the Floating Palace. From the elevated position, he could see the entire bowl. The cave was spectacular, the official “night” beginning so that the overhead lights dimmed and the crushed crystal roadways began to glow. It looked like a vast Life Day display laid out in patterns and mazes, as if thousands of engineers had been at work full-time for a century.

And above it all loomed a floating castle, like something from a children’s storybook.

It was, beyond a doubt, one of the most stunning vistas he had ever seen. The structure seemed to defy gravity, suspended from the ceiling of a colossal geode, the castle itself resting on a solid, transparent crystal disk.

Winged creatures sailed around the edges, recognizable after a time as tourists or wealthy adventurers wearing artificial glider “wings” and soaring on the updrafts from the same volcanic vents that created...*clouds*.

Astoundingly, this gigantic bubble was so vast that clouds floated like cotton candy near the geode’s ceiling. An actual climate, within an underground cave. The castle hung from the ceiling like a magnificent chandelier, its towers and turrets suspended by thick, reinforced supersilk cables.

The castle’s outer walls were adorned with large, faceted crystals of various colors, which refracted and scattered the artificial and natural light. Everything seemed to shimmer and change color as the streets flickered on.

On the lower levels of the Floating Palace, suspended gardens were filled with exotic and vibrant plant life, creating a series of oases. Cascading waterfalls and crystal pools contributed to the tranquil atmosphere.

Be careful, Mace said to himself. *Do not be deceived*.

Walkways and balconies within the castle were crafted from semi-transparent crystal, providing breathtaking vistas of the geode’s internal beauty. Mace could look down through the foundations a few meters before the crystal twisted light and he could see no farther.

The interior of the palace was adorned with opulent furnishings and decorations, including chandeliers made from glittering gemstones, intricate mosaics, and richly detailed tapestries. Crystal windows allowed Mace a closer view of the winged athletes gliding into the cloud. Dangerous sport!

There was even a zoo of some sort, with biological specimens of many kinds. “From many worlds?” he asked.

“All Metagosan,” WRM-2456 said.

He was fascinated by one in a glass enclosure—some kind of lizard. A pale fungus seemed to grow in and out of its body, covering its eyes, which stared blindly out at him. It was...disturbing. He walked on.

The castle harnessed the abundant natural and artificial light within the geode for illumination during the day. At “night,” the geode was probably lit by bioluminescent mushrooms and strategically placed lights to maintain the surreal ambience.

“Most impressive,” Mace said.

“Indeed, sir,” WRM-2456 said. “The Floating Palace attracts visitors from around the Outer Rim. We have guided tours four times a day to explore the castle’s magnificent architecture. Perhaps you would care to—”

Mace waved him away. “Cables must be strong.”

“Strongest in the galaxy. Made here.”

“What material?”

“It is a secret. Perhaps in time.”

He knew the damn secret. *Hillian supersilk.*

—

THE COMMUNICATIONS CENTER was in a lavish building just outside the guarded doors of the inner sanctum—the throne room and perhaps personal chambers of this “Chulok.”

But even the communications room was immense, a meeting chamber three times the size of that in the Jedi Temple. The rectangular table could seat thirty, with an enormous double chair at its head.

When Chulok entered, linked at the shoulder by some sort of metal housing that offered glimpses of the fleshy bridge beneath the golden casing, Mace felt a trill of the uncanny.

Despite his deep and powerful sense of control, Mace was impressed. Both of the connected beings were taller than him, and wider. But together, they were a titan.

He had known Rodians before, of course. But the Farakai were a notoriously secretive species. Mace recalled some stories of the Farakai’s unique bonding abilities, but he’d never heard of a Farakai bonding with a being from a different species.

This linking indicated something very special. Sheer power radiated from them, physical and psychological. They were almost hypnotically charismatic. Great power combined with great cruelty—it took no great insight to realize you were in the company of a conqueror.

“You are the one they call Solver,” Chulok said.

“That would be me.”

“What is your home?”

“I’ve been around.”

“And your name?”

“Call me Solver,” he said.

Chulok raised one eyebrow at the unusual name.

“My father was an optimist,” Mace said.

“Solver,” they said together, rolling the word in their mouths as if tasting.
“You crushed three of mine.”

“They crushed themselves. They should have known not to underestimate strangers.”

“One was a Zilka of some skill.”

“Not enough, apparently. You are...Thane Chulok?”

“We are.” Both spoke at the same time. The blended effect turned a whisper into a shout.

“I see. Full neural integration?”

“Yes.”

“You move and think and fight as one.”

“You are very quick.” A gust of wind and a blur of motion. Suddenly Chulok’s fingers burrowed into Mace’s throat. “But so am I,” they said.

I, not we, Mace thought, his breathing intense but smooth under the pressure.

Chu, the Farakai, was larger and stronger. Lok, the Rodian, was a few centimeters shorter, but faster. At least, that should have been the case. But they seemed equal in strength and speed, and he suspected that somehow the flesh bridge had blended the two in a way he’d not experienced before.

“I see.” It had taken great restraint to suppress his defensive response. This was not the time.

“You did not flinch.”

Mace’s teeth gleamed. “I did not fear death.”

“Why not? Do you fear nothing?”

He scoffed. “I didn’t say I do not fear. That would be a lie. All beings fear. But it is irrelevant. I knew my time had not come.”

“Because?” Chulok seemed amused.

“Because you think you can use me.”

Chulok released his throat. They both smiled. Lok’s was a bit lopsided, almost endearingly so. “Can I?”

“If the price is right.”

“You are...for sale?”

“For rent,” Mace said, correcting him. “If the price is right.”

Chu and Lok smiled again. Different species synchronized into a lethal whole.

“Very good. Look at him. He came here with nothing but a stick. Took down three of my best. Accepted my invitation and strode in here like a Jedi.”

“High praise.”

“I kill Jedi.” The pair said it casually, watching for a response.

“I’ve heard. And now I understand.”

Chu and Lok inclined their heads and motioned Mace to a table at the side. A teapot began steaming as they approached. Another inclined head offered seating. Chulok poured, their motion almost dainty. “Have you...met Jedi?”

“I have, yes.”

“Have you *killed* Jedi?” What a happy insinuation in those words. This was someone who loved killing.

“No. I have not.”

“Remember that I have.”

“I will. Have I wasted my time coming here?”

“Apparently not. We do have a problem, however. There is one who owes me money. One of Sybil’s children.”

Mace chuckled. “I hear she has many.”

“And loves each one the most.”

“Of course. Like any good mother.” They paused, then all three dissolved into laughter. Mace recovered first, a little concerned when he realized his amusement had been genuine. This being spoke slightly out of time with itself—sometimes alternated words, other times spoke simultaneously from both mouths. It was disorienting, and Chulok damn well knew it.

“Can you be specific about the way this issue involves me?” Mace asked.

“Yes. If one of mine were to punish him, it might trigger war. But you are not yet my employee. If you were to...instruct him, perhaps?”

“Painfully?” Mace asked.

“Why, yes.” The Chu head took the next piece. “Even terminally.”

“Pain can be an excellent teacher.”

“Death’s lessons are more lasting,” Chu said.

Lok said, “If you were to do such a thing, I would consider it a favor. And at that point, I might employ one such as you. But the event would have to precede the hiring.”

“So this would be a gesture of good faith.”

“Precisely.”

“Where can I find him?”

“Oh, gamboling about, I imagine.”

—

NAVIGATING THE FOURTH level, the Great Wheel, was both simple and complex. Visualize a dejarik board with concentric rings. Once Mace had oriented himself to the cardinal directions, he could walk east along a ring until he reached one of the intersecting, straighter streets and canals radiating from the center. The straight streets were numbered, while those along the curves bore names. The outer dwellings seemed middle-class, but poverty festered in the center.

He followed one of the curved streets to go north.

What he was looking for was northeast. The path ahead and behind was clustered with artistically designed and decorated dwellings. They looked not terribly dissimilar to the ones he’d seen on the surface, although the walls

weren't as thick, as if the people down here hadn't needed (or hadn't felt they needed) to protect themselves from waves of solar radiation. This was just a simple wish for privacy.

What he saw was the natural urge to create joy. A certain sense of gracefulness in life. It was clear that desperate citizens who had fled here from the surface had once possessed a certain sense of elegance. Wealth allowed that. Now impoverished, they were still attempting to find some meaning in their lives and some comfort for their families.

There were many small decorations, although not much that he saw could have been brought from above. The storms might have given only hours of warning, so the refugees couldn't have carried much with them. They must have gathered their things of greatest value, then used them to buy their way into the Abyss.

Now he had a sense of why the people in that sad little ghost town on the surface had not come down to the tunnels. A simple explanation—they hadn't had enough to buy their way in. Whoever controlled these tunnels had been so vicious, so lacking in charity, that even children were denied safety and shelter. Mace exhaled, releasing the flicker of rage that threatened to catch fire within him.

The area was rich with open-air markets and restaurants where firepit-roasted flesh was for sale to eager customers. Goods of all kinds were displayed by people with haunted eyes who were doing the best they could for themselves and their families.

In between the houses, where gigantic crystals thrust upward, there were rivulets of stinking brackish water so steeped in toxic minerals that it was almost brown. Drinking that muck would be death. To see so many people crowding into such a toxic area broke his heart. There was a slight bowl declination at the center, higher around the edges. He suspected that tides of filth and muck drained toward that center, and that the sewage droids were kept busy.

Despite all of this, there was a sense of aliveness about the district. Mace's feet followed the rhythm of lively music from up ahead, and his eyes sought the glowing lights—some artificial and some the result of glowing minerals

that had been implanted into the buildings. In certain cases, the buildings were actually manufactured from the minerals; others also had a few glowing mushrooms.

So he knew that some of the light here was being stored in various forms so that when the rationed power was turned off, there was still energy released from the walls and mushrooms and even the glowing crystals above them. Crystal jutted from the ground and stalactite fangs threatened from the ceiling so that the Abyss resembled the mouth of a gigantic schwabat beast.

Mace wondered how it felt to live down here. Were there ever groundquakes? Did those gigantic crystalline stalactites ever come crashing down?

With that disturbing thought filling his mind, he turned the corner and saw a brightly lit building filled with laughter and music. When he entered, he witnessed people dancing in some sort of ritual remembered from their time on the surface.

Rows of tattered folk faced each other, bowed, and began swaying to the music, moving their arms and legs in patterns that Mace knew would be as old as their culture. This was not peasant dancing—filled with joy and life and a celebration of fertility. With such rituals, citizens declared that they remembered the days above, the days before. Those who did not know the fancy steps, the precise movements, the casual but calculated flirtations, the turns of the head and shoulders, would be instantly identified as outsiders and embarrassed or shunned.

As exclusionary as these movements were, there was also a sadness to them, a plaintiveness. A memory of better times when these folk had not lived in filth and on the edge of starvation. His heart went out to them. These were the good ones. Their ancestors might have been wealthy, but they had refused to turn upon their neighbors. They'd refused to join the corrupted in the northeast quadrant.

These were not Chulok's lackeys. He hoped that in their dance, in their footsteps and curtsies, whether for mating or memory, they would be able to touch some small place inside themselves that remembered better times in a better world...and dreamed such a world would come again.

Suddenly, he realized to his surprise that Vin-Vin the tavern keeper was one of the dancers. The massive, reptilian Metagosan's ungainly body moved with surprising grace. His thickly lidded eyes were half-closed, as if remembering something he couldn't have been old enough to have experienced.

He couldn't have been more than a child when the solar storms had swept the surface clean and turned life into glass. These dances must have been taught by parents or learned by association. Mace watched him move and dance with a small creature, a little furry woman with wide eyes and a very serious expression...

It was Marzi! The widow Mace had helped just days ago. She, too, was loving the movement, and when he looked to the side, he saw two of her children laughing and clapping along.

It seemed as if every movement, every step, was a descent into some storehouse of happy memories. Mace felt as if he were almost violating them to watch. This was not for his eyes. This was all they had left of a world that perhaps none of them had ever known. It was possible that they never even dreamed it could return.

He turned away, promising himself that if it were possible, one day these good folks would dance with joy rather than pain.

Were there still any people here who had lived on the surface before the Great Storm? Who had taken it upon themselves to preserve these memories?

Had something in particular triggered this ceremonial action? Was it a holiday in old Xaxxis or New? Perhaps across all of Metagos? There was something strong and fine in their capacity to laugh and fight to keep a connection to a lost world. These people had been savaged but not destroyed. The seed of freedom still lived within them, awaiting nurturance.

He sighed and turned away, heading for the bar Chulok had described to him. And in the back of that bar, he found what he sought.

Mace had been in gambling parlors on many planets. There was nothing new here, just the same old undercurrents of greed and desperation. The door guard checked him against a list of some kind. "I hear a man can find a game here."

“We have the best games in New Xaxis. Your coin is welcome here. Good luck to you.”

“Luck is for amateurs.”

He checked the library of his mind, finding the image Chulok had given him of an insectile creature with yellow and green spots on the face. It matched a grub playing cards at a back table. A Syblin, mature and doubtless deadly to have survived Mama’s lethal nursery.

Mace watched until he saw what he needed. “May I join your game?”

“Do you have coins?” the Syblin asked.

Mace threw a purse on the table. “Will this do?” The dealer weighed the sack, then emptied it onto the table in a glittering spill of gold coins.

The Syblin picked one up, bit it with chisel teeth, and smiled. “Please. Be seated. Do you know Bevin Blitz?”

“Refresh my memory.”

“Magistrate wild,” the Syblin said. “Droids ascendant.”

“Deal,” Mace Windu said.

—

TIME PASSED AS it does in such smoky, noisy places where people pit their luck and skill against cards or dice. Mace knew that the people who loved gambling, of whatever species, tended to be those who considered luck more important than skill in life. Soldiers who had watched comrades blown to pieces only a step away. Executives who acknowledged the web of chance that drove their fortunes. Adrenaline junkies, thrill seekers, and the desperate trying to undo a lifetime of bad decisions or ill fortune in a single turn of the bubble.

This Syblin wasn’t that. This one gambled because he loved winning. Loved crushing his opponents. Loved luring them into betting more than they could afford...and then cheating to break their hearts.

This one was bad.

After three hands had lightened his pockets, he knew how the Syblin was cheating: Syblins had a retractable thumb-claw, one useful in palming an

extra Chancellor that he'd doubtless held back from the shuffle and deal.

Mace chose his moment and used the Force to flick the card out of the Syblin's hand onto the table, as if he had simply fumbled it. The Syblin was so aghast that he didn't consider the implications.

The squat little Mon Calamari next to him pointed a flipper at the Syblin and burred. "You cheated!"

Concern and fear morphed into anger and protest. There was no other answer that would satisfy honor. And the Syblin had to maintain the fiction that this was about honor, not embarrassment and thwarted sadism. "You'll die for that!" the Syblin roared. His blaster flipped up, but before he could pull the trigger, Mace was suddenly there at his side, hand over the Syblin's drawing hand, stopping the action dead with a sudden, crushing grip.

"Blaster against an unarmed man?" Mace whispered just loudly enough for all to hear. "Hardly sporting."

The Syblin tugged. His hand might as well have been in a vise. "What business is it of yours?" His mandibles were still somewhat flexible, suggesting this was a relatively young Syblin.

Mace inclined his head toward the stack of chips and coins. It was about to go down. "I saw you cheating, too." He withdrew his hand, knowing what would swiftly follow.

"You'll die for that!"

The Syblin drew, or, to be more precise, he attempted to draw. The next moments seemed almost coordinated, as if they were part of some dance or familiar game.

Mace grabbed his wrist. The Syblin's tendons were more than strong—the joint didn't really bend. Mace kicked his leg out from under him, and when the bug's body was in midair he twisted the whole arm, breaking it at the shoulder and aiming the blaster at a startled and fearful face. *Stop now*, Mace thought. If the Syblin would only relax, Mace might be able to disable him without killing, then find a plausible excuse to give Chulok.

But no. The Syblin continued to struggle, and it was his own finger on the trigger that caused the shot that destroyed his face. The whole thing was over in an instant.

“Wrong choice,” Mace said.

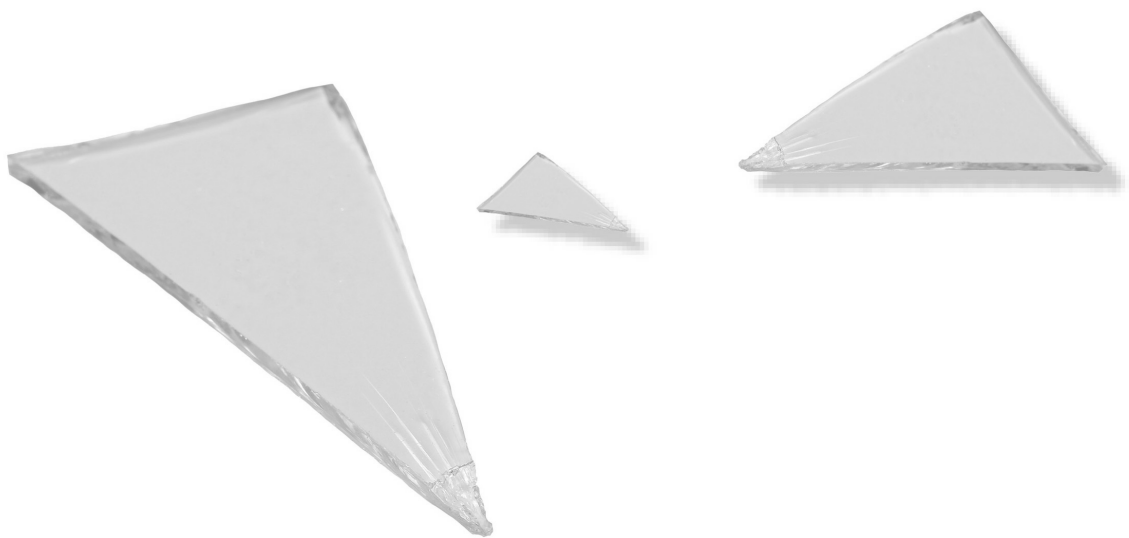
One of the observers started to touch his sleeve, then pulled his hand back as if he’d suddenly realized Mace’s flesh was hot enough to burn fingers.

“You’d better leave, stranger. He was Sybil’s sixty-fourth.”

“Sixty-fourth?”

“Out of three hundred and twelve.”

Mace lifted one eyebrow. “She needs a new hobby.”



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE HALL OF SHIMMERING CONTRITION

Mace felt both awed and disgusted. Chulok's throne room was adorned with a display of stolen jewels from offworld immigrants, creating an opulent but morally complex atmosphere.

Worm guided him in. "This, sir," the droid said with great formality, "is known as the Hall of Shimmering Contrition."

"I'll bet that was Lok's choice of name," Mace said.

"Why, yes! How did you know?"

"I'm a Solver. I know things."

The throne room was a vast chamber with high ceilings and intricately carved walls. Elaborate golden columns and ornate moldings served as a backdrop to the stolen jewels, highlighting their extravagance.

Adorning the walls, the throne, and other surfaces was an array of stolen gemstones, precious metals, and artifacts from the possessions of desperate immigrants. These stolen treasures included sparkling crystals, iridescent pearls, golden statuettes, and rare gems, each telling the tragic story of a doomed or desperate family.

The room's central focus was the double-seated throne, upon which Chulok themselves were seated, eating bochi nuggets right from the vine with a lazy insolence and expressions on both faces that invited comment on the stupendous wealth so casually, almost contemptuously displayed.

The throne itself was draped in luxurious, gem-encrusted fabrics. The backrest was embellished with an intricately designed mosaic created from fragments of stolen jewelry, providing a glistening backdrop for the ruling authority.

Chandeliers with suspended gemstones and jewels illuminated the room, creating a kaleidoscopic display of refracted light. Their luminance created a

mesmerizing, albeit uneasy, ambience. The stolen jewels exuded an undeniable sense of wealth and power, but they also represented the misappropriation of precious cultural heritage.

This had to be the dais of the previous ruler of New Xaxxis, or perhaps of Metagos itself. Once upon a time, that grand double chair had been a single, belonging to some powerful figure who had amassed immense wealth and influence through the pilfering of the subjects.

If rumor was correct, then this throne room was similar to what had existed on the surface. In which case...the original rulers of Metagos had been no angels. *Power and corruption*, Mace thought. *Corruption and power*. Far too often they flowed together, attracted to each other like iron filings to a lodestone.

The “Hall of Shimmering Contrition,” indeed. Mace bit his tongue. If he was very, very careful, he might be able to have this conversation and then back out of the room without committing violence.

Slavery. Extortion. A planet controlled by criminals.

And only those who had killed at Chulok’s bidding were admitted into this august presence.

“I heard what happened,” Chulok said.

“I’m not surprised,” Mace said. “There were witnesses.”

“You made him strike first,” the duo said, their blended voices almost soothing.

Almost. *This one is insane, and no one has the nerve to say it. Insane, but very clever. Be very careful. They know their dual voices are disorienting and use this to keep others off-balance.*

“I know that you have a delicate truce here,” Mace said, “between you and Sybil. I thought self-defense would be easier to explain than a straight killing.”

“I can agree,” Chulok said. Two pairs of eyes observed him. Judging. Coming to some new conclusion. “But it is uncommon for a mere mercenary to think so many moves ahead.”

“I never said I was a mere mercenary,” Mace said. “Every Rim-runner has a past.”

Chulok laughed, both heads nodding with approval. “Indeed, we do. Yours seems to have taught you valuable skills. Nala!”

The door opened, and a tall, loose-limbed figure appeared. Thin and shaggy, his fur a pigment-free white and his eyes blazing red. A Gigoran—no question. And the very killer Qui-Gon had sought.

A Gigoran assassin was a formidable and terrifying concept. Imagine a towering figure covered in dirty, matted fur, with piercing red eyes that gleamed with malice. This creature would be immensely strong, capable of crushing bones with ease, and would wield his immense physical power with ruthless efficiency.

Perhaps this Gigoran would lead a band of mercenaries or even a criminal empire, using his strength and cunning to exert control over others. His roar would send shivers down the spines of those who dared oppose him, and his presence would cast a shadow of fear wherever he went.

The Gigoran was dangerous and sly. Mace suspected that before this assignment ended, one of them would be dead.

Beyond any doubt, this was Nalaflfita, known simply as Nala. Was it an accident? Or was Chulok testing him?

“Yes, sirs?” Nala said, speaking Basic through a translating vocoder bound to his mouth.

“Observe,” Chulok said. “This one might be looking for your job.”

“I am happy however sirs prefer.” The Gigoran’s natural roar was absent. His version of a translator seemed to hijack the Gigoran’s vocal cords, producing an almost servile faux courtesy. He invited underestimation. Mace swore not to make that mistake.

Chulok turned to Mace. “And that is your lesson. You please me. See you continue doing so.”

“I promise to be mindful,” Mace said.

“Nala, take him to his quarters.”

—

“THIS PALACE IS amazing,” Mace said.

Nala laughed and said, “I’m glad you find it pleasing.”

“How was this built? Was it constructed on the ground and lifted up? Was it manufactured? Were the raw materials brought in and then assembled on a platform? I don’t totally understand.”

Again that laugh. It was not a pleasant sound, and the translator didn’t help. One of the unpleasant things about Nala was that he seemed so superficially pleasant, but underneath were those cold, nasty red eyes in a bleached furry face.

“We didn’t build it,” the mechanical voice said.

“Well, how did it get here?”

Nala said, “We moved it. Oh yes, one group trying to get into the underground was the wealthiest family in Xaxxis. Chulok bought their house for a single coin. Then we made the family and thousands of others go up to the surface after the solar storm had died down, and moved the palace here a block at a time. I wish I could have seen them racing to escape the ‘death dawn.’ Hah hah.”

His was the kind of petty cruelty that turned Mace’s stomach. To make people go out into the radiation and move their own home down here and then force them to work to raise it to the top of this gigantic geode bubble—what kind of being did something like that? Certainly, it was primarily for entertainment.

Mace looked up at Nala and said, “How many died?”

A nasty laugh passed the translator filters. “I wasn’t there, but I have heard stories. You can probably imagine that thousands upon thousands of people died to raise this and then mount it as protection for their allies below, where all the poor sections could look up at it, knowing they are within its protection.”

It was mounted protectively over the wealthiest section of the city. In that way, when residents looked up, they saw their benefactor, while knowing from the weapons mounted at the edge that any uprising was well and truly doomed.

“It wasn’t entirely done by dragging, of course,” Nala said. “They used sleds and the like, but it was still very dangerous. There were still sand slugs

out there. They had changed to glass. They'd eat your children, and you could watch them digest inside." The furry mountain laughed as if this was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. "I mean, they hid underneath the dirt, so they weren't as affected by radiation. They were affected more slowly. After a generation or two, they began to mutate. They were very hungry. There were many people who didn't make it back. They were very hungry, but who cares, really? It wasn't our people who were lost. It was the high mucky-mucks who had lorded it over the planet."

Mucky-muck? Mace had never heard that term out of a translator. He suspected it was a polite version of a somewhat viler turn of phrase.

All that Mace knew was that this was one of the greatest and most lavish houses he'd ever been in. In comparison, the spare environment of the Jedi Temple was like a hovel. Nala wore a secretive smile as he opened the door. The apartment was furnished with the gold, jewels, and silken accessories befitting a guest room in such an amazing palace. Was this the same housing that had been offered to Qui-Gon? If so, the contrast with his simple apartment on Coruscant must have been grating.

"And these will be your quarters while you work for Chulok." Nala paused and shook his pale fuzzy head. So jolly. Seemingly harmless. "Unless you get promoted—or killed." The way he said that last suggested a pleasant anticipation.

"We'll work on the first part," Mace said. "How does one advance?"

"You must be hungry for the killing. It is all Chulok understands. I suspect this does not disturb you."

In this moment, Nala seemed to offer brotherhood. They were two of a kind, yes? Just a jolly pair of killers. They'd be happy to stand back-to-back in a slaughterhouse or face each other in mortal combat. It was almost intimate, the closest thing such a creature could offer to friendship.

Mace grunted. "Tell me more about this place. Sybil and Chulok hate each other. Why is there not war?"

"We share with Sybil an interest in the silk spiders, the Hillians. She keeps production going. We sell offworld and share responsibility for the security of the Great Wheel. It works well."

“Apparently.”

“We sell all we can produce. We make plenty of gold. This is a good time to choose talk over blood.”

“In what way?” Mace asked.

“All levels, all sides think they are most honorable. And both sides have those who believe they demonstrate or gain honor by killing. So challenges between low-level people are tolerated, just a bit.” He held two furry fingers a centimeter apart.

“With what limits?” Mace asked.

“Dueling is allowed.” Nala made brisk fighting movements.

It seemed pure pleasure for him. This one enjoyed killing. Mace noticed that Nala slid in and out of patois. He suspected either protective coloration or the deliberate courting of underestimation.

“But careful...not too much. And big-time punishment for killing with blasters. Better to break a neck than blow off a head.” Nala laughed and laughed.

Mace remembered the blur-fast feints and laughed along politely.

“If you win, most of the time, Chulok will scold you publicly but reward you in private. It is the same with Sybil, I think.”

Mace considered and saw the problem. “And what is the signal for a duel? How does it commence?” Advanced cultures with formal duels always had rules.

“Stamping on the ground three times. Then an empty-handed attack. Be careful: Sometimes they forget rules. That can be very bad.”

“Some particular reason?”

“Yes. Sybil only has her children as direct lieutenants, but they hire others. Sybil’s children share a hive mind, similar to those who have a connection to the Force.”

“The Force?” Mace asked.

Nala spit. “Jedi superstition. Those fools think they are special. Chulok showed them. They’re better than any Jedi.”

Mace suspected Chulok would, in time, test that notion.

He was thinking of how to frame his response when they passed an alley, and with ghastly synchrony, a Syblin stomped three times!

“You killed my brother!” the Syblin said.

“Which one are you?” Mace said.

“The one who will kill you.”

“You’ll need to be more specific,” Mace said. “There’s a lot of that going around.”

Confusion clouded the cold eyes, followed swiftly by annoyance. “I am One Three Three.”

Mace glanced at Nala, who had stepped back a bit to watch with merry, bright, bloody eyes. This was entertainment for him. And Mace sensed that no matter what happened, Nala would observe with glee.

“Without your blaster? Go back to your mother.” Mace pretended anger or disdain. Was there any way to send this one away? Perhaps if Nala had not been watching.

For this villain’s entertainment, he was being manipulated into a killing. He felt a flicker of blind rage, followed by the cold hand of an inflexible discipline.

Syblin-133 sneered. “I don’t need a blaster for one like you.”

“We’re about to find out.”

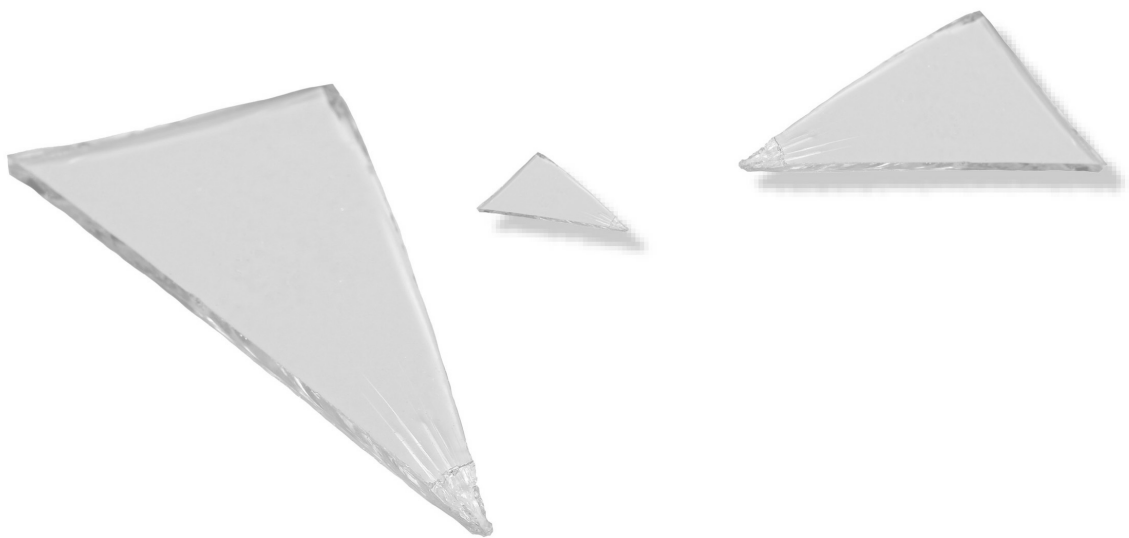
No blaster, but it would have been absurd not to use his staff. The insectile being was armored, but the joints of the armor were, as he suspected, brittle, and they broke at a careful thrust. Mace broke his top left arm. When he attacked with the middle right, he snapped that one, too. And then the top right. When the Syblin tried a kick, Mace simply wasn’t there, but he paralyzed every nerve in that leg with a knee strike. Syblin-133 tumbled to the ground, struggling to claw his way back upright.

This was absurd. “Are you insane?” Mace asked.

“I’ll get you!”

“You are seriously disturbed,” Mace said, turning away.

Nalaflfita shook with laughter. “You’ll do, Solver,” he said, slapping him on the back with one huge, pale, furry hand. Mace wanted to wash himself. “You’ll do.”



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GLASSBANE

Mace spent one night in that apartment, but to his annoyance, sleep was elusive and shallow. He felt restless, as if cara beetles were crawling and biting beneath the sheets. Four times, he woke and searched for the little insects. But there was nothing.

Perhaps it was the proximity to his enemy. So the next day, he found himself a second hidey-hole on the outskirts of the Children's Maze. No one questioned him, but he did see Woolif performing minor surgery on one of the wretched inhabitants. He took in return a single precious flask of Glassbane.

Odd. The creature also served the Sa'ad, who could certainly supply such unguents at wholesale.

Then he understood. Woolif was a good being, one genuinely dedicated to healing. He would not insult a poverty-stricken patient by refusing what little they had to offer.

Mace decided to test his understanding, seeking out a stall where a florid Phindian sold presumably diluted sunblock.

"It's called Glassbane, offworlder."

"Expensive?"

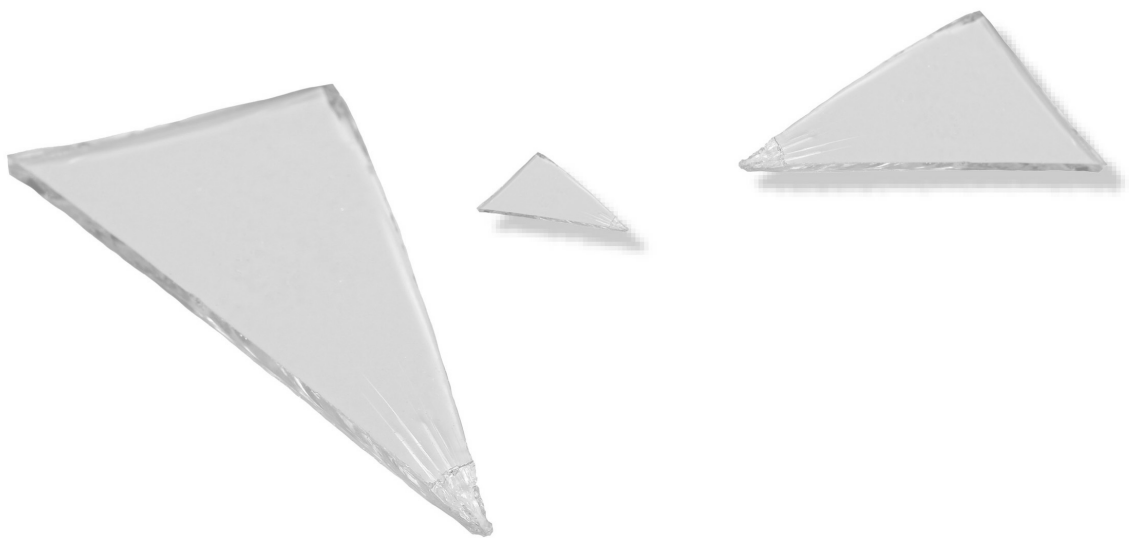
"It is now. The Uppers came in and wanted to live above the city. That means they need Glassbane or they'll die or maybe turn into one of the wretched surface creatures you might have seen."

Mace remembered vividly. "So it was protection for most, essential for those who mined it...and now for those on the top three levels as well." And here in the middle it was makeup, worn to flaunt wealth.

"And they pay through the nose."

"If they can't pay?"

The dealer laughed. The sound was unpleasant. "They fry."



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE SECRET

Mace found himself drawn back to level seven. Perhaps for information or perhaps simply because he enjoyed KinShan's company. This was a precious and rare thing for Jedi. They were warned against attachments but still needed company and companionship to function fully as beings.

He approached, and to his pleasure, she cocked her head slightly to the side, listening...and then smiled and greeted him with extended arms. He shook both her hands.

"I am making my rounds," she said. "Would you care to accompany me?"

"That I would," he said. Her first stop was outside the tourist area, the lair of the mature Hillians.

The rock beneath them had been partially hammered away, exposing a fungal mat. The creatures sleepily dipped their heads and chewed at their leisure. The supply of nutrient seemed endless.

"This is the source of our wealth," KinShan said. "The spider-worms are a gentle, placid people."

One of their young men approached. "Nightbird. The cocoon is ready."

"This is my younger brother," KinShan said to Mace. "Lead me, Chala-Non."

The golden, smooth-muscled lad led them to a processing chamber several tunnels away, a brisk five-minute walk.

As they entered, a silk cocoon was being sprayed with a mist from a red canister. Mace watched it shift colors from silver to gold, ripening. The Sa'ad set it up and then unwound it onto a gray spool, one meter of thread at a time. Slowly at first, then faster. The gray spool device orbited more and more rapidly, scanning the thread to prevent breaks. Slowing and speeding, fingers of Sa'ad elders teased the threads apart.

Mace was fascinated. He sensed KinShan evaluating him, perhaps wondering if his mind was wandering. It was not.

At last the spinner slowed, then stopped. Their efforts had revealed a beautiful spider-worm larva. It was golden and sleeping, dreaming whatever dreams such creatures dreamed.

But something troubled Mace, and he pulled it from memory. “I had always heard that creatures born in cocoons had to chew their own way out.”

Chala-Non nodded. “They would die of weakness, but we place them with their siblings, who nurture and strengthen them.”

“Compassionate creatures,” Mace said.

The next cocoon was placed in the odd apparatus, and the unraveling commenced. Raw silk was incredibly precious, and now Mace knew a piece of the secret. This was how the thread was unwound and the silk cows were protected in the process. Lovely.

“And here,” KinShan said, “we spin the threads into what we believe are the strongest cables in the galaxy.”

“How do you cut it?” Mace asked.

“That is our secret. Then we send it up to level three, where it is formed into commercial products or sold in bulk across the galaxy.”

“I get the feeling that you have a lot more secrets.”

She laughed. A good sound. “We do. And we keep them. I will show you one.”

—

YET ANOTHER JOURNEY, through yet more branching tunnels. He wondered if you had to have been born down here to ever truly learn the pathways’ intricate geography.

Led by the hand, Mace was taken to a complex cave system that presented another genuinely beautiful vista. The constant but varying light was a little disorienting, because it felt like sunlight, but he knew it couldn’t possibly be. Instead, there seemed to be microsuns glowing from rock crevices above. When he climbed up to look more closely, the “suns” turned out to be

clusters of glowing mushrooms, so bright they looked almost ablaze. He had never seen such extreme bioluminescence in a fungus.

“Is that natural?” he asked his guide.

“Yes,” Chala-Non said. “In the sense that we did not breed it. Perhaps our ancestors did. But we do feed it. It’s a fungus that eats other fungi, but not in a predatory fashion: There are other fungi that actually move, climb, and seem to willingly sacrifice themselves so that the chamber has light.”

The floor was uneven except for a cleared area in the middle, which was otherwise strange—the rock formation had been formed by water more than volcanic activity.

It wasn’t anything like a mine. The rocks were bronze-colored. Stalactites dangled from the ceiling like icicles, and stalagmites rose in stacked concentric rings from the ground where the mineral-rich waters had dripped down.

It was clear that countless generations of Hillians and Sa’ad had lived here, worked here, grown here. He did not know the life cycle of these great creatures, but he was certain that this area had been set up to facilitate it. If there were nooks and crannies, perhaps the worms crawled away to have a little privacy. Or perhaps they did their business right out here in front of everybody. Their digestive and mating patterns were outside his knowledge.

What he did know was that at the moment, the center stage was held by the younglings. The Hillian grubs crawled in a circle five meters in diameter while village elders sang to them.

As they did, several adult Hillians reared up on hind legs and swayed to the music. He wouldn’t have thought they could do such a thing, but they did. And as they danced, silken threads emerged from glands beneath their abdomens.

“That’s their mating song, isn’t it?” It was a guess, but an educated one.

KinShan approved. “You are very quick.” That seemed her greatest compliment. “Yes. Ordinarily, they produce silk only when they mate. The males sing to them. We simply learned to sing that song, which the Hillians love. And in return they reward us with silk.”

The great worms danced. A beautiful sight.

AS IF OPENING the door to one of life's great mysteries, KinShan pushed aside a curtain and took Mace into the chamber beyond. It seemed half a klick across and was infinitely cobwebbed, a vastness cleft with endless sheets of interconnected webbing.

"What is this?" Mace asked.

"For a thousand generations, my people have woven history in silk. All we are is written here."

It was a library. A history library. An organic version of the Jedi Archives. "The past illuminates the present and opens the path to our future," he murmured. "And you can read it?"

"Yes. It is a thing taught from birth." She plucked a string, and it hummed. "Our history started at least three thousand years ago, when we immigrated here and found we preferred the depths to the surface." The strand seemed almost alive, the vibration traveling along the thread, splitting, animating other fibers as it spread.

"What is that one saying?"

With startling facility and clarity of intent, she ran and then jumped a full four meters into the air, landing on a rock ledge barely half a meter wide. Amazing leap, and...how did she know the ledge was there? Practice? A trick of sound echoing in the confined chamber?

She said, "It is a tragic love story. It says that once upon a time, the priestess of the clan fell in love, but her love was mining Glassbane and was taken by the Depth Dwellers."

There was more to the story than she was saying. "Which priestess was this?"

"One who was young. And foolish."

She rubbed her finger along the thread, and it hummed.

Mace's heart ached for her. "We were all foolish once." The entire history of a people, here in one room. He saw a way to change to a better subject. "How did all of this begin? The Sa'ad and the Hillians?"

“Ah. It is difficult to say where history ends and myths begin. But we Sa’ad came here from another world, it is said. And our first princess, named Chan-Dree, fleeing some beast, went into the caves, where she wandered until she was lost. She dreamed, and in those dreams, the Hillians spoke to her. She descended and met them, and they cared for her. She brought her people to them, and Hillian and Sa’ad became family. The Hillians gave them fiber, and the Sa’ad danced and sang for them. And thus it has been, through all our history.”

“You think this accurate?”

“Fairly. I know the Hillians were here, as were the Syblins. It is thought that they and the Metagosans are native to the planet, and others migrated here. We made family with the Hillians long before the sun poisoned the air. When the survivors fled down here, just fifty years ago, we were already entrenched.”

He had wondered if the Hillians were Sa’ad pets or wards. But now, if this was true...he saw things a little differently. The Hillians had lived down here forever, probably evolved here, and if the Depth Dwellers were also here, it implied that the Hillians had...well, had some way to protect themselves?

Before Mace could form the next question, he noticed that KinShan seemed to be struggling with herself, perhaps deciding whether or not to say something. Finally, she said, “Someone is playing games.”

“What sort of games?”

She considered before answering. “Information about our ways has filtered to the upper levels. And worse.”

“Dangerous information?”

“Absolutely.”

“What kind? Please be precise.”

“It has to do with the life cycle of the Hillians. This could be disastrous.”

“Sybil or Chulok?”

“Of that we are uncertain. What we know is that we’re running out of time. Chulok is power-hungry and on a collision course with Sybil. Sybil and her children dominated until Chulok’s rise, and they have been nibbling away at her power ever since. She was in control of selling our silk to the surface,

and even controlling much of the offplanet trade. Chulok was only supposed to provide security, policing and interfacing with the civilian authorities, and Glassbane production. But they've gained control of enough of the offworld silk sales to create tension."

"I've seen. And you are trapped between the two."

"When they collide, Metagos will burn."

"All of these caves connect, right?"

"Yes. You could travel all over the planet underground without ever seeing the surface. There are always plans to expand the tunnels, but I suspect that before that is necessary, the surface will be safe again."

He nodded. Good. "I assume there is communication and commerce between New Xaxxis and its suburbs."

Her milky eyes remained impassive. Full trust had yet to be achieved. "Yes."

"Why was the evacuation so effective?"

"The cave system," she explained. "It allowed faster evacuation, more rapid than building bunkers. We saved seventy-five percent of the planet's population. This is why you are here."

"I ask you to please speak plainly," Mace said. "What is your greatest fear?"

KinShan considered. "That whoever wins the coming war will own the planet. The Sa'ad have existed in the balance between them."

"And without that balance, you will be dominated."

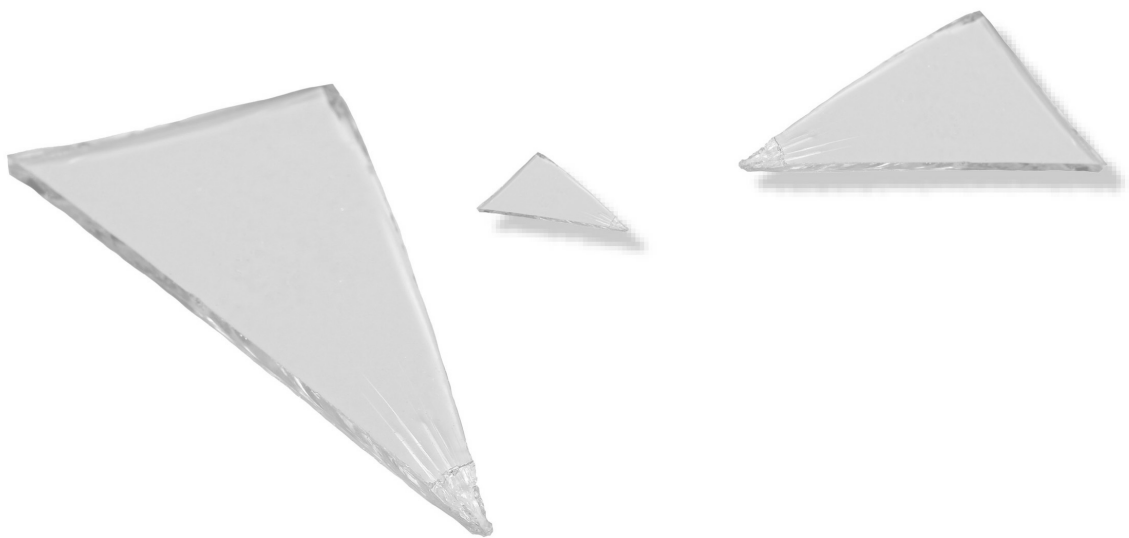
"Or *exterminated*. Yes, that is my fear."

"And the spider-worms?"

"They are of extreme value. More than you can imagine. My fear is that they will cease to dance. Their quality will decline, and Sybil will punish them. Pain would temporarily increase the output, but then it would fall again. More pain. More punishment. More decreased output. A deteriorating spiral that will offend the Web."

He admired her mode of thought, but its focus repelled him. Those gentle creatures under the prod. A horrible thought. "And Chulok?"

"I shudder to think. All I hear suggests that they are even worse."



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ALLIES AND INFORMANTS

The Wheelhouse was, in youngling parlance, “syncing”: filled with music, food, and dance, the air wreathed with enticing vapors. The massive Vin-Vin Sunfall was once again behind the bar, polishing glasses.

And Mace, at KinShan’s urging, was talking to Maya-12.

“I heard that you wished to speak to me,” she said.

“Yes. I understand that you have many skills.”

“As a fighter yourself, you will be interested to know I am familiar with three thousand different weapons systems and two hundred twelve fighting techniques, including the vulnerable points on over a thousand species.”

“And you are trusted by the Sa’ad. Have you contacts among Chulok’s and Sybil’s people?”

“I performed translations for Nalaflfita,” she said, and her intonation suggested distaste.

“What job?”

“I cannot discuss old clients with new.”

“Rim-runner’s oath?” he asked, slightly amused.

“No,” she said. “I simply *cannot*. When most of my clients hire me, they install temporary chips that have access to my core memory. But what he might have asked me to translate was on that chip. I only remember being hired and then discharged.”

Canny little bastard, Mace thought, then said, “Excellent. Law enforcement?”

“I am rated to handle investigations at the local, planetary, and Outer Rim levels, and I have. Is this your interest?”

“Almost. I have to be careful...”

“Give me a moment to swap programs.”

There was a beat as she sagged her head, then suddenly came erect. Her projection stuttered, and her visage was replaced with a weathered face sporting a scar across her top lip. She winked at him with an eye now rimmed with smoky eyeshadow. When she spoke again, her voice was almost a parody of toughness.

“Pay me, sweetheart. That way, you have client privilege. Someone in my profession can’t break that, even if they toast my circuits. It’s the code.”

He slid a coin across the table. She made it disappear, then said, “All right, Brown Eyes. Talk to me.”

“I want to be careful, because if you aren’t, it could be dangerous.”

To his surprise, Maya placed a cylindrical herb pipe between her mechanical lips. She raised a finger, and fire sprouted.

She lit and puffed. This was absurd. Droids had no lungs. This was sheer affectation. “Danger is my business.” She inhaled and exhaled a plume of fragrant mushroom vapor.

Mace managed not to laugh. She had already shifted into “investigator” mode. He said, “Someone has stolen eggs from the Sa’ad spider-worms, set up an alternative farm. You are a friend of the Sa’ad, I believe?”

She puffed and studied him. “I’ve had dealings with them. Everyone has.”

“On the main levels, yes. But their actual dwellings?”

“I’ve been among them, yes. I know the breed. I could tell you stories.”

“Later, perhaps. I would like you to investigate. But if you learn anything that could put you in danger...stop looking. Report to me.”

“What is your interest here? You are a Solver.”

“I’m solving a problem. What are your rates?”

She showed him, and he whistled.

“I’m the best, baby,” she said.

“At these prices, you’d better be.”

—

OVER THE FOLLOWING days, Mace observed, collated information, and wormed his way more deeply into the social structure of New Xaxis, befriending

criminals and citizens. He asked careful questions to see if anyone was selling silk below market price or could provide a Hillian grub to smuggle off the planet. This was dangerous for multiple reasons, and as a result he constantly felt eyes upon him—a state of stress that annoyed him because he usually dealt with such dangers with aplomb.

Here, he felt uncomfortable no matter where he slept, and he rarely stayed in the Floating Palace two nights in a row. No matter where he pillowed his head, despite meditations that normally put him into a deep and restorative slumber, his sleep was shallow and troubled. That *crawling* sensation continued, even accelerated. His dreams, normally vivid and deep, were fractured and filled with the sorts of images that frightened children and caused him to wake gasping.

Was it something in the atmosphere, perhaps? Solar radiation penetrating down to level four? Deep in his bones, he felt a pulsing sense of something like low-level panic. If he got three really good hours of sleep in a night, that would have been a happy surprise.

Every day he felt more deeply that he had to find those responsible for the kidnapping or find a way to break Chulok's and Sybil's hold on this world—and then *leave*.

He was aware that he greatly interested Chulok. Could the hybrid gangster suspect his real intentions? Or did Chulok want to kill him for the sheer joy of combat?

If Chulok was stealing from Sybil, they might be extra cautious. If Sybil was cheating Chulok or preparing to eliminate the Sa'ad, she would be aware of any powerful newcomer to the game.

And could Chulok feel his connection to the Force? Could Sybil? How much danger was there? He was certain these questions would be answered in the coming days.

—

MACE HAD MADE a deal with Vin-Vin Sunfall. No one suspected the reptilian wasn't pouring a strong intoxicant but rather was pouring mushroom juice—a

slight pick-me-up but nothing more. The other drinkers assumed differently, and from time to time he slurred his words or dulled his walking balance to play into those delusions.

Another of Sybil's endless children entered the Wheelhouse, looked about for a moment, and spied him. "Solver," he said, presenting himself at Mace's table. "My mother would like to see you."

He managed to look just slightly woozy. "On what business?"

"That is between the two of you."

"What number are you?"

"Eleven."

A lower number. Assuming that the children were promoted when their elders died, this one had survival skills. "Well, Eleven, I'm busy."

"Too busy for gems?" He dropped a fist-sized sack on the table.

Mace weighed it. "I just made time."

"Take this." Eleven handed Mace a flat circle of rock, grooved like the Great Wheel and signed with thumbprints. A security sigil. "No one will harm you while you hold it."

"I think you mean that while I hold it, I won't have to kill anyone."

"Yes," the Syblin said. "That is what I meant, of course."

"Then let's go."

—

MACE WAS ESCORTED to the southern edge of level four. Carved into the wall was a door guarded by heavily armored Syblins.

These beings were similar to Hillians, except that their armor and limbs were closer to those of crustaceans than those of insects. It was entirely conceivable that they had sprung from a common ancestor.

The guards were, doubtless, Sybil's children. She trusted no one else. They balanced upright, supported by four or balanced on two of their six limbs. And they carried shock prods. When they opened the durasteel-and-ironshroom gate for him, he was surprised by what he saw.

The tunnel walls were not rock. They looked like mushroom fiber that had been chewed and commingled with stomach exudates and then regurgitated onto the walls. The more deeply he ventured into the tunnel, the more it began to feel like a biological rather than a geological or engineered structure.

Then the tunnel opened into a larger chamber, and he suddenly had greater insight. Mace had of course seen insects that produce various forms of honey, for many planets had them. He knew that their hives often had hexagonal or octagonal spaces where their larvae were raised.

This was something similar. The walls were filled with hexagonal cells, each just broad and deep enough for an egg. A dozen attendants seemed constantly shuttling between a pile of eggs just outside a room-spanning veil and the cell-covered walls.

Blazing bright fungal clusters lit the ceilings, as on level seven. Other attendants shuttled mewling newborns into side passages. Half of the room was taken up with the huge scarlet veil, perhaps for privacy, perhaps for another reason. Through the veil he glimpsed something much larger than any Hillian he had seen. Certainly larger than a Hutt. That thought took him by surprise—could they be related?

Sybil's palace was an entire chamber set deep into the wall of the southwest section of the wheel. It teemed with her children and their various associates.

The throne room of the giant Worm Queen was surreal.

At the center of the room, he found Sybil herself, an immense, serpentine creature coiled around a nest of hundreds of eggs, only the lower half of her body visible beneath the veil. The queen was a breathtaking, multicolored behemoth with iridescent scales that shimmered in a captivating play of colors, depending on the angle of the light.

She lounged languidly in a circular nest made of a soft, mossy substance, cradling the translucent, gelatinous eggs. It was this nest that the veil bisected. Each egg was illuminated by a faint inner glow, hinting at the potential life within. The nest formed a natural amphitheater around the

queen, which Mace assumed was partially for comfort and partially akin to the Floating Palace: designed for intimidation.

Giant, glistening mineral formations encrusted the cavern walls. They contributed to the room's unique aesthetic, reflecting and refracting the soft bioluminescent light throughout the space, giving it a dreamlike quality.

In its own way, it reminded him of Hillia.

A small, steady stream of devoted worm-worshippers entered by another entrance. Some knelt on mats; others genuflected and left tribute before backing away. Some were of her species, but others were of varying breeds and unknown origins, here apparently to pay their respects. These worshippers sang, chanted, and seemed to regard the queen as divine.

Giant bioluminescent insects and arthropods inhabiting the chamber served as the queen's protectors. They moved silently and harmoniously, keeping a vigilant watch over the queen and her precious offspring.

The throne room was filled with a soft, soothing hum, a combination of the queen's contented purring and the gentle rustling of the bioluminescent fungi and crystals. This acoustic symphony added to the room's mesmerizing atmosphere. Mace could tell that the goal here was a mood of spiritual tranquility, but there was an undertone of total control and submission.

Queen Sybil was perhaps three times the size of a Hutt. There was a part of Mace that enjoyed thinking about the species the galaxy was filled with and whether there were common genetic patterns. On several planets, he had encountered sects who believed that life had drifted through the universe on waves of the Force, seeding planets with common life-forms both plant and animal. This had led to similar geology, similar simple life-forms, and then complex life developing along familiar evolutionary pathways. Indeed, the universe was sufficiently connected, and creatures from one planet could often survive easily on another. Even the basic compounds in foods were usable by more than one species on more than one planet.

Still, the application of this concept on Metagos seemed questionable. If the Hillians and the Depth Dwellers had been here for eons, then these creatures might have branched off from each other thousands or millions of

years before. Or they might have come to Metagos from another world altogether.

Such analysis was nearly instinctive for Mace—a survival skill gained through hundreds of explorations on countless planets. The ability to detect what didn't belong in an environment could mean the difference between life and a messy, protracted death.

Sybil was a colossal shape behind her shimmering crimson privacy half curtain. The shadows of her movements were precise and deliberate. He noted that any hatchlings were instantly spirited away, their eggshells heaped against a wall. *What a contrast with the Hillians*, he thought. There it was cocoons rather than eggs, and every cocoon was sacred.

Or *were* there cocoons here in some chamber to which he had not yet been welcomed? Wasn't that the pattern: egg to larva to cocoon to some adult form?

From what he was coming to understand, Syblin children were forced to fight for their lives. Mace found it disturbing, and it was not the Jedi way to be disturbed by such things. Equanimity was highly prized. Every species had its own way, but he was, in fact, disturbed by his disturbance.

Perhaps it was just fatigue. Sleep continued to evade him, and he was disturbed by unpleasant dreams. He normally slept six hours a night, but in New Xaxis, he'd been struggling for three, feeling tendrils of deep fatigue clutching at him like water constrictors every time he attempted to breach into consciousness. Of the content of his dreams, he could remember only a glimmer: He was asleep, then woke to find several people standing around him. He did not know them. Then a woman said, "Why did you kill us?" And suddenly he recognized them—they were faces of the dead, slain by his hand. He opened his mouth to speak—

And woke for real. It was disturbing and not uncommon for warriors. But he had not had such a dream in a very long time. He had made peace with his path. What was this? Why now?

And why the hell had his attention wandered in such a critical meeting? A blast of frustration brought him back to the present just in time to hear the queen's words.

“...are the Solver,” she said from behind her privacy veil. The vast, apparently gelatinous body was fifty times his size, even if much of it was egg sac.

“A name I’m known by.”

“You killed my child.”

“Your child cheated at cards and then made a mistake.”

Sybil laughed. “He attempted to kill you?”

“Yes.”

“He was always a reckless one. I sometimes think I’m a bad mother.”

Despite her callous effect, Mace sensed a hint of truth behind Sybil’s words. He said, “Is that why you summoned me?”

She laughed, a silken, silvery sound. Seductive and warm.

“I was of a mind to hire...the sort of person who would call themselves a Solver. What would your price be?”

Mace pretended to consider. This was a serious piece of luck. “I’m enjoying being a freelancer. Seems that as long as I’m a free agent, I’ll never be alone.”

“I hear you accepted residence in the Floating Palace with that upstart Chulok.”

“I also have a room in the Maze. No one owns me.”

“Rim-runner’s oath?”

“Rim-runner’s oath.”

“If you are truly a free agent, you will take assignments, yes? If you are *not* a free agent, then I wonder whether you ever were. That could upset the balance here, and it might violate agreements with the bastards.”

Meaning Chulok, he assumed.

Her voice had remained soft and sweet. In fact, he noticed that *all* her children and the supplicants spoke only in hushed tones. He adjusted his voice downward accordingly.

“Not free. In fact, quite expensive. But worth it.” He spoke the last words in a tone barely more than a whisper.

And she heard him perfectly. Either the acoustics in this chamber were superb or her hearing was at the very greatest levels of sensitivity. He

suspected the latter.

“You are no follower,” Sybil said. “A leader. Yes. You are a leader, and I have a crew that needs one. Two Four Five?”

“Yes, Mother?”

“We have found the one.”

Mace almost enjoyed that. “May I ask a personal question?”

“Yes. Be courteous,” she warned from behind her veil. There was a sharpness to that last sentence. He suspected rudeness to such a being could be lethal.

“You are the mother of all these children.”

“Yes.”

“Who is the father?”

She sighed. It seemed...nostalgic. “He was a great one. It was an arranged mating. He came from around the edge of the world, of excellent blood. We loved ravenously. For five days.”

My, my. “And then?”

“I ate his head, of course.” She shrugged, sending ripples through that bulk. “But he left me enough seed to secure generations of descendants... Does this disturb you?”

He had the distinct impression that, behind the veil, she was smiling.

He matched her expression. “He should have brought flowers.”

—

MASKED RAIDERS OF several species awaited him in Sybil’s ready room. Strange. Jedi were not intended as military officers, but over the years, he had attended several such meetings in an advisory capacity. It had never really occurred to him that criminals did the same. *This would have amused Qui-Gon*, he thought. *And Yoda would have never let him hear the end of it.*

Half were Syblins, while the remaining six were various other species. Mace slipped into the role of leader effortlessly. It was too damn easy. “This shipment comes through every week?”

“Every seven cycles, yes,” Syblin-245 said. “The tunnels are guarded. But we discovered this branch, created by the Hillian spider-worms, then sealed.”

“To conceal?”

“I would think so.”

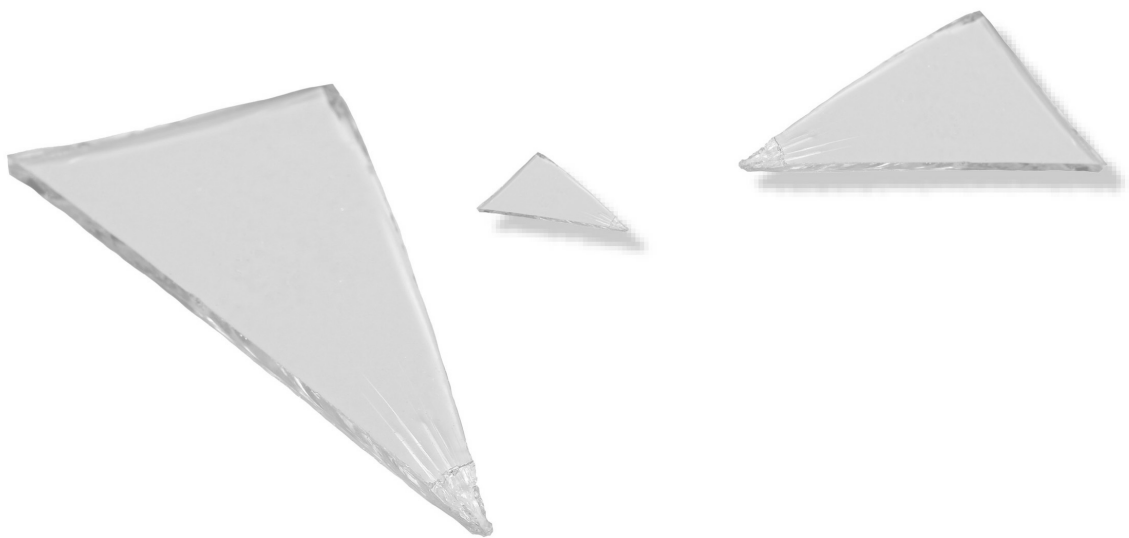
Mace paused, then said, “So you think these creatures are intelligent?”

“They are sneaky,” 245 said. “Not the same thing as intelligent, of course. So, *leader*...what is your plan?”

“This train—it runs weekly and the next is tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me sleep on this. We meet back here tomorrow morning.”



CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE GREATER GOOD

Mace needed to think. And as many philosophers had discovered over the centuries, it was good to do this in motion. Walking stimulated the blood and nourished the mind. It was when most deeply engaged in random encounters that ideas would best flow.

That's what he needed right now: ideas. Mace needed to think like a master criminal. How to rob a train without anyone knowing the train had been robbed?

One train deserved another. He took the shuttle around the entire edge of the Glass Abyss, a journey that took over an hour. He scanned every portion of it and then studied the train itself, seeing whether or not there was an idea to be garnered.

What could he do? What was the right way to approach this? He thought about smuggling people aboard or stopping the train by damaging the tracks. Perhaps he could break into Chulok's storehouse or the one on the Nexus side. Perhaps after the goods had been off-loaded, they wouldn't be as hard to steal...

Nothing felt right. Mace exited the tram at the next stop and walked inward. Homes around the hub were too standardized—too interested in their wealth and showing off to their neighbors. He was looking for something else.

Mace sought inspiration among those most connected to life itself, and that meant those who still struggled to provide for their families. Here below the surface, each being had a choice: to join with the powerful and the corrupt or to carve out a life without the resources that came with criminal alliances.

Because of their decisions, the people here couldn't afford fashionable artifice. He'd watched the intricate dance in which Vin-Vin had taken such sober pleasure. Those were vestiges of the surface life, old lives long past.

As he approached the Maze, the smells and sights and sounds of the gentle people—the real people of Metagos, the ones who had been closer to the land—filled his senses. He knew he could determine the families that had been farmers, because they had found a way to farm here as well: vertical racks and ladders growing various fruit and vines that allowed them to make use of whatever space they could find between the giant crystals jutting from the ground.

There were fewer mushrooms here than on level seven, but those he saw often fruited edible spores. And faces filled with joy and anticipation as they were plucked and cooked and combined into meals.

Among the modest and makeshift homes were numerous pens in which various animals were raised for meat, eggs, milk, and other nutritive products. Some, he suspected, were sapient and understood quite well what was happening to them.

He had visited worlds in which the flesh of sapient creatures was considered a great delicacy. While that was frowned upon, there was no law to stop it out here on the Rim. He could do nothing even in an official capacity.

What I cannot change must not be dwelled upon. He was already pushing at the boundaries of how much a Jedi could interfere on a world outside of the Republic. His duty was to the Order and its role alongside the galactic government. Yet somehow Metagos had gotten under his skin...

Mace walked on.

Up ahead, lively music filled the air, and Maze dwellers were dancing in a spontaneous, informal manner. Mating patterns were more explicit. The gyrations of hips and antennae and the mingling of musks in the air were intoxicating and perhaps even a little dangerous.

That was not an avenue nurturing to a Jedi's studied calm.

Near this open-air dance hall was a line of citizens holding various forms of produce or roughly crafted goods. Curious, he watched as one at a time they were admitted into an office shanty emblazoned with the sign LIGHT OF RENEWAL FREE CLINIC. He peered through the window and saw Woolif and a few medical droids examining, poking, and prodding the entrants. He smiled

at the sight of flightless avians scurrying about tending to the needs of the impoverished. The Sisters of the Light, no doubt. They ran the orphanages, if street talk proved accurate.

Mace was pleased by the sharing of resources among those who seemed to have so little. And he understood better now why he saw Woolif in varied locations, from the richest to the poorest. This strange, friendly little being earned money in one location to buy medications to serve another. He waited until a break in the flow presented itself and Woolif looked over to the window and saw him. He fluttered over, his colorful wings beating like those of a Ventrillian hummingsnork.

“Hello, Woolif,” Mace said. “What brings you here?”

“Service,” he replied. “That is what I was made for.”

“But you’re not a droid.”

“No, I’m not a droid, sir. But we all have a gift. The secret of life is to find the gift you were given and do all you can to perfect it. If you are lucky, that gift will also be something that is of use to others. If so, then the thing that is your bliss will also support you and benefit your tribe.”

Mace smiled. What a delightful being! “I agree completely. And your ultimate intent?”

“The greatest good, for the greatest number,” he said without hesitation. “Would you care to come with me on my rounds? There are some people I need to serve.”

“I would be honored. Do you need a bodyguard? The Maze seems a little tough.”

Woolif sniffed. “No one harms me,” said the little doctor. “Everyone knows who I am.”

“Verify something for me,” Mace asked. “You serve the high and mighty to buy medicines for the low and needy.”

Woolif chuckled. “That depends upon definitions.” He paused, as if weighing the wisdom of further speech. “Well, I know some of your friends, so I suppose I can say this. Some medical procedures require anesthetics. And when people are under anesthetic, there are times when they don’t

realize what they're saying. Or missing. And they are so happy to have been healed that they forget to check their wallets or remember their words."

"Information can be a valuable commodity," Mace said.

"It buys medicine almost every day," the flying doctor said.

Mace laughed heartily. Steal from the top, give to the bottom. "You are an interesting butterfly indeed."

"Oh, I've been this way for a long time," Woolif said. "I was a mere larva when I first decided to walk the medical path. My clan was happy for me. They sent me to medical school, and I served my apprenticeship on some of the toughest planets in the galaxy. I served the slaves there as well as the masters."

"Is that your way?"

"Yes. It is a simple philosophy: that life is sacred. I have no religion. I don't worship anything. I simply do all I can for life. That is honorable. And in harmony with the medical code."

"All people should have such formal and worthy ethics," Mace said.

For a moment, Mace had the sense that Woolif was going to say, "Just as Jedi do." But although the Ruurian glanced at him, Woolif remained silent. Mace's instinct told him that KinShan might have said something to this little creature, which implied a level of trust that pleased him. It was important to clarify your alliances. Woolif had been discreet enough not to speak it aloud, and if Mace was correct, that was an even higher recommendation.

"It was not always easy," Woolif said. "I had a difficult time keeping up with the others in my class."

"Why is that?"

"Well. I served my apprenticeship as a larva. As you well know, there are ways that larvae do not become chroma-wings. Rather, larvae die so that chroma-wings can be born."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Hmmm. Let me think about how to put it. It's almost as if I was born with two beings inside me, one a larva, the other a chroma-wing. The larva was born first; that was the one educated in medical school on Alderaan. But

then when it came time for me to spin myself a cocoon and come out the other side, that larva's body was liquefied to feed the chroma-wing."

Mace stopped dead. He had never heard such a thing! "Really? Are you saying that the larva died—"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying."

Mace was confused. "Well...how could the education that you got as a larva map over to the chroma-wing? If you died, how did the chroma-wing inherit your memories?"

Woolif laughed. "And now you understand why I had the augmentation before I went into the cocoon. It allowed me to maintain the memories that I earned as a larva even after I sprouted wings."

"Wouldn't it have been more conservative or efficient to simply postpone your education until you became a chroma-wing?"

"Well, perhaps it would, but then I would have missed the years of service. As I said, in my clan, it is service that is most highly prized."

The galaxy was filled with so many wonders! How could anyone ever be bored? "So interesting," Mace said. "So the things that you learned as a larva, you don't remember as an adult, unless you are augmented." He thought about that. Somehow, it commingled with something that was happening in the back of his mind.

This was why he loved long walks. Not just for the motion, but also for the interactions that randomly occurred along the way. Sometimes, things happened that reminded him of his dreams. Now that Woolif had said this, Mace realized that he'd had a dream the previous restless night. Something about his childhood? Something that he had learned in childhood? He shook his head. Dammit, it was so close...

"Are you all right?" Woolif asked.

"Yes," Mace said. "Last night I had a troubling dream. After speaking to you, I suspect I was remembering something that happened when I was a larva."

Woolif smiled at that. "Well. If you ever need to talk, you know where to find me. This is my destination."

The little doctor nodded and flew up a shadowed stairway on a two-level building.

Mace decided not to follow. Children were playing in a makeshift space covered with dried mushroom chips. There were climbing bars and swings and hoops where they jumped and challenged one another with spontaneous games of skill, strength, and agility. Adults supervised, keeping them safe and playing a game with them. This reminded him of Hillians more than Syblins. Adults were crawling on all fours in the chip pit. Children rode their backs, jumping on and off, laughing. He laughed with them.

This was life, close to the way folk would live even if they hadn't been chased underground. No matter where they resided, these people would have been raising their children, playing with their children, caring for them.

This was natural and normal, and this was the world that he wanted to give back to them. Mace felt something a little hollow about that dream last night. Perhaps.

What had it been?

Whatever it was, it made him feel just a little sad and a little lonely. He left to return to his solitary rented room.

—

AS SOON AS Mace opened the door, he locked it behind him. Then, after stripping off his cloak, he began to exercise. He'd only exercised the first night on Metagos. Since then, poor sleep had made his ordinary calisthenics spotty. He hadn't really thought about that, and only now really focused on the omission.

Strange. He was getting out of balance. Something here on Metagos was deeply troubling, and he couldn't quite determine what.

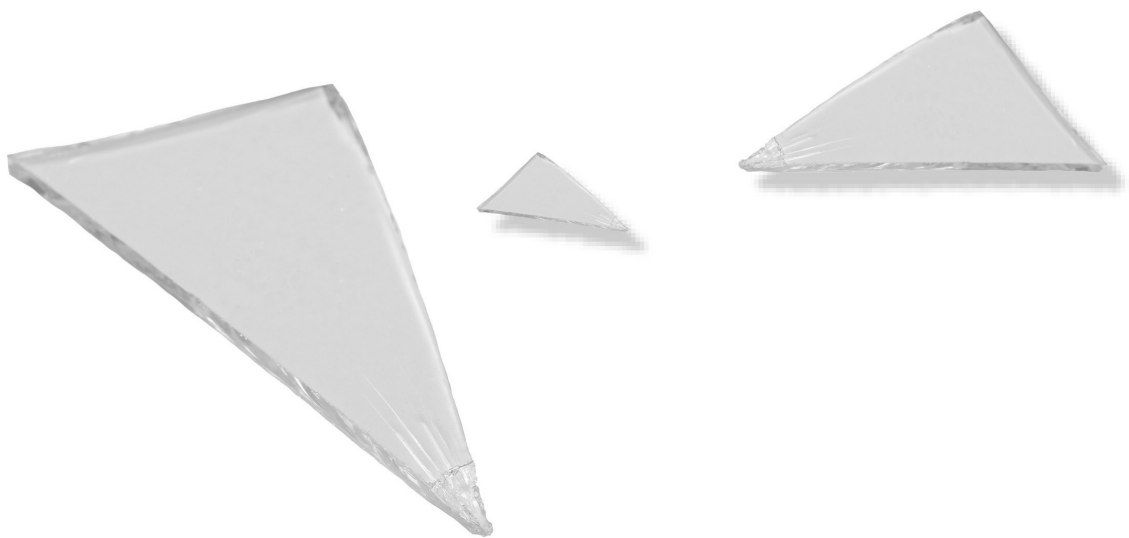
The familiar patterns of Vaapad were a comfort to him. He explored various lightsaber and empty-hand forms, even the Jax Vaapad static-position combat form that he had created for bodyguard work and had never shown to anyone. When his muscular body was slick with sweat, he took a sponge bath, then meditated and slipped beneath the covers for sleep.

AGAIN MACE'S SLEEP that night was troubled.

He tossed and turned, waking several times as if sleep were a very thin sheet of ice over a boiling lake. He kept falling through the ice and scalding himself, then rolled over to go back to sleep. This repeated several times, but in between those times, he dreamed in snatches of images and sensations. Because he demanded it of himself, he remembered more of those dreams. One of them involved seeing little children and Hillians crawling in a circle. The stronger ones helped the weaker, knowing that anyone who did not or could not crawl would die.

That was life. It was family. Tribe.

But he also thought about the children riding their parents' backs. And the train carrying the precious Glassbane underground to Nexus. Mace balanced on that thin edge between waking and sleeping. Sometime just before dawn, just before the artificial lights went on and the cavern welcomed its inhabitants to the synthetic sunrise, he woke and sat straight up, suddenly knowing precisely what he needed to do.



CHAPTER TWENTY

THE HEIST

When Mace entered Sybil's chamber the next day, his chosen minions were lounging about in various cynical and relaxed positions, pretending to ignore him.

"*Wake up!*" he screamed, and they snapped to attention. "Chulok purchased the goods. If they know that they were stolen, it will cast suspicion on your mother. But if they believe their partners in the other city—Nexus, was it?—cheated them, *that* will disturb their alliance."

"How do we get them to believe that?" 245 asked.

"We have to dilute the cargo without stopping the train."

"How?" 245 asked.

"Carefully. Look."

The conference room's central table displayed a map. The territory between New Xaxxis and its suburb Nexus and the serpentine path of the underground train were well detailed. "It will slow down around the curve *here*, then slow down again *here*. That's the only place we can get on or off. And that is an absolute. Every last one of us has to be off. Then we have to backtrack through the tunnels, so our rides need to be waiting for us."

"My siblings will be there."

"They'd better be. And you'd better get ready. Let's do this," Mace said.

—

THEIR LITTLE MINING car rattled through the depths. Mace was startled to see that the droid pilot was the same one that had guided him and KinShan just days ago, and for a moment, he felt a flash of anxiety. Then he realized it was merely a similar model and relaxed.

"Your destination, sirs?" the droid said.

Syblin-245 ignored pleasantries. "Just follow this chip." He plugged it in.

“Yes, sirs,” the mining droid said courteously. “Let me introduce myself. My name is—”

“Nobody asked you,” the Syblin said.

The droid shook its head and whispered, “Well, I never!” Then it bent to its task.

The little car zipped through the tubes, floating, moving more and more rapidly as they built up momentum. Mace noticed that the rock walls were zipping past at increasing speed. All was darkness except for the headlights on the mining car, which were continually adjusted by the mining droid.

He noticed that the tubes varied. Some were lava tubes that had been created by the flow of magma from some underground volcanic activity. Others had apparently been caused by erosion, the flow of water through the ground. Some may well have been built by machinery. Scratches in the walls suggested the use of pickaxes or some great mining apparatus in either ancient or modern times. Droids, perhaps, or even people. People seeking treasure? Or perhaps trying to escape?

Scorch marks and melt suggested massive energy discharge. Was the entire planet honeycombed in such a fashion, all these branching mazes running off in all directions into the darkness?

Echoes of their passage were loud, and he noticed that the Syblins had stuffed wax into their ears, as if the sounds were more painful to them.

Mace’s mind stored up every sensation and visual memory.

Lava tubes. Erosion. Digging/melting by heat. Signs of some bioexudate, as if living creatures of some kind had chewed their way through the glazed rock.

Mace wondered about the size of whatever creature had eaten its way through here. Larger versions of his companions? They were a motley crew indeed. He noticed, not for the first time, that the rows of Syblin limbs served as both arms and legs. The plump sectioned bodies, the faceted eyes, the mandibles...flexible in youth and then growing harder with age? That meant the young were more expressive. But what of the queen? Behind her curtain, he had the impression of considerable animation. Was that a false notion?

Mace had to learn how to read all these phenomena in a very short period of time. Failure could very conceivably cost him his life, and he was not prepared to die without completing his mission. Noting the dismissive body language of the Syblins toward their hirelings, he intuited that his non-Syblin companions had been chosen as cannon fodder: If anybody died, it was to be one of them. In that way, any civilian investigators would have a hard time tracing the activity back to Sybil. That was smart. He did, of course, wonder if he was one of those considered expendable.

Somehow he didn't think so. But there was always a possibility that jealousy or an error would leave him with a blaster bolt in the back of his head. So he needed to be very, very careful as they went.

The walls were scored with various markings. Passing blurs revealed themselves to be graffiti—different statements miners had made over the years to announce their passing or fill their time. Basically rough equivalents of BOLLATA MEEP WAS HERE.

Eventually, the darkness began to give way, and something appeared up ahead: a light moving and waving.

The mining droid decelerated.

"Slow down," said the lead Syblin.

"Yes, sir," the mining droid said. Mace got the sense that its dignity had been injured by their lack of interest in its name.

The mining car came to a stop. The Syblins hopped out swiftly, but Mace hung back. "So," he asked the droid, "what is your name?"

It brightened immediately. "Why, Ex Four Nine One Two, sir."

"Well, you can call me Solver," Mace said.

"Solver. Yes, sir. It's been a pleasure to transport you." The mining droid backed up out of the tunnel and was gone.

—

SYBIL'S CHILDREN AND their hirelings climbed the tunnel walls and attached themselves to the ceiling with rope and chain, swaying like ripened fruit as they awaited the cargo train. Then it came *howling* around the corner. As

Mace dangled, he glimpsed living pilots in the engine car, but the headlights were aimed at the rails ahead and didn't betray the raiders crouching in darkness at the top of the tunnel.

They dropped. Most of their hooks dug deep into the roof of the sectioned train. One of the raiders screamed and fell under the wheels. Another slammed into rock and was gone.

"Hold tight!" Wind whipped through their hair and across Mace's scalp.

"Which car?" 245 asked.

"Count six back."

They broke into a car, which was loaded with white sacks.

"Each is fifty kilograms," 245 said.

"Just take two scoops of Glassbane from as many sacks as possible. Remember, we want it to look as if Chulok is trying to cheat them."

The crew opened each bag, removed a couple of scoops, and then sealed the bags again, putting the Glassbane in expanding sacks tucked into their belt pouches. When full, the bags were handed up to those on the top, who dropped them over the side onto the track.

"We're almost there," Mace said. "Hurry!"

"Just a few more bags," 245 said.

"Leave *now*!"

"My mother would want—"

"Your mother knew you would get greedy. This is enough. And if they catch us, it's all for nothing."

"I don't like you, offworlder," the Syblin said. He sniffed. "You don't smell right."

"I'll change my cologne. Now *do it*."

They climbed up. As they reached the curve, a Colicoid engineer came clambering up. Syblin-245 prepared to drive a spike into the base of the engineer's skull, but Mace stayed his hand.

"No death."

Mace gave his staff a swift swing, and the Colicoid's grip slipped. Mace grabbed him before he could tumble from the moving train, leaving him unconscious but alive.

“You are soft,” 245 scoffed.

“Again...a fatality suggests a different scenario. And invites escalation.”

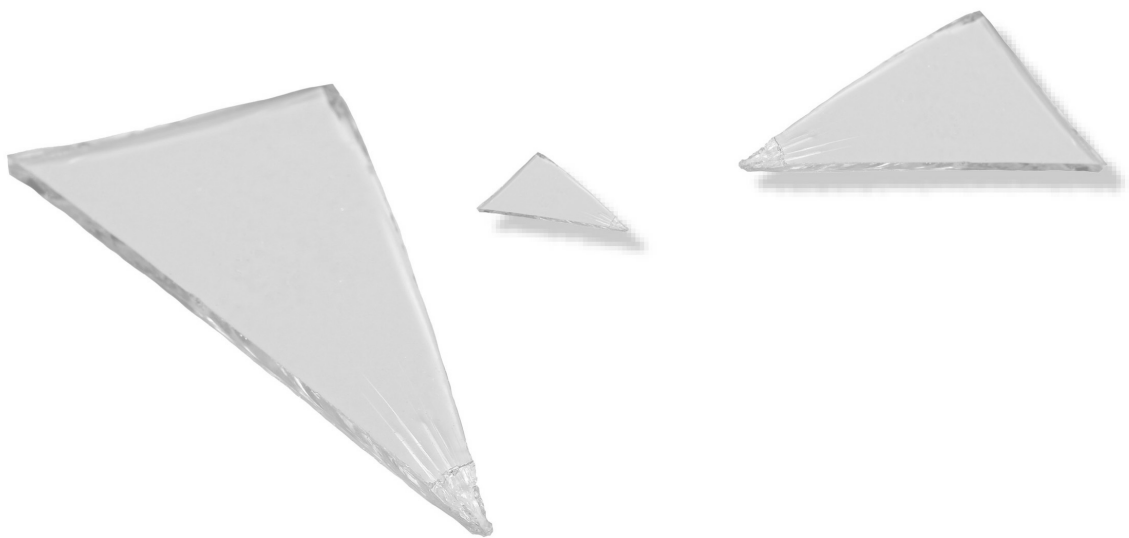
“Isn’t that good?”

“Not if it backfires. We want dissension, not suspicion leading to discovery and a war.”

When the train slowed for a curve, the raiders sealed up and jumped free. Some landed badly.

They steadied themselves and flashed a light. Several lightweight motorized carts appeared from shadowed side tunnels. They set them on the hovertrack one section at a time, a mini train, and headed back the way they came, picking up bags with glowing tags as they went.

Even Mace was laughing.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MAYA ON THE TOWN

Her name was Maya-12, and she walked the mean streets of New Xaxxis. She wasn't built here, but if beings like her could die, she reckoned she'd certainly die here. She could feel it.

Every month, the hot springs boiled over, enough steam to collect as fog and create clouds through which the flying tourists soared. Sometimes it rained. The Glass Abyss possessed what she'd heard called a microclimate. That suited her. She liked rain. It washed away memories.

Not hers, of course. Her memories changed only when someone swapped her chips. But for organics—everyone seemed to be a little nicer when it rained. Wives were more content with their husbands, husbands more content with their wives, and neither preferred blasters to the bedroom. A better world.

She approached her favorite hangout, the Wheelhouse.

"Raining out," Vin-Vin said. "Drier in here."

"I like the rain. When the streets are clean, people seem less likely to cut throats."

The bartender rolled his reptilian eyestalks. Vin-Vin, people called him. That was a long story there. Another time. He said, "Detective mode? My brother and sssister used to love those vidsss."

"You've never talked about them," Maya said.

He looked at her curiously. "Are you on *asssignment*? Detective chip?"

"If I were, I wouldn't tell you. And I wouldn't remember any details once I swapped that chip out."

—

THE XAXXIS AXIS band was just setting up, and Maya-12 found her "sisters" at a back table relaxing and awaiting their set.

“You’ve been busy,” Maya-8 said.

“Very,” Maya-12 said.

“Can you discuss it?”

“Only with you,” she said, and the three touched hands. Linked, there was no need for spoken conversation.

My sisters, I think the one we’ve awaited has come.

This Solver? Is he your customer?

Yes. And he serves the Sa’ad.

Maya-14 was dubious. *I thought he worked for Chulok. I also heard he entered Sybil’s lair. He is not to be trusted, I think.*

If KinShan vouches for him, that’s good enough for me, Maya-12 thought.

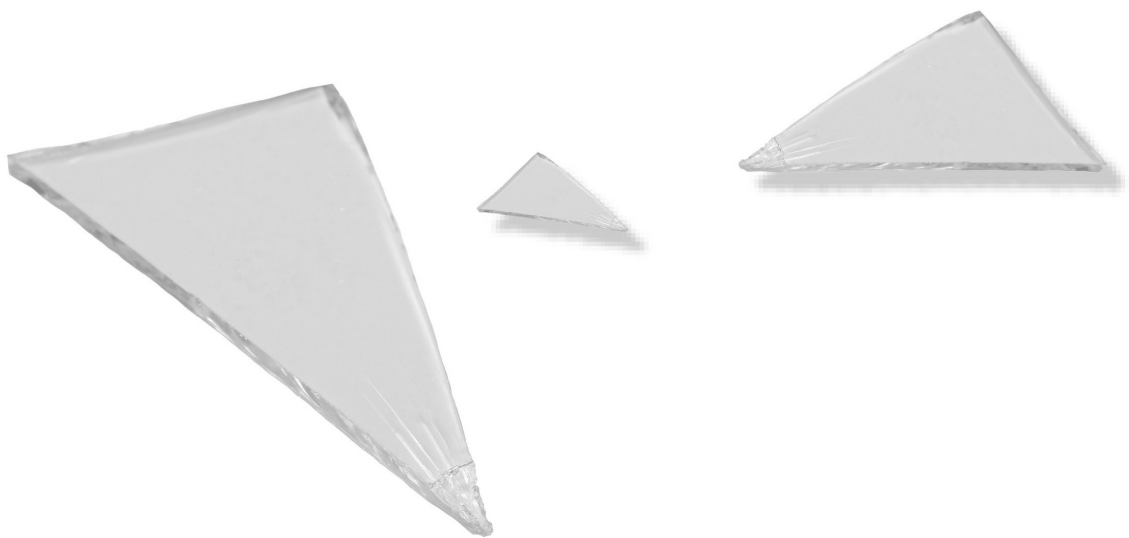
How can we help you?

Keep your eyes open. If you see strangely discounted silk or poorly cured silk, let me know. Someone has kidnapped Hillians.

Her sisters leaned in, and their mutual grip would have turned flesh and bone to paste.

We will, sister.

Then Tekkis, their long-snouted Kubaz band leader, summoned them to the stage.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE OTHER POSSIBILITY

The communications center had been buzzing all morning. Something had happened to a transport train. A crewmember had investigated a broken seal and fallen from the transport; he was currently in a medcenter. And reports in Nexus suggested that the load was, to put it diplomatically, light.

Mignon Fat, the human mayor of New Xaxxis and its suburbs, was apoplectic with rage and barely skirted the edge of direct accusation. Mignon supposedly oversaw civil concerns and structural maintenance, but he actually maintained only a tenuous grip on power by accepting bribes and kickbacks from the planet's criminal elements. He spent most of his time lounging among the mansions of the Crystal Empire—New Xaxxis's wealthiest neighborhood.

Chulok, to their credit, handled the call personally, and so far they had been the very soul of reason. "Light by over a hundred kilos?" they said to the mayor.

"Yes. And not the first time."

"But it will be the last. I will see to it. The money will be subtracted from your next payment."

"There may not *be* a next payment if this happens again. One of my men was wounded trying to stop the thieves. This is a problem on your end, Chulok. Fix it."

The holo faded out.

"What has happened, my lords?" WRM-2456 asked.

"I am uncertain," Chulok said.

Odd, WRM-2456 thought. He had rarely seen his patrons in any state besides cold confidence. And why had they tolerated rudeness from an underling?

Chulok said, "Bring me the shipping chief."

WRM-2456 bowed. "He is already here."

A door slid open and the little Mon Calamari generally just called the shipping chief entered. "Yes, Thane?" the amphibian asked.

"I would suggest you avert your eyes," WRM-2456 whispered.

The creature looked slightly downward, his goggle eyes lidded. "Yes, Thane?"

"You personally supervised the packing of the train?" Chulok asked.

"Yes, sir, as you requested," the shipping chief said.

"And the loading of the Glassbane into the containers?"

"Yes, sir."

Chulok came closer. The shipping chief kept his eyes down. "Then how do you explain the light load?"

Four hands rested on the creature's two shoulders. The threat was unspoken.

"I can think of only two explanations," the shipping chief said.

"I eagerly await your thoughts."

A sudden sour aroma in the air suggested the shipping chief had soiled himself. Chulok's smile suggested delight.

"One is that on the other end, something happened with the measurements. Perhaps their equipment is malfunctioning...or Mignon's employees...pocketed the difference and lied to him."

"Hmmm. And the other?"

"Sir, I hesitate to say."

"Do say. Please."

"That Mignon Fat is lying to you."

Chu and Lok both smiled again. "I have known Mayor Mignon far longer than I've known you. You suggest such a thing?"

"Only because you ordered me to speak."

They seemed amused. "Hmmm. There is another possibility, of course."

The shipping chief trembled so severely that it seemed he might pass out.

"Would you like to hear this other possibility?"

"Yes, sirs," the shipping chief said.

“That someone has managed to steal our goods in transit, leaving almost no trace. But this is absurd, yes?” They approached more closely. “Is this absurd?”

“Sir...I could not suggest such a thing.”

“And why not?”

The shipping chief thought a long time. “Because there is only one group with the resources and will. The only problem is that they have never demonstrated such a level of expertise.”

Chulok’s four hands, so close to the shipping chief’s throat, pulled away.

“And that answer has saved your life,” Lok whispered.

“Sir?” the shipping chief said.

“I gave you a chance to blame Sybil, to suggest she has broken our truce. But you did not take it. You are correct: The Syblins have the resources and perhaps the will. But not the capacity. Unless...” They sniffed the air. “What of the Hutts? Scharsa the Hutt has visited our satellites without the courtesy of asking my permission. We know the Hutts are expanding into the Outer Rim. This theft required the kind of planning for which they are notorious...” Each head seemed to wander into separate musings. Then Chu shook his head, and Lok seemed to agree.

“Sir?” WRM-2456 said, sensing his masters’ question before they spoke.

“Worm. Any whispers from Sybil’s camp?”

“None of her children will talk, sir. But...”

“But?”

“There is...a deeper silence than that to which I am accustomed. And in the absence of braggadocio, in the absence of even implying they had something to do with it, I see a problem.”

“As do I,” Chulok said. “Call the Solver. We may have use of him.”

—

AS SOON AS Mace entered the Wheelhouse, he heard a strange piping music coming from the back. There, Xaxis Axis was playing instruments that seemed to have been adapted from some aquatic kingdom. With an almost

majestic formality, Maya-8 and Maya-14 writhed to the beat. It was a dance he'd not seen, a rhythm of motion, freezing for several beats and then writhing again.

Mace was once more struck with the fact that there were so many different kinds of citizens here. Few of them seemed to be related to the golden Sa'ad people, perhaps one of the original species on Metagos.

But he could see the influence of the thousands of different criminal species that had fled here, finding that, in the underground, making a living by smuggling or other means was a perfectly acceptable way to make a living.

He wondered whether or not the surface dwellers now regretted allowing the underground to function as long as it had. They'd allowed the criminals to build a world that then turned against them in their time of need.

Vin-Vin worked the bar while serving droids took orders and ferried drinks to the tables. The air was thick with the aromas of cooking meat and the musks of a dozen different species. Mace recognized both mating and fighting musks from several species and figured that somebody was going to either be damaged or have a very, very good evening indeed.

Then Maya-12 glided up to the chair next to him and asked, "What troubles you?"

"A friend of mine has a saying: 'Pretend not to be that which you are not, lest the pretense become the reality.' "

"He talks funny."

"He speaks wisely."

They seemed poised on the brink of another conversation. A deeper, more perilous one.

Maya-12 asked, "Are you pretending to be something?"

"You ask a lot of questions. I think perhaps it is time for me to ask a few."

"I have no secrets."

"I doubt that. Everyone has secrets. Who are you, really?"

"I'm whatever you need. A friend, teacher, bodyguard, companion. Do you have a lover, far away? I can be them. Or perhaps one you lost—"

“No. You’re fine as you are. Better than most. I’d just like you to be... yourself.”

“You are an odd one.”

“But the question is, is this life you live what you want?”

She regarded him as if he were a specimen in a test tube. “In this life, we don’t do what we want. We do what we must.”

Mace paused to consider. “You are everything to everyone—but yourself. What do you want in the world?”

“You are an odd one,” she repeated. “I would wish to be a silk merchant.”

“Why?”

“The Sa’ad are the best people on this planet. I would like to be like them.”

“Then why aren’t you?”

Maya considered. “I have no credit. No connections or introductions. I came here with my owner and worked my way free.”

“Who was your owner?”

“Mayor Mignon Fat. One of Chulok’s puppets. His family was kidnapped by Sybil’s children. A revenge thing, and they were going to be killed. Obscenely. My owner promised that if I could find them and bring them back, he would free me. I did. He kept his word.”

Damn good for her.

“And if you did have credit? If you did have an introduction?”

“I would make and sell beautiful things.”

“Of silk.”

“Yes. Of silk.”

“If you serve me well, I may be able to help you.”

Maya thought carefully, her shape fluctuating slightly as she did. She said, “I have learned things.”

“You hear things I do not hear. See things I do not see. I am not surprised. Please share.”

She lowered her voice. “You are not on either side.”

“No.”

“You are no mere assassin.”

“No,” he said with a bitter edge to his voice. “But I’m starting to think I’d have been good at that.”

“I watched you on the bridge. Your movements were not unfamiliar. But I think it is unsafe to say more, even in this place.”

She was familiar with hundreds of combat forms...enough to recognize Jedi arts? It was possible. And her restraint was admirable. “I believe you observe keenly. What of my request?”

“I have carefully made queries in the right quarters. And I have another interview with KinShan scheduled. I think she knows more than she thinks she does. I’m very good at interpreting what is unsaid. I like it.”

“We should all do what pleases our hearts. What is closest to our spirits.”

“You are a strange man.”

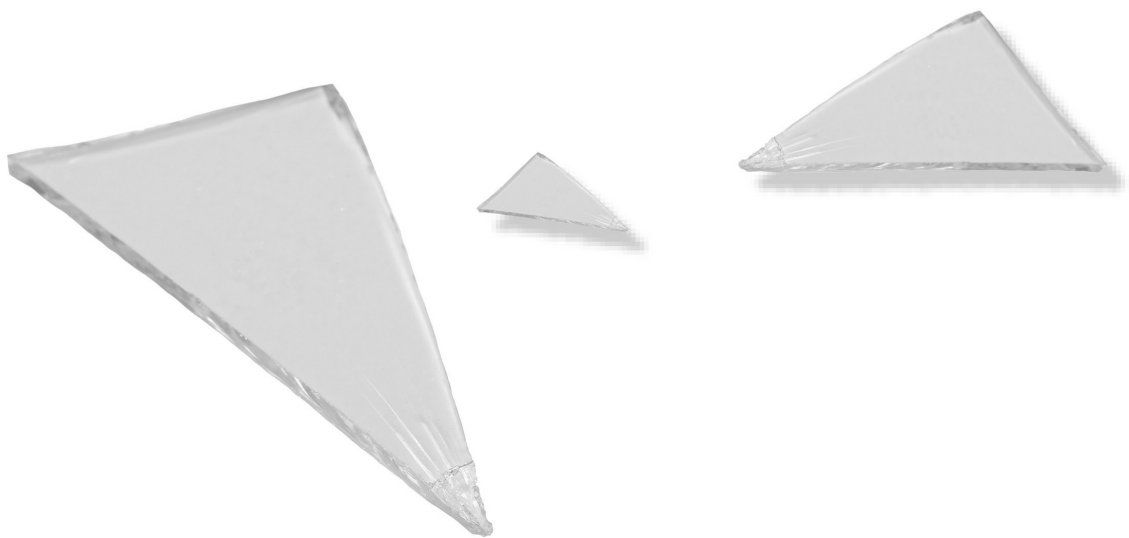
“A strange man can make a good friend.”

—

THAT EVENING IN the Maze, Mace again performed his nightly ablutions and exercises. He had not done them in the Floating Palace, as it seemed there were eyes upon him. He checked his lightsaber, hidden within his staff.

“I will have need of you, old friend,” he said gravely. “I can feel it.”

He slept. And dreamed.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE DREAM

The deeply forested valley was a hidden gem of nature, a sanctuary nestled between towering mountain peaks. As Mace entered this secluded haven, a profound sense of tranquility washed over him, and the outside world faded away. The air was thick with the fragrance of moss-covered trees and the sweet perfume of wildflowers.

Ancient conifers, their trunks wrapped in vibrant green ivy, created a natural canopy overhead. Sunlight filtering through the dense foliage cast a dappled glow on the forest floor below. The play of light and shadow added a magical quality to the surroundings, creating a mesmerizing dance of patterns on the carpet of fallen leaves.

A brook babbled its way through the valley, its lucid waters reflecting the emerald hues of the surrounding foliage. It provided a soothing background murmur, harmonizing with the symphony of birdsong and rustling leaves.

And through this verdant paradise wandered a boy named Mace.

The valley was home to diverse wildlife, from elusive leaf eaters to fist-sized lizards hunting insects. The boy's alert perception was rewarded by occasional glimpses of a brightly colored bird.

The undergrowth was a lush and varied landscape, with ferns, wildflowers, and delicate mushrooms carpeting the forest floor. Giant ferns unfurled their feathery fronds in shaded corners, creating pockets of coolness. Moss-covered rocks and fallen logs tumbled together as nature's sculptures, adding to the valley's organic beauty.

As Mace explored more deeply, the air became infused with a refreshing coolness, and the scent of pine grew more pronounced. Towering evergreens stood like sentinels, their branches reaching skyward, providing a contrast with the shifting mosaic of the deciduous trees during the changing seasons.

The deeply forested valley was a living, breathing ecosystem, a sanctuary where time seemed to slow down, allowing young Mace to reconnect with the untamed beauty of the natural world. It was a place where the symphony of nature played out in every rustle of leaves, every chirp of a bird, and every ripple of the clear stream—a testament to the enduring majesty of untouched wilderness.

He came finally to a clearing where there were three people: a man, a woman, and a small child. The woman kissed the baby and laid him on a blanket. The man took her hand and led her away, turning her head when she tried to look back at the child, who cried for his mommy and daddy and tried to crawl after them.

Mace knew that child. And he knew that man and that woman—he was certain of it.

And that certainty horrified him.

MACE WINDU WOKE sweating. “What in the world...?” The dream was a lie. His parents had not given him up—they had died protecting him.

That is what you were told, a voice said, and he shivered. What the hell? From whence had *that* thought sprung? That voice in his head? And he remembered something he’d been told when he was nearing adolescence in the Jedi Temple.

You are not the voices in your head, T’ra Saa had said. *You are the one listening to the voices.*

He rolled over and returned to sleep.

THE SAME FOREST. *The same parents. Only this time, they were arguing. The woman screamed, and the man beat her down with his fists. When she lay on the ground, he raised a rock and...*

No. No. It was too terrible. And after he finished, he looked around for the child, howling with rage that he had crawled away to safety...

HE WOKE AGAIN. Where was this emotional filth coming from? This was not his history. He *knew* his origins. The official note in official Republic files was open to anyone with the proper clearance:

Mace Windu was born on the planet Haruun Kal in the year 7905.355 (C.R.C.). Due to his natural affinity for the Force, Windu was sent to the Jedi Order—a monastic order of protectors, sworn to defend the Galactic Republic—to learn the Jedi arts.

That was what it read. And he believed it. He always had.

But was it true?

Yes. He was certain. *That* was the truth. But these lies, this false history... what ugly, pale part of himself had birthed this? And what about Metagos, or old Xaxxis or New, had triggered it?

One more *last* time, he'd attempt sleep.

He dreamed of a mother screaming. And a child was dragged backward down a dark tunnel. Mace woke again.

This is wrong, he thought. *It wasn't like that.*

He tossed restlessly, then finally dressed and sneaked out.

MACE TRAVELED UNUSED tunnels and deserted lifts, and appeared an hour later at KinShan's dwelling just as she was stirring from slumber. She had pulled on a furry robe with a high collar. Her fine, strong legs, visible through the robe's slit, suggested a climber's body, a web of muscle and sinew flexing with every step. Freshly roused, her hair was a shoulder-length tangle. Most Sa'ad women seemed to wear their hair either shorter or in a bun, but she was

one of the few to let it fall freely. As a result it framed and accentuated her pale eyes and high cheekbones.

“KinShan?” he asked. “I would have words with you.”

“Windu. You are early.”

“I couldn’t sleep. I need to speak to you.”

She yawned. “Come. Let me brew tea.” She busied herself.

After a time, he said, “I need to speak.”

“I am listening.” She seemed very old at that moment. Ancient.

“I...had dreams.”

She cocked her head to one side. “Do Jedi not dream?”

He shook his head. “Not like this.”

She pattered about as the water heated. Oddly, she reminded him of Yoda.

She said, “And what do you make of these dreams?”

“I was selected in childhood for this path. While it is true that I was asked questions, was told to offer a commitment...there are also ways that the choice was made for me. Was I actually free to choose or was that an illusion? Some part of me must wonder.”

“I can understand your concern.”

“Jedi live in a world where energy is more real than matter. But we must also live in this world. And I wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“If I ever really made a choice or had the real freedom to say no. What would I have done if I had walked away? Who did I know, and what life could I have had? Can a child of that age even make such a choice? What did I know of the galaxy or of that path? I was old enough to say yes, but was I old enough to understand what I was agreeing to?”

“Are you sorry for your choice?” she asked.

That, of course, was the most important question, wasn’t it? “No. I’ve never been. But it would be reasonable to wonder if the path shaped me to its needs rather than totally respecting mine.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Republic needs Jedi. And in response to that need...I don’t know.”

“The needs of a child might not come first. The welfare of the galaxy is a mighty burden for a child.”

“Yes.”

“And you wonder about the parents who would give you up so easily?”

“I was orphaned. I have no memory of my parents. All I know is that they died to protect me. But the dream cast doubt upon even that.”

“You dreamed they abandoned you?”

He nodded.

“I doubt it was easy for them, no matter the circumstance.”

“Yes, but...I wonder. Or my dreams wonder. As if one part of me is attacking another.”

She nodded. “This is serious. Even if this path would have been chosen a thousand times, in a thousand lives, we always have doubts. You served the Web.”

“The Force.”

“Whatever you need to think.” She smiled at this.

Mace realized they were becoming friends—they already had private jokes.

She continued, “And the Web also nurtured you. We all have duty. Not all of us follow it or shape ourselves to it, as you have. But yes...I can sense that as strong as you are, as connected within, there is still conflict.”

“The path ahead will allow no internal conflict,” Mace said. “I cannot fight a war on two levels at once. Both internal and external. Not any more than Chulok could fight on two fronts at once.”

“I sense that this may not be *your* dream.”

“What, then?”

“It is possible for another to find you on the Web and use your own mind against you.”

He frowned. “Chulok?”

“I don’t know. I have never met them. Do you think they have such ability? If they could attack you in this way, wouldn’t they need to know who you are?”

“That is what I would ask you.”

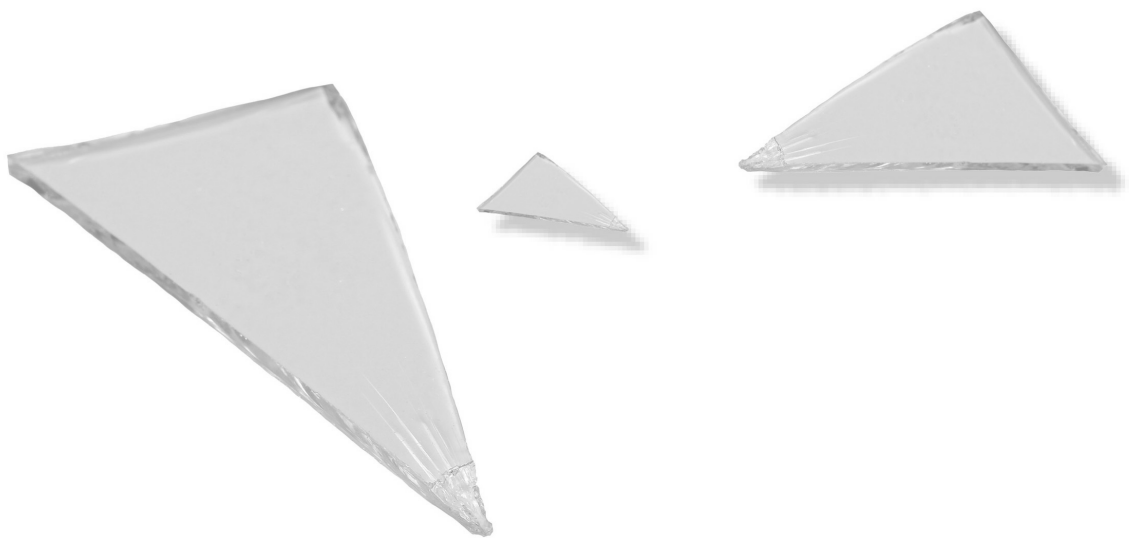
She stirred the tea and then poured. “These matters run deep. If you have not been exposed, how are you being attacked?”

“Perhaps I’m not. Not from outside, anyway.”

“I know an answer, one that might help, no matter what is happening.”

He found the place of questioning within himself. A place he was not comfortable dwelling in. “What do I do?”

“Go into the Hillian chamber. There are crystals everywhere. Find one that calls to you. Bring it to me.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE CHILDREN'S MAZE

Maya-12 hated what was derisively referred to as the Children's Maze. The entire central district of the Great Wheel was commonly called the Maze, but the core of that seemed to be where the poorest of the poor gathered. Here one found the greatest number of homeless as well as the three major orphanages, run by a benevolent order of nuns.

She could usually find any information she needed here—if she could find the right people to interrogate, blackmail, or bribe. Who would help her this time? Perhaps someone she had served on a previous occasion.

“Two Three Two, yes?”

The Syblin bared his spiky teeth in a smile. “Yes. You are Maya. Twelve, I think, from the look of you. I have seen you. You have sisters who dance in the Wheelhouse.”

“Good. I have a coin for you if you can answer some questions.”

A rapid series of nods. “I can.”

“Good. The Silk Guild carefully controls the flow of spider-worm silk.”

“Yes,” 232 said. “Some of it is handworked in the Maze. It is one of the few legal trades here.”

“Excellent. The question I have is—have there been any unexpected sources of silk? Anything that seemed...unusual?”

Syblin-232 considered. “Maybe. Could be. If there is, it's not Chulok. And not my mother. But it might be someone who works for one of them, if you know what I mean.”

Maya put down another coin. “The name?”

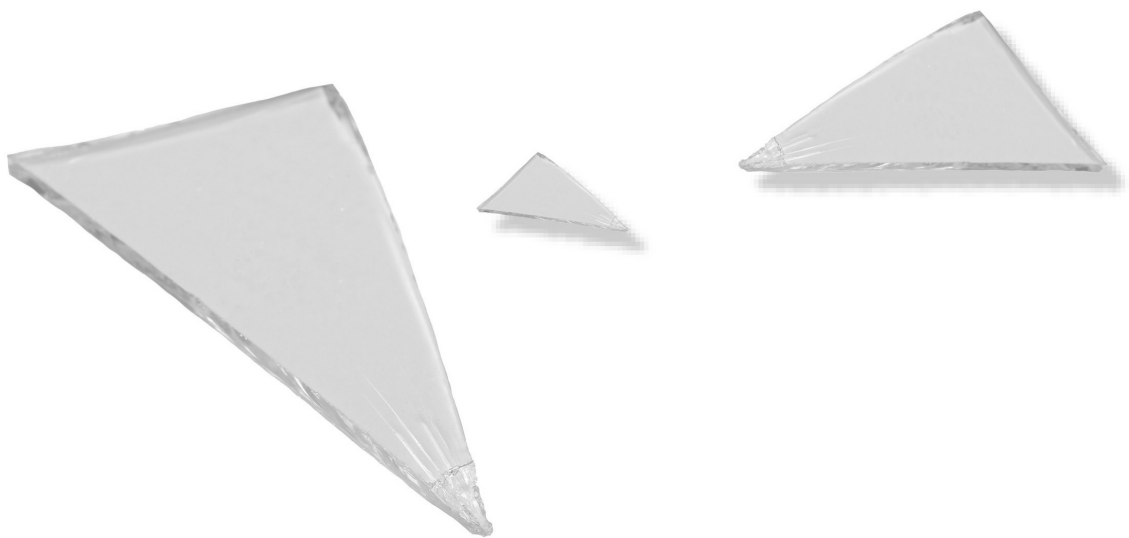
He pushed it back. “Take your coin. I've said all I'll say.”

“Would any of your brothers or sisters be involved in this?”

“Possibly. But I've said all I'll say.”

She considered it and concluded that there were questions without answers, and she needed more information. Just as a geometer can draw a complete circle from three points, a good detective gathered data until a shape emerged. A pattern. A path.

And then that good detective followed it, no matter where it might lead.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE VOICE WITHIN

Mace entered the stalactite-toothed mouth of the northern Hillian chamber, one unsullied by tourists. The great drowsy spider-worms barely noticed him. Those that did seemed to smile. One almost nodded toward a crystal set into one of the walls that reflected mushroom light. It seemed to shift colors from moment to moment, like a diamond rotating in white light. Mace regarded it and then worked it free. It was the size of two fists, clear with blue highlights the color of a varactyl's feather.

"You'll do," he whispered. "You'll do fine."

AFTER THOROUGHLY EXAMINING the crystal, KinShan said, "Very good. This will work. I need you to sit quietly and stare into the crystal. The light will change, but so will your mind. And as you gaze, you will see things."

He sat in a perfect meditative pose. The air around him shimmered.

"Listen to my voice but also to the voice within. Not the man you are but the child you were. The one who first began this path."

"I cannot see him."

"He hides from you. I think you've not truly considered that part of yourself for many years."

"It is irrelevant."

"No. It is the root of who you are. Close your eyes. Think of a safe place you loved when you were a boy. You may speak as you do."

"I was born on a forested planet called Haruun Kal. Legends say that it was originally settled by marooned Jedi. If so, that single crashed ship brought new life, life that spread across the planet in harmony with it."

"That's the history of your people. But who were *you*?"

Images and brief scenes flashed through his mind. But it was only things he had been told. No real memories, nothing against which to brace his emotions. “I was a baby. The Jedi chose me.” He searched his mind, and where he ordinarily found crystal clarity, now, on this subject...he was confused. He knew more than he had said but was having trouble accessing it.

Damn dreams.

“If you don’t have access to those memories—”

“Usually I do. This is disturbing.”

“I can help. I need you to imagine a place you felt safe as a child.”

“The Jedi Temple?”

“I see,” she said with real empathy in her voice. “This is difficult, because you aren’t certain the Jedi played fairly with you.”

“That is the disturbing thing. On any other day, I’d be certain. I would.”

“I believe you are being attacked, yes. And at a vulnerable point—your certainty of your identity. This is sophisticated. Try this: Imagine a place you *would* have felt safe at the age of...six. Imagine it.”

He thought, trying to reconnect with the child he had been so long ago. And to ask what that child might have experienced at home on Haruun Kal. Finally, an image came: that boy, sitting cross-legged on a ledge atop a mountain, looking down on the trees.

And he knew. “I—I have had this dream before. A dream of climbing the mountain and sitting by myself, looking down over the ocean. The Jedi Archives had detailed descriptions of my homeworld, and I have read it over and over, enough for it to bleed into my dreams. When the sun was just right, near sunset, between dark and light, I could picture the energy of the forest stretching out before me. I imagined bringing friends up to see the wonderful thing.”

“And they could not see it.”

“No. They could not. I was alone. But once I dreamed that one of my Jedi cohort came to the mountain with me.”

“And he could see it?”

“She could, yes.”

“She,” KinShan said. “Interesting. And this was your ‘alone’ place?”

“Within my heart, yes. It was a cure for feeling that all there was, in all directions, was forest and mountains. I dreamed of water. Yes.”

She nodded with satisfaction. “Then this is where we begin. Leave a token for your younger self. He may not come to you today. But eventually, he will. Raise your hand when you have done this.”

He paused and rearranged the images in his dream, moving them down from the mountain to the shoreline. Now he placed a gift of fruit and bread into a silver bowl and set it on the blinding-white sand at his feet.

After a pause, he raised his hand. In this place, with the disruption of his dreaming, it was harder than he expected.

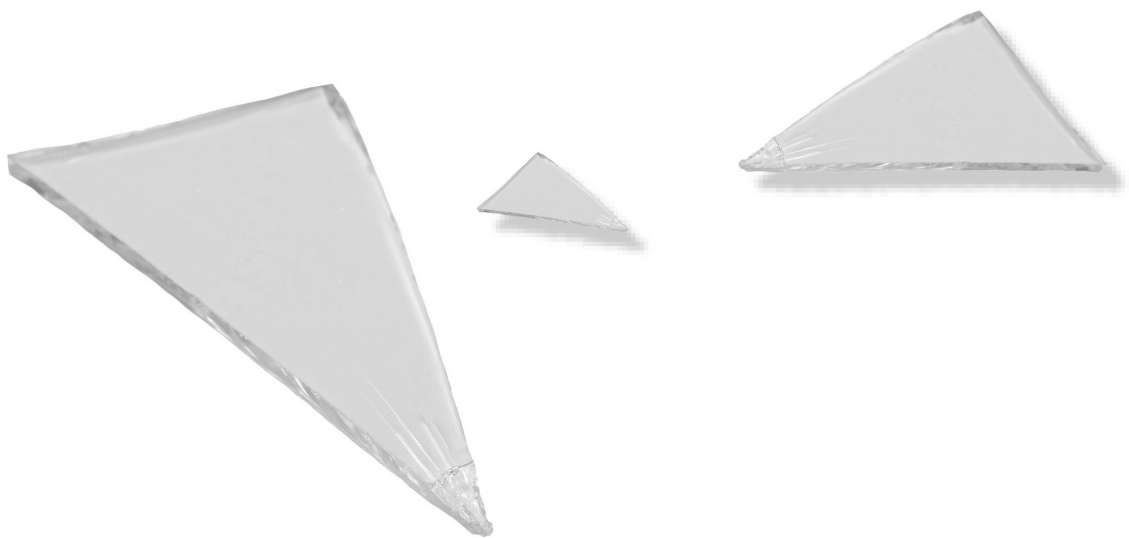
“As you have done today, so your mind will do whenever your name, real or false, is called. And you will remember this little conversation we have had...always.”

Mace breathed deeply, emerging from his trance. “That...was different.”

“Deeper?”

“No. But I went to a different place. And you’re homesteading in my head?”

“I can think of worse things,” she said.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE HAPPY PLACE

It did seem odd to Mace Windu that his “happy place” was at the edge of an ocean, as he had never visited a real ocean until his teen years. But in his dreams, he’d already taken countless visits to his home planet, to the mountains and streams and, yes, oceans. He’d imagined their blue vastness, but he’d never dipped his toe in one until he was sixteen standard years old.

These new dreams were different—he was no longer alone. KinShan was there. Sometimes silently. Sometimes standing close to him, watching the sun rise or set. Sometimes discussing life and existence.

He remembered a dream where she laughed at his speculations about why life was similar on so many different planets. She’d said, “You are so busy thinking about the ‘everything’ that you miss what is right in front of you. The secret of creation is in the small things. The smile of a newborn Hillian, the touch of an aging parent. You have traveled too far. Come back, Mace Windu.”

And now, meditating and dreaming awake, he could focus down to a single point of contact with the world: the boy he had been long ago, before he or any of his people had known of Jedi.

This time, he’d brought food and toys with him. In the distance, his eyes could just make out a child’s shimmering silhouette. It did not approach more closely. He stood and walked toward it...and the child backed away, then turned and ran.

“Damn.”

—

THE NEXT TIME he sought KinShan, she was in the southern cave system in the center of a web. It didn’t seem to have mucilage; it was ropy rather than sticky. She played with loose strands, pumping her arms to create waves of

energy, like sound or ocean waves. They flowed out and then back to her, and she caught them with perfect timing so that they flowed to and fro in a smooth rhythm.

Then she stopped, wiped sweat from her forehead, and took a whip from a slender mushroom stand. He noted that there were three other mushrooms that were her height, and atop each of them was a round crystal. She stood quietly. Thinking? Feeling? Then with a move so sudden and untelegraphed that it was much like a rock suddenly dropped into a well, the whip of braided Hillian silk lashed out once, twice, three times. The first rock fell, as did the second. But the third shattered into shards and dust.

Impressive. He wondered if she had done that just for him.

When she took a break, he said, "I need help."

"Again?"

"Don't start."

She laughed. "You must need help if you're coming to me like this. I sense that this is difficult for you."

"The nightmares never cease. Terrible ones." He sighed. "I dream of the dead. All warriors have done things. Terrible things. We hope our judgment has been good, but eventually all our justifications are stripped away and what remains is the sense that what we did was done for duty."

"And what troubles you about this?"

This was touching on an issue that deviled all soldiers with a conscience. If they took orders that led to mortal consequences, what happened if those who provided the orders were untrustworthy? "Eventually, there comes a time when you must trust those who are not fully worthy of that trust. Go *here*. Do *this*. And can we really know, really be *sure* that those who oppose us do not, from their perspective, have equal right to kill *us*? Can I say that every life I've taken was despoiled?"

"No, you cannot."

"I cannot," he agreed. "I know that if the Council, or the Galactic Senate, or the chancellor gives suggestions or orders...we act."

"Always?"

"No, but it is difficult to refuse. Time pressure is often a factor."

“So you act. And sometimes, you must kill.”

“Yes. And the ghosts of those slain came to me last night. And they asked, *Why? Why did I take their lives?*” He closed his eyes.

“And you have no answers.”

Mace shrugged. “Apparently, none good enough to stop me from screaming myself awake.”

“I heard that Jedi have great powers. Great resources.”

“I was not prepared for this. I know that someone, or something, is playing on my doubts. All people have doubts about matters that cannot be objectively defined. Cannot be held, touched. Cut with a lightsaber. Right and wrong in this context are such things. Sometimes, I must be a soldier, doing what I’m told. This is dangerous. But I don’t know how to avoid it. Can you help me?”

“There is something I might be able to use if you are open to understanding.” Her eyes seemed huge.

“What is it?”

“We call it Chan-Dree.”

“The princess?”

“Named for her, yes.”

“What is this Chan-Dree?”

“It is the Sa’ad art of dreaming. It is never taught to outsiders. But if you fight for us, it would be unfair not to share with you.”

“What must I do?”

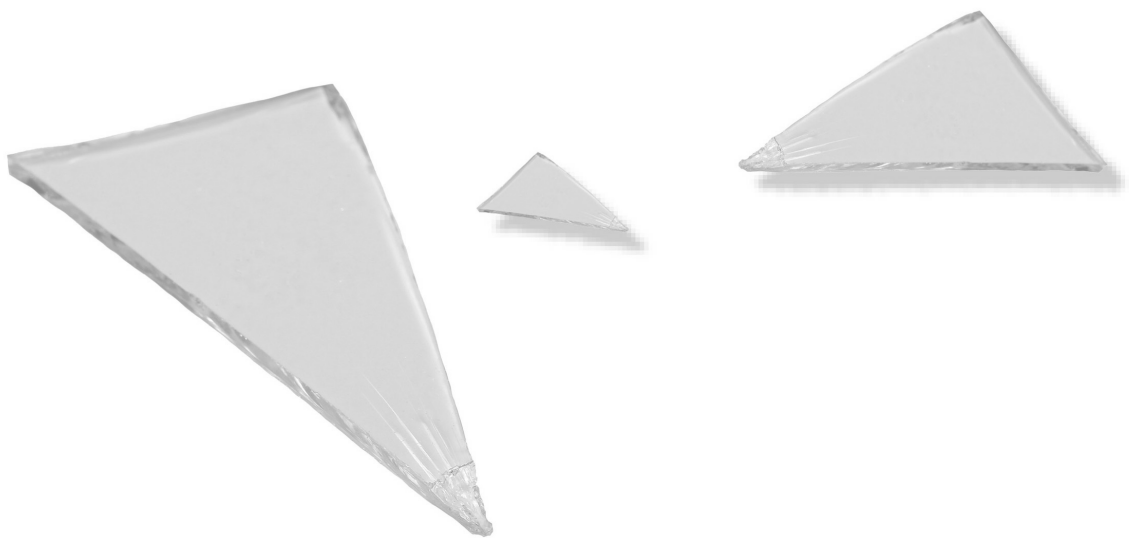
“Become an honorary Sa’ad. Join the Web.”

“This is possible?”

She smiled. “Yes, under certain special circumstances. Would you do this thing?”

He paused. The offer had been made, but something within cautioned him to consider carefully. This was a larger step than it appeared on the surface.

Before he could speak, she smiled and touched his hand. “You are not yet ready, but I think you will be. And sooner than you realize.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ARRESTING SYMMETRY

When doubt and guilt about his current actions threatened to overwhelm him, KinShan gave Mace a tour through the different levels and sections of the massive cave system. This was no mere tourism. This was familiarizing him with the battlefield to come. The place where a battle was fought was as important as the tools and combatants, and the commander who chose the proper place for conflict had great advantage. It was almost like getting to tell your opponent where to place his dejarik pieces.

The tenth level fascinated Mace. There was a key here, and he could feel it. So once again they went to where the anti-radiation drugs were harvested.

The mushroom light was so dim that Mace needed a lantern, but KinShan seemed perfectly comfortable. He now understood that she was sighted where he was blind, and vice versa. A fascinating balance.

She brought them out on a ledge ten meters above the ground.

The light of his lantern barely illuminated the scene before them, the set of vast ancient gates that stood between them and the Depth Dwellers. A gigantic set of gears had once been connected to chains thicker than a human body, but those chains no longer raised and lowered the gates, and the machinery was long disused. The gates resembled a great mouth. Today, there were perhaps a dozen workers digging in the mud and shoveling raw Glassbane into carts.

Something growled in the darkness behind the gates. KinShan's fingers brushed the whip coiled at her waist. He had wondered about the weapon. Certainly it was not used on the Hillians. The Sa'ad–Hillian connection seemed forged by love alone. But whatever lived behind the gates radiated danger. And he was sure that, from time to time, the danger escaped.

The Sa'ad would be wise to stay ready. Remembering the shattered crystal, he hazarded that they were.

“Who created these gates?” Mace asked. They were large enough to dock a medium-sized space shuttle.

“There are legends about this,” she said. “Some say they have been here forever. There is one story that they were created eight hundred years ago, but I think that is conservative. We did not build them, but we discovered...” KinShan fell suddenly silent.

She grabbed his arm and pointed: A tentacle was snaking out from behind the gates. This must be a Depth Dweller. But the guards and workers weren’t paying attention.

One Colicoid worker, focused on his next shovel-load of mud, didn’t notice until the tentacle had his ankle—and then it was too late.

His shriek of horror and dismay was ear-shattering. Another worker screamed, “Help him!”

A guard sprang to his defense, swinging her shock prod. Sparks rained from the contact. She was a human, stout and strong, with skin almost as rich as Mace’s and a shaven skull. Again, like Mace.

The tentacle quivered but did not release its prey.

But the other three guards were frightened, and they fled. This time, Mace did not wait. Maintaining his anonymity was not worth the life of an innocent. Following an instinct deeper than thought, he vaulted down, pulling his lightsaber from its hidden compartment in his staff so that it was at the ready by the time his feet touched the ground.

“*Hieee!*” Mace screamed as he struck. The stink of singed flesh filled the stagnant air.

The guard’s eyes went wide. “Jedi! He is a Jedi! I must tell Chulok—” She turned to flee—and ran right into another tentacle. She slammed her shock prod repeatedly against the purple, suckered, boneless arm, to no effect.

“Jedi! Help me!”

“So that you can expose me to Chulok?”

“No! No! I swear—” Her words became gobbling, inarticulate babbles as terror froze her mind. Inexorably, one scrabbling meter at a time, she was pulled toward the gates.

The prisoners were screaming but not helping. Who could blame them? Who would react differently?

He glanced at KinShan, who had jumped down after him. She did nothing to help, but her placid expression told him what he needed to know. His lightsaber hummed as he brought it down, severing the creature's hold.

The tentacle vanished back behind the gates. The guard lay puffing on her belly, her face strained.

This is the moment she will scream and jump up and flee to tell Chulok, Mace thought.

"You saved my life," the guard said.

"Yes. Your name?"

"Corporal Thanna Tan."

"And what will you do in return, Corporal Tan?"

She knelt. "Serve you."

"You need not serve *me*. Rather, it is your planet that is in need of service," Mace said.

Tan looked shocked for a moment. Mace suspected she had never seen someone reject power over another before.

"What must I do?" Tan asked.

"Be ready for when I call on you," Mace said. "Until then...say nothing of me, and go light with the whip."

"Yes, honored sir." She stood, a little dazed.

He noted that she remained a sober distance from the bars. This guard wouldn't make *that* mistake a second time. Hopefully, she had learned other lessons as well.

"How do we thank you?" a prisoner said.

"By saying nothing of this. Nothing of me." Mace studied their faces. He saw desperation but not the sort of deceit that would betray a potential benefactor for short-term gain.

No. They were his to command.

"You have come to save us?"

"If you are to be saved, you must save yourselves. I will help if I can. But I need you to promise silence."

“This we can do,” the prisoners said together.

—

“THAT WAS IMPRESSIVE,” KinShan said as she led him back up through unmarked tunnels. He was beginning to sense his way around, but he hoped for another dozen hours of guided tours before he really needed to fend for himself. Maps or not, this was as complex as a rassit warren.

He found himself pleased by the fact that she was impressed. Not his ego, certainly. Just thankful for the admiration of an ally. Of course.

Mace said, “Strategically, it may have been foolish.”

“Because you may have revealed yourself?”

Mace nodded. “If one of them talks, it could be tricky.” Which was an understatement almost as impressive as his actions.

“But you took the risk. The guard?”

“Thanna Tan glimpsed hell, and she was rescued from it. I don’t know what the future holds. I do know that I must act in accordance with my nature. And my nature aligns with the Force.”

“Sometimes, those who have never seen such action can be changed by its demonstration. You...are an unusual man.”

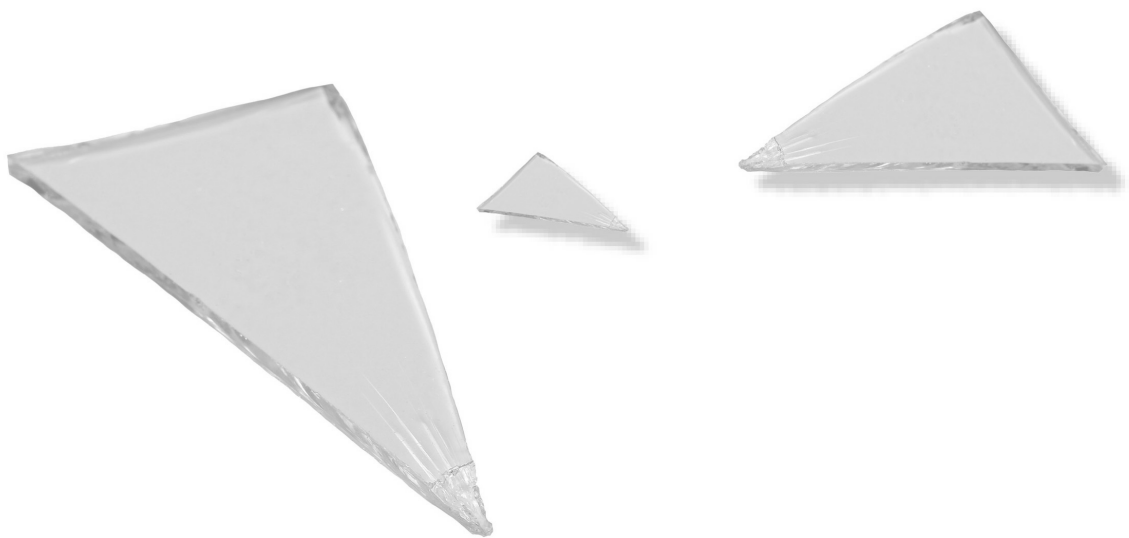
He smiled. It was good to hear that. “And you, an unusual woman. It is good to walk with you.”

She bumped against him.

“We both carry staffs.”

“Different motivations.”

She agreed. “I compensate for lack of sight. You, so that you might not be seen for who you really are. An arresting symmetry.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE WARREN

The Maze was crowded tonight, air electric with anticipation. It was charged, as if the knowledge that *something* was now different in the Great Wheel was percolating, even though details of his recent actions had not been spread.

Mace moved through that tightly pressed crowd without touching anyone, automatically slipping into gaps between them.

Then it occurred to him that a careful eye would distinguish something suspicious in such skill, and he deliberately bumped into a few folks.

He groaned as, at the edge of his peripheral vision, an insectile being on hind legs stamped her foot three times. “Offworlder!” the Syblin called.

Mace sighed. “What is your business?”

“Your life.”

Damn. This was getting tiresome. “And which number are you?”

A quick, uncomfortable face-flicker. “I’ve not earned my number yet. Call me Ex.”

“Well, Ex. Unless you want to be Ex-Alive, I suggest you leave me be.”

“You killed my brother,” she whined.

“Doesn’t mean I have to kill *you*.”

She didn’t even hear him. “If I kill you, I’ll get his number! No more talk. Defend yourself!”

The Syblin attacked empty-handed, and Mace was suddenly in a whirl of knees and elbows. Syblin joints seemed impervious. They provided stability, but in motion, a Syblin’s upper body had to commit more than was optimal for any strike or attempted throw. And that meant if Mace simply stepped on one’s feet at the right moment, he could freeze the entire body.

Excellent. Before Mace could press an advantage, though, his enemy was joined by two allies. So...multiple attackers were just fine, but using a blaster

to defend himself was foul play?

This was nonsense. Mace hurled one into the corner of a building, then stomped another's knee joint to an angle nature had never intended. The third blanched and fled.

Mace had had enough of this. He pursued.

The Children's Maze was a warren of tight alleys and shadows, like the poverty- and crime-stricken districts on a thousand other planets. Networks of makeshift caves and shanties. Hungry, hollow eyes gazing out at him. As he entered, he was attacked...by younglings flooding out of a three-story building crafted of stone, with a sign in Basic reading LIGHT OF RENEWAL ORPHANAGE.

"What in Nine Clouds is this?" he grunted. Hurting adolescents was bad enough. But younglings?

They were not all Syblins. The children, on two legs and six, swarmed at him, and he was horrified by their poverty and ferocity. These were children of multiple species, their own desperation fueled by Sybil's horrific rule.

He pulled a rug from a drying line and swatted them with it, knocking them down without harming any of them, then continued pursuit.

Finally, Mace cornered his attacker in a den. The creature's fear was palpable. There were many, many Syblins about.

Panting for breath, the Syblin attacked him one last time. He swatted her to her knees. She curled up like a pill bug, and Mace just waited, finally tapping her shell with his toe.

"Come out, come out," he singsonged.

She uncoiled. "Kill me," she said, cilia writhing rapidly around her mouth. She was still young, her wormlike feeding apparatus not yet hardened into mandibles. "I'm not afraid to die."

"So I see," Mace said. "What is this place?"

"The Warren. No more questions. Kill me!"

Damn. "You are so eager to die? Why? Aren't you all broodmates?"

The Syblin sneered. "Yes. And the strongest live. The weakest die. This is tradition."

And the others said as a group mantra, "We are the Web."

Something occurred to him, something that might represent a way out of this mess. “Who put you here?”

“The assistants move eggs here from the mother’s nest. Sometimes grubs. We are moved here to hatch or grow.”

“Take me to the nest.” He added, “Rim-runner’s oath: I swear I mean your unborn siblings no harm.”

He had heard that such an oath was never broken and it was therefore respected. But it really was impressive to see how quickly his enemy extended trust.

—

THE PLACE REFERRED to as a birthing chamber was a cave in the southwest wall, twice as large as the Sa’ad map room, and filled with eggs and crawling hatchlings. Mace was stunned by its size. The adolescent Syblins who had accompanied them seemed more interested in his reaction than in challenging him to a death duel.

“Thousands. There are thousands of you.”

“Yes,” Syblin-X said.

“But I’ve heard no number higher than three hundred.”

“Not all survive.”

That answer raised an ugly thought. “So...your mother lays thousands of eggs, then sends you here. To make your own world. Cope for yourselves. Some survive to make their way back to the nest.”

“When we are of ten years, those who survive are given numbers. Only twenty a year.”

The implications boggled him. Each generation exterminated all but a tiny fraction of siblings? “You...kill one another until there are only twenty?” A sudden wave of horror twisted his gut.

“I will win!” Syblin-X paused, suddenly uncertain. “Or...I would have. But you bested me. My life is yours.”

“Your life is not mine. But I may ask for a service.”

“I will not sacrifice honor for life.”

“By the...Web. Not everything is death and honor. I will not ask you to betray your mother. But a time may come. And you will listen and remember that I spared your life. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Syblin-X said.

He had to remind himself to keep track of all his new allies. If he continued in this fashion, by the time the hostilities began, he would have an army.

—

THAT NIGHT, THE nightmares came even more powerfully. The continuing horrid visions plagued him, playing on his love for lost parents, regret for leaving his home planet, and fears for the Republic. His struggles made restful sleep impossible. This wasn't him, but he couldn't seem to climb out of the emotional pit.

He could leave Metagos, of course, but what if this fear followed him? No, he had to solve his problem here, in this place. His path as a Jedi had brought him many challenges, but none had been stranger or more dangerous than this one. He had to win or die.

That night he returned to the Floating Palace for slumber, hoping that the stillness of the palace would also quiet his mind.

Yet again, he dreamed...

Once again, he stood at the shore of a vast and turbulent ocean. He saw where the toys and food were left, and some remained, but some had been moved.

“That’s...different.”

He walked to the edge of the water. In a childish hand, scrawled in the sand, were the words YOU ABANDONED ME. Then a wave washed over the words, and they were gone.

“No. I chose a path.”

“No,” a voice replied. “It was chosen for you.”

Mace screamed. “That is a lie! I knew my path. I saw my path. Even then.” He grew more quiet. “I just didn’t understand what it would cost.”

“Would you choose it again?”

“I choose it every damn day.”

—

HE HEARD THREE knocks at his door, the sound of metal against wood. Mace threw on a robe and answered. WRM-2456 awaited him.

“I heard...sounds,” it said. “Is all well?”

“As well as can be.”

WRM-2456 seemed to be trying to see into the room, perhaps wondering if he had a delicious companion. “I know you have not given me leave to speak.”

“Speak if you have something to say.”

“Then...know that you are not the only one with dreams. Those of your kind, you live in the world of action, not emotion. But the emotions can return.”

Apparently, somebody had therapy programming.

It occurred to Mace that pretending WRM-2456 was incorrect might be the wrong approach. *Let your enemies think you are weaker than you really are.* “How do you see others dealing with their problems?”

“I believe strong intoxicant is popular.”

He laughed. At least his lips smiled, and his throat made sounds. Inside he cringed. Had he been talking in his sleep? Screaming? This was even worse than he’d thought. “Yes, it is. Perhaps I’ll seek some out.”

—

MACE WAS ON his way to the Wheelhouse, wondering if he should try something a little more...relaxing than his standard mushroom juice. Surely under the circumstances that was justified.

Suddenly and without warning, a searing sheet of pain flashed through his nerves. He was already pivoting as a Syblin slashed at him again. “Your life is mine, offworlder!”

And this time, mercy was the furthest thing from his mind. “Take it if you can.”

The Syblin refused to relent, but even in his exhausted state, Mace was still devastating enough to end the engagement in seconds. No one had witnessed the death. A total waste of a life—for nothing. The flash of rage had driven his response faster than conscious thought.

He examined the cut on his shoulder. Only a handbreadth, but bleeding. What worried him more was the uncontrolled emotion still pulling at his heart. As he stanching the blood with a coagulant salve, this thought kept blazing through his mind: *This shouldn’t have happened.*

—

“YOU ARE HURT,” Maya-12 said.

They sat at a back table. Vin-Vin was off duty, and the band had packed their instruments and retired for the night. He had the sense that someone had noted his entrance and sent for Maya-12. She had arrived mere minutes after Mace sat.

“Mostly my pride,” Mace said. “Something is wrong.”

“What? I’ve never seen anything like what you did at the bridge.”

“You saw strength and speed and skill. But there is more—a sensitivity to intent.”

Maya whispered, “They say you walk the Web.”

“Not by that term. But I can no longer feel it.”

Maya considered. “Is that bad?”

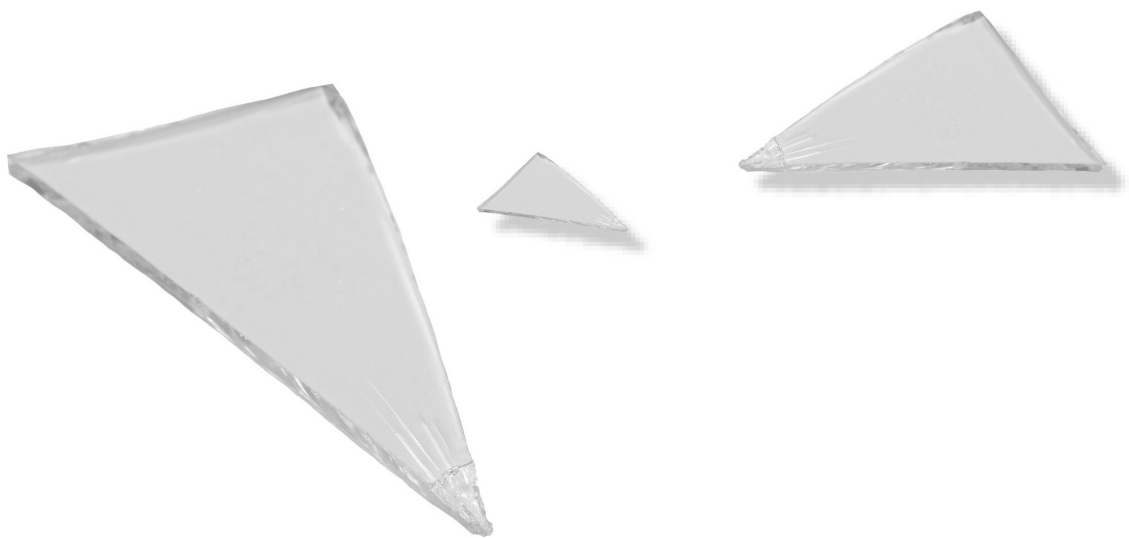
“Worse than I can say.”

Maya frowned. “Whatever brings you here—and please don’t lie to me—whatever brings you here, whatever purpose, I think it weighs upon you.”

“I have seen and done many things in my time. Some that troubled me long after. None quite like this.”

“Is there no one you trust to speak to?”

He considered. Yes, there was such a person. And he was uncertain why he felt reluctant to reach out. “There may be one.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

CHAN-DREE

Rather than the lush billet within the Floating Palace, Mace sought out his humble room in the Maze that evening. He needed to have a private conversation with a wise old friend. After a brief meditation, Mace took out his comlink and called home.

“Master Windu.” Yoda’s gentle voice sounded from the comlink. “Wondered, I did, when you would seek me.”

“I am troubled, Master Yoda.”

Yoda chuckled. “See this, I can. Tell me why, you must.”

“My dreams are troubled. And my sleep is terrible. It is affecting my balance in the Force.”

“Hmmm. Possible it is that extreme lack of sleep can disturb our minds.”

“I...am tempted to leave.”

“Do so, and your mission is incomplete.”

“Yes...” Mace said. “But I am not certain I can do this.”

“Do this, you can. Qui-Gon sensed this.”

“If I returned...”

“Twice deserted, they would feel. If you returned here, you would become involved with current Senate affairs. Return to Metagos, you would not.”

Mace heard the truth and wisdom in that. “So I need to complete this.”

“Only you can say so. I cannot. Qui-Gon could not.” Yoda paused for a moment. “But feel, I do, that there is something more here. Something I have not sensed.”

“There is a villain called Chulok. A dual entity who seeks to destroy the way of life of many here.”

Yoda nodded. “This planet, in the Outer Rim...The Senate knows little of it, but I sense that important it may be. *Will* be.”

“The Senate may not approve of my actions. But I believe my destiny is here,” Mace said.

“Laugh, Qui-Gon would, to hear you speak this way.”

Mace could not deny the truth in Yoda’s words. “Something in this place...The Hutts may be involved, trying to create their Outer Rim empire.”

“Allies, are they?”

“Perhaps. But Chulok has great force.” He almost smiled at the pun. Almost. “A powerful personality. It is difficult to believe they would be satisfied to let the Hutts rule them. I suspect higher ambitions.”

“Allies, you have?”

“Yes. Good people, who are teaching me things.”

“What you need, this is.”

Mace brooded. “I always thought the Jedi were all I needed.”

“To help others is the Jedi way. Sometimes, in helping others, we find ourselves.”

That stung. “Are you saying I’m lost?”

“No. I’m saying there is a part of you yet to be found.”

“You are wise,” Mace said, laughing. “Slippery, but wise.”

“And you are powerful. And sometimes blind.”

“I know one who is blind,” Mace said slowly.

“Perhaps...help you to see, she will.”

And after they severed their connection, Mace finally took time to wonder how, exactly, Yoda had known the person he referenced was a “she.”

—

ONE HAD TO traverse a warren of lifts and secret tunnels to descend from level four to level seven without being seen. They branched and twisted, and only one who knew which symbols to follow could possibly sort it out. Mace was beginning to feel his way through it and find the logic in the paths. He could feel the air, smell the scents, and sense vibrations in the ground that told him which way to turn. He could find the deepest shadows from which ambushes might spring—or be arranged by allies.

His mind was building a map of the entire system. Once this was complete, he would be able to position his scant resources for the best possible result.

KinShan had two dwellings: one in the western tourist area, where she played the princess, and a private one in the north, to which he was now welcomed. The house was carved into the base of a five-meter-tall ironshroom, and the life within and without were in perfect harmony.

“I wish to learn your ways. The way of the Web. Chan-Dree.”

“You have your own ways. Can you put them aside to learn ours?”

“I can empty my cup and taste your tea.”

“Then approach me, aspirant.” She took his hand and led him to the place where Sa’ad boys became Sa’ad men.

The men’s circle contained more folk than Mace had seen until this time. And when he entered, it was as if they knew he needed to speak. They fell silent. Strange, but they seemed to be here waiting for him. That would mean that they—or KinShan or even Chala-Non, who smiled silently and leaned against the rock wall—knew him better than he knew himself.

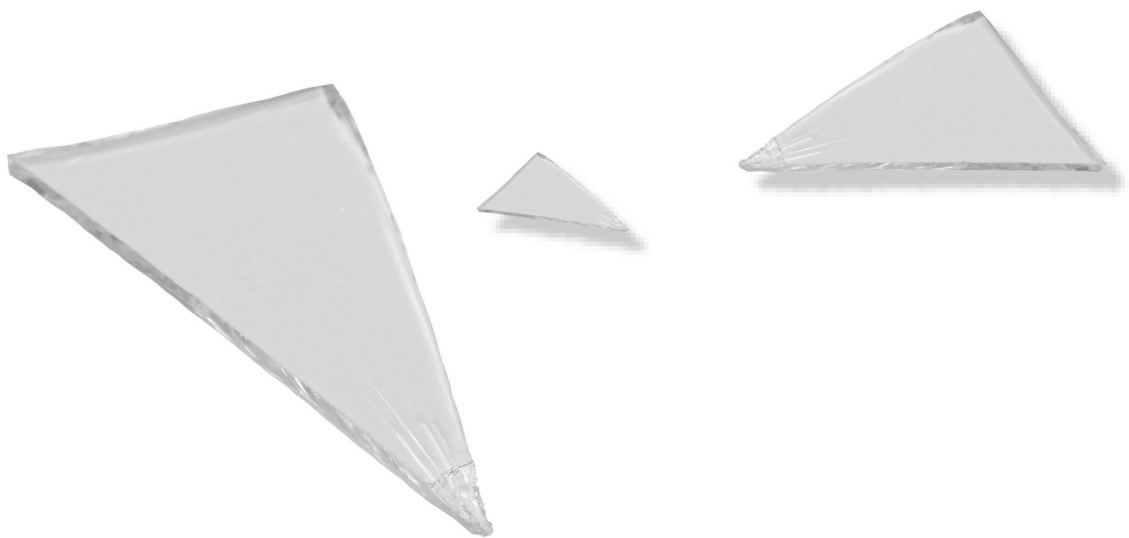
And in this place, perhaps they did.

“I am losing my way,” Mace said. “My body rests, but my mind is restless. And in that restlessness...”

“You cannot rest,” Chala-Non said.

“I cannot. I must go further.”

Chala-Non smiled. “Then further you shall go.”



CHAPTER THIRTY

WEB DANCE

To become an honorary Sa'ad, Mace had to enter the Sa'ad men's circle and, in essence, become a boy-child seeking entry to the mysteries of male adulthood in this clan. Looking into the faces of those gathered, Mace could see that "*men's circle*" was clearly a vestigial term, used more from habit than exactitude. All who felt they belonged here were welcome—even Mace. He was a foreigner among these gentle and smooth-muscle mushroom farmers, and felt brutish in comparison. But he opened himself to learning when promised a specific and highly desirable outcome. This was a miracle, in fact, as KinShan's brother Chala-Non had told him: "The highest state is that where the body is asleep while the mind is awake."

At first he did not believe this possible, but that first night after practice, he lay on his back and felt himself float up above his body, as Chala-Non had suggested. And while fully awake, he heard himself snoring.

That was different. And once he experienced the truth of this path, he was more willing to take another step.

The next day, he happily reported progress and was a little surprised when Chala-Non, his guide, seemed doubtful.

Chala-Non was young for a teacher, perhaps no more than twenty standard years, but as a prince of his people, he led a group of adolescents through their paces. Seven Sa'ad children walked in a circle, reminding him of the Hillian grubs. Each step was taken with great care. An elder Sa'ad father called out rhythm and critiques.

Mace joined the dance.

"Move! Feel! Breathe! Pay attention!" Chala-Non called.

The senses, body, and mind all came together with every step. This was basic exercise to Mace, but he felt no irritation or impatience. It didn't matter that he had performed and even taught such exercises himself. There would

be a pace and intensity to this that was specific to the Sa'ad and specific to this moment in Sa'ad history. Only by forgetting what he knew, or thought he knew, would he join their tribe.

Mace felt a little odd to be among them, and no matter how he moved, Chala-Non and the old man—his name was something unpronounceable that meant “treasure”—constantly corrected his posture, the tilt of his head, and the pace of his movement. He refused to get frustrated.

“Let it go,” Treasure said. “You want progress today. Progress is tomorrow. Today is movement, in this moment.”

“Surrender,” Chala-Non said. “You must work softer.” Chala-Non’s roundish face tightened primly. “Every motion and breath is a request. You are asking Metagos to reveal the mystery of the Web.”

Mace felt a flare of anger. Why were they putting him through these hoops?

And then he caught himself. Something about this place was far more challenging than he had anticipated. “I ask to be shown your truth.”

“Lie quietly,” Chala-Non said, “and let your mind roam through your body, from the fingers to the palms...all the way through.”

There were no musicians visible in the cave, but suddenly music drifted through the air. The rhythms took him deep.

“Yes,” Mace whispered.

“Now the wrists. Forearms. Upper arms. Shoulders. Neck. The mouth. Cheeks.” This was a basic set of instructions, but he was careful not to say that aloud. “*Emptying the bowl*,” Yoda had called it. Temporarily forgetting what you already knew to make room for additional wisdom.

“Yes,” Mace said.

“Left side of the chest. Right side. Left side of the belly. Right side. Hips. Groin. Thighs. Calves. Feet. Right leg together. Left leg together. Both legs together. Whole trunk together. Whole body together.”

As Mace lay, hearing himself sleep, he felt as if he were rising from his own body, observing it like a ghost without a grave.

“In this place, your body can rest, even if your mind is alert. Rest, Mace Windu.”

REST HE DID, and this time there were no dreams save those of the darkness between the stars. Waking came easily, without that tarry residue of guilt and death.

He washed and prepared, then presented himself to his guardians, who escorted him into tunnels as yet unexplored, through passages concealed by shadow. Chambers within chambers, caves within caves, tunnels that led to tunnels that led to channels that led to other tunnels. Through it all, Mace realized that he could spend a lifetime down here and still never know everything there was to know about this place.

The next room was part of a larger cave system, with ledges and looming stalagmites and stalactites. What he noted most rapidly was the immense network of webbing anchored to rock shelving, dividing the cave in twain.

Sa'ad people swung from the strands, so he knew these were not adhesive. They seemed a different composition, grayer and thinner, but when a coil of the stuff was placed in his hands, it was unexpectedly heavy.

"We are not helpless," Chala-Non said. "Every year, a few of the Depth Dwellers escape and climb to our level. And then we have to protect our families and our friends the Hillians."

That was as he had suspected. "What do I do?" Mace asked. Even as he spoke, the cavern thrummed with drumbeats. The players were concealed in shadow.

"Hear the drums. Move to the rhythm," Chala-Non said.

"I will. I do."

MACE WAS LED to a ledge high in a northern Hillian chamber wreathed with webs in various configurations. He noted that they were absent mucilage, so these were not for catching prey but rather for various forms of exercise and preparation. Another ledge on the far side, twenty meters distant, held two young Sa'ad boys. The cave was cool enough that they shifted back and forth

on the balls of their feet, their typical loose-fitting, coarse cloth pants and shirts flapping. Chala-Non and another man handed him the ends of two web cables. “Feel the web,” they said.

A player on the far side of the cavern shook his arm, and a wave of web traveled down the line to Chala-Non, who timed it and sent it back. The other Sa’ad player timed that in turn, then bounced the wave back again. Back and forth, several times, the flexible line finally trembling so rapidly that it began to hum.

“Understand? Make it sing.”

“I do,” Mace said. And he did. Jedi arts covered lightsabers, empty hands, and even thrown weapons, but nothing formal about flexible weapons. However, some of the teachings involving empty hands were germane to the current challenge, especially the concept known as Na Jang. This was a term borrowed from the martial disciplines of the Kaleesh hunters, adapted for the training of military units.

Na Jang could be translated as “explosive power” or “issuing power.” This principle focused on the coordinated and efficient generation of force, often involving a sudden release of energy. The key to Na Jang was the perfect coordination of body mechanics, breath control, and focused intention to generate powerful and precise movements.

He knew this. Even though he had never been taught explicitly (unarmed combat arts were, for a Jedi, merely “a stopgap until you can regain your lightsaber”), the internal mechanics of all living bodies were similar enough that some universal observations could be made about generating combative power.

Instead of relying solely on the strength of individual muscles, Na Jang emphasized the integration of the entire body, using the legs, hips, waist, and shoulders in a coordinated manner.

In addition, Na Jang as applied to flexible implements required precise timing and quick execution of movements. The power was often unleashed in a sudden burst, catching the opponent off guard. Proper breathing was critical, synchronized with the application of force.|

This was perfect for those attuned to the Force. Jedi were encouraged to look beneath the skin and sense the movements of tendons and muscles within the body. Economy of motion was critical, because *timing* required micro-movement awareness. Anyone who used more power than was needed would miss the moment when the energy came back and could be “bounced” at the opponent smoothly.

As they led him through the paces, Mace thought this a fine exercise, one that taught complex concepts without words. As a fine sheen of sweat began to build on his skin, he found himself thinking how much he would have enjoyed this as a boy.

The wave hit him, and he rocked back on his heels and created a “hollow body” with a rounded back and tensed gut to absorb, and with a hiss sent it back. Over and over. Again and again, until the rolling waves of energy consumed him.

“Can you feel it? Feel the rhythm?” Chala-Non asked.

“I do.”

“Then send it back to him sideways now,” Chala-Non said. “You understand the up and down of it. Feel it. Send it back.”

Mace followed the instructions to the letter.

He web-danced with them for hours, one man against two. After a while, he noticed that other candidates were web-dancing to either side. When had that begun? He, Mace, had been too engaged in the moment even to notice.

Chala-Non called a halt to the dancing, and the men on the far side of the gorge climbed down as half a dozen Hillian worms climbed up to replace them.

They took up the lines and began to wiggle.

Their movements seemed simple at first, but then he realized they were using tripartite rhythms, like the clans of Christophsis who “sang” fish into their nets. It was easy to *think* you were moving in sync, but...

Yes. *Sync*.

That was the term he had mocked. But now, he had to let not just these people but also a species of worms guide him. And where he initially

matched tensions, he realized that it was matching the counter-beats, the relaxations, that really mattered.

Speed, he thought. How rapidly you could move was limited by how swiftly you could relax. Most made the mistake of thinking it was about how swiftly you tensed. Within still water, you could detect the slightest vibrations, and it was in detecting those micromotions that the Hillian rhythm could be found and followed.

“Do you see?” Chala-Non asked.

“I see,” Mace said, gasping. This was serious work! His galaxy-class fitness was tested by something the Sa’ad youth were expected to master before adulthood.

Truly, “fitness” was specific to the activity. He had never experienced this!

“What do you see?” Chala-Non placed his hands on Mace’s wrists, bidding him to cease.

“I see...that you Sa’ad display your strength differently. Your enemies do not know you. If you pushed back, a criminal army would have been challenged by your strength and annihilated you. You are...durasteel wrapped in cotton.”

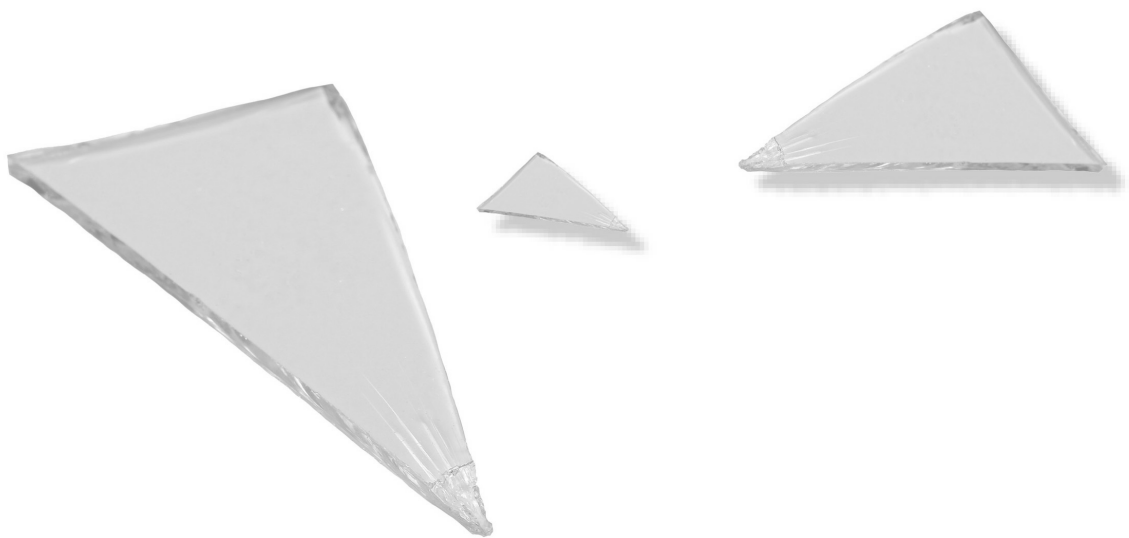
Chala-Non smiled. “Our people are not hard. Nor are we soft. We are life, and life is both. But we can be either when it is appropriate. It is not our minds that matter but rather the dream of our future, of our children. There is strength in those who nurture, just as there is strength in those who protect.”

“I see that now.” Mace meant it. “You have much wisdom. And we will need all of it in the days ahead.”

—

HE DANCED UNTIL exhaustion drained the last of his strength, then was instructed to sleep in the Hillian egg chamber as the sleepy spider-worms chewed mycelial cud around him, unconcerned. He was no longer a stranger. Mace was becoming a Sa’ad and as such...family.

A Hillian larva nuzzled him. He smiled and, without opening his eyes, stroked its scaled head.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

A SHOW OF STRENGTH

All twelve chairs in Chulok's communications center were filled with holograms from across their world and around the Outer Rim.

"I called this meeting," Chulok said to the flickering video ghosts.

"We are here," a Neimoidian said, sunk deep in his ceremonial robes. "The silk continues to flow, but the profits are not shared equally. And I believe the Hillians are not producing all they can."

"Agreed!" a second Neimoidian said. "The Sa'ad coddle them. I believe they can be convinced to do better."

"And how would you suggest we go about this?"

The second smiled. It was not a pleasant sight. Its—her?—teeth were... mobile. More like cilia than chisels. "Pain is a more reliable motivator than pleasant dreams. I think we should take the Hillians away from the Sa'ad and apply pressure."

Chulok took control. "We have engaged in experiments with young Hillians. They are not yet at the age of production. But there is reason to believe that pain will not increase our profits."

The second Neimoidian's smile was feral. "You have been nominal leader of our combine for many years. It was your strength that motivated this trust."

A third voice. "I, too, wonder."

"Wonder what?"

The hologram next to them flickered and then grew stronger: a Kerkoiden named Harlass Pizzle, a smuggler and now distributor of uncertified spider silk around the Outer Rim.

Pizzle narrowed his eyes. "If you are still strong enough to lead."

"You question me?"

"Merely speculate."

“Any of you may challenge me at any time. In fact, I believe you are challenging me even now.”

The cone-headed Kerkoiden sneered. Then Chulok raised their hand, opened their fingers, and brought them slowly together in a crushing gesture.

The result was startling. Pizzle’s blue face reddened. His hands went to his barrel neck, and he gasped for breath.

Both of Chulok’s heads smiled. “Actions have consequences.”

They released their challenger, who plunged face-first into the table.

As Pizzle gasped, the Neimoidians, now wide-eyed, fumbled to find words. Clearly, they were terrified by the display. “You seek to bind us in such a fashion?”

“No,” Chulok said. “That was in response to discourtesy, which I abhor. Allegiance created by fear is no allegiance at all. I merely ask that you consider what it would mean to stand with me.”

Pizzle seemed to have passed out, but now he stirred and forced himself upright, still gasping. He pushed a button and disappeared.

Chulok ignored him. “The power we wield together could change the galaxy’s balance forever. I merely demonstrate the capacities of your new leader...if you accept me as such. I swear to you that those who do not may go their way. And those who witness this promise will know if I break it.”

“I want no part of this,” the second Neimoidian said.

“Fair enough,” Chulok said. “Go your way, in peace. But do not stand in my way. You understand?”

“I understand.”

“Go.”

She faded out. The male remained behind, blinking those amber eyes rapidly.

Another leader, a human with narrow black eyes, seemed doubtful. “You really let her go?”

“I keep my word to my own.”

The attendees chattered in a dozen languages faster than the translator droids could manage, but Chulok ended the meeting before any conclusions had been reached.

AFTERWARD, WRM-2456 EXPRESSED astonishment. “I did not know you could do such a thing. The strangulation—what sort of magic was that?”

“Chulok magic.” Chu grinned mischievously, and Lok shook his head as if chiding his other half.

“Where did you learn to do such a thing?”

“We didn’t,” Lok said.

A screen materialized. The ivory-tusked Kerkoiden reappeared. In perfect condition.

“Pizzle.” Chulok grinned. “You played your part well.”

“Then you are pleased?” In contrast with his former attitude, the Kerkoiden was now clearly deferential.

“Yes. Wait a few cycles and then join us. I think the others will not question.”

“Yes, sirs.” He faded out.

“You are sly,” WRM-2456 said.

“Among other things.”

“What do you make of this?”

“That war may come. We may need to shore up our forces.”

“What do you suggest?”

“We have financial resources. I have put out a call.”

“Mercenaries?”

Both heads bobbed. “There are those who see beyond the political to the reality.”

“What is that reality?”

“Everything is the flow of resources. The Republic bonds together planets with mutual defense. The trade unions approach through shared interests. Both have their uses.”

WRM-2456 considered. “Are sirs considering a third way?”

“Perhaps. But that would be if we decided to join the Republic. Here on the Outer Rim, we are beyond any central control. The so-called government

of Metagos is too weak to challenge us. We decide our own destiny. Each to their own. But in that separateness..."

"I believe, sirs, that the Hutts seek influence. So far you have avoided conference with them, but at some point they must be dealt with."

"After we have taken control here," Chulok said. "Jabba respects nothing but strength. If we need him to finalize control here, he will want his piece of the pie. I prefer to deal from a more stable position."

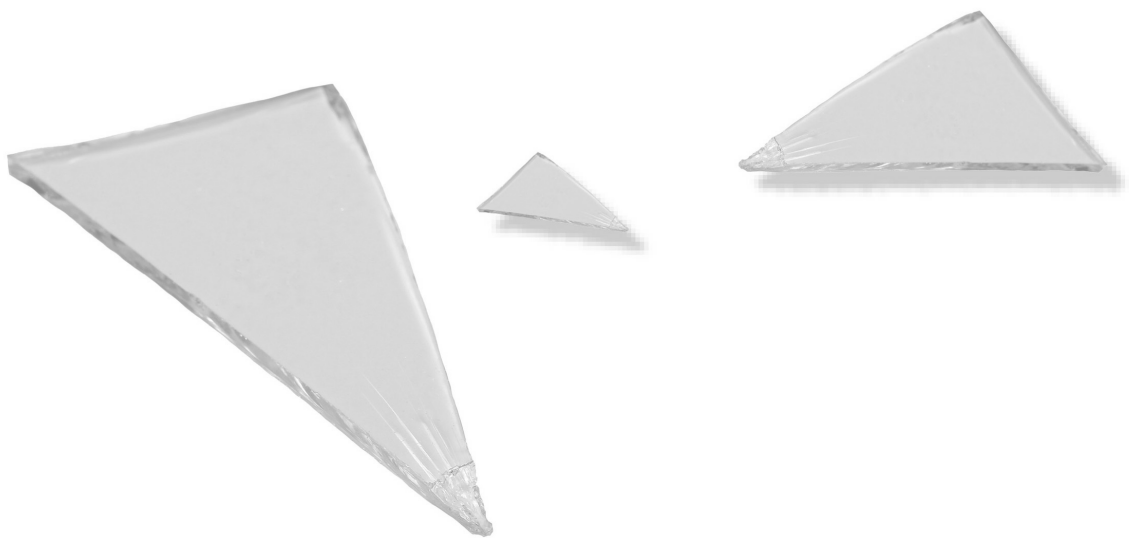
"There may be unity, though? After that point?"

Both heads nodded as one. "Perhaps. I have made inquiries. Tentative outreach. And I believe that there are ways we can connect with his allies and learn more of their experience with the Hutts. If enough of them are discontent, new leadership is always a possibility."

A room-sized holographic map blossomed.

"What would be necessary?" WRM-2456 asked.

"Ambassadors. As we, Chu and Lok, saw that together we were stronger than separate, we joined. Not just any alliance, but one that created something new."



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

MERCENARIES

From the palace to the Maze to Hillia—just trekking up and down the tunnels and passageways would have been enough exercise for any average person.

Mace was normal enough to have begun enjoying the Wheelhouse's fluid offerings for more than protective coloration.

The air was hazed with smoke and vapor. Even inhaling risked intoxication. Mace sat drinking at the bar with a mixed group of Chulok's people. It was an easy camaraderie based on the comfort of being with those who understood that if anyone was given the order to slit his drinking buddy's throat on the morrow, he would find it as pleasurable as sharing a song tonight.

It was hard to find people who understood that. Such friendships were precious, rare, and utterly nonfungible.

Two shoulders down, a three-meter-tall Harch soldier glared at him. "So, Solver," he said in a grinding voice brimming with derision. "They say you are rising too quickly."

"Who is to say such a thing?"

"Some of us have been here from the beginning and have never been asked to sleep in the Floating Palace."

"Perhaps you snore." An excessively casual response, perhaps.

It certainly irritated the Harch, and that was generally an unwise thing to do. He said, "Perhaps you lie."

"About what?"

"The people you say you bested. Perhaps you...exaggerate."

"Such things are possible. And what if it's true?"

The soldier half rose. "I think I'd like to find out for myself."

“Likely to be an expensive lesson. Short, too.” *Dammit!* This had to end—and soon.

The soldier completed his rise to standing. The result was impressive.

“No blasters. No knives. Just this little human and me,” the Harch said, drooling with anticipation. Literally. The sight was somewhat revolting.

They squared off. Mace saw a dozen options, each of them leading to a fatality.

Trapped by the need to kill. Perhaps...perhaps he could—

At that moment, Nala sauntered in, a lazy, faux-regretful tone dripping from his vocoder. “Sorry, Solver. No time for games. Chulok sends for you.”

“Another time,” Mace said to the Harch soldier, feeling more relieved than he would be comfortable admitting. Nala might enjoy such slaughter, but Mace was not Nala.

Once they were outside, Nala asked, “Did I spoil your fun?”

“A little.”

—

THEY REACHED THE Floating Palace in minutes.

Mace bowed slightly to Chulok. “How can I serve you?”

Four other members of Chulok’s squad were present. Experienced killers, Mace guessed.

“I am to entertain guests. It would be good to have you here. Would you?”

“Of course. I came to serve.”

“Excellent. I believe that at some point my guests will ask you to leave. You will do this.”

“I don’t understand,” Mace said. “You summon me here just to dismiss me?”

“To observe. You will be able to do that behind that wall.” They pointed to a mirrored wall.

“As you wish.” Mace wondered what was to come.

—

CHULOK WELCOMED A diverse and hardened group of mercenaries. They looked like the crew of a smuggling ship: hard, intelligent, ruthless, no two of the same species. Not for the first time, Mace noticed that humans were not the clear majority here in this part of the Rim. “I welcome you here because we need good fighters.”

Their leader was, like Vin-Vin, a Metagosan. He bristled impressively. “We would speak to you privately.”

Despite Mace’s misgivings, Chulok motioned for him and the others to leave. Mace caught Chu’s eye and nodded subtly. Then he followed instructions and waited behind a false wall. Now what?

“Yes,” Chulok said. “Now speak.”

The Metagosan snarled. “Deeds, not words.”

And he attacked. Chulok barely defended themselves with surprisingly weak and imprecise blocks, their four feet stumbling and tripping over one another. They backed up before calling for help. “Solver!” they cried.

Mace and his companions leapt from hiding. Mace did not have his lightsaber. The air hummed as he spun his ironshroom staff. He knew Chulok was watching: This was a test, and a brutal one.

Chulok watched with interest as the mercenaries fought back. Mace was uncertain about the correct approach. He wanted to win, certainly, but how much skill could he display?

He decided to try something. Mace scaled his responses so that his blows from the lower-left quadrant seemed just a little underpowered. Attacks coming from that direction were seen less quickly, and repulsed with less vigor, as if Mace nursed an old injury. After days of sleep deprivation, it was easier than Mace cared to admit to make his fighting sloppy. He was still lethal, but he thought such an approach just might give him a bit of advantage if he ever fought Chulok, for the creature might well underestimate him.

Or was he wrong? Had Chulok’s apparently “weak” defenses been a ruse? Protect Chulok? But surely the creature needed no bodyguards. So was this a test or was Chulok less powerful than Mace had supposed?

“Well done,” Chulok said, their two voices rising together to a thunderous cacophony, twining together until they shook the room. “Now stand back,

Solver. Watch and learn.”

He did. And the result looked as if the assassins had been dropped into the gears of a machine. Mace was taken aback. Two heads, four arms, and four legs. Fully unleashed, the combination was like a tornado full of razor blades.

That three-sectioned staff...yes, he had seen it before, but never used with such facility. In fact, he doubted any single being could have managed such a display.

At that moment, Mace knew this paired warrior-being was above his level. It was not despair he experienced, but something close to awe.

“Go!” Chulok called to him. “We have been betrayed! See to the armory and the treasury.”

“I will!” Mace ran, aware Chulok had *wanted* Mace to see their full power. But why?

“Never have I seen such a thing,” Nala said.

Mace had not, either. He threw his previous calculations away. This one, this time, was beyond his skill. But he was not afraid. There was more to combat than skill.

—

CHULOK HAD STREWN broken bodies around the glittering throne room. They had the last one, a bleeding Neimoidian, by the throat, as they had once trapped the Solver. “Who paid you?” they asked.

“We were paid through a cutout. The Hutts brokered the deal.”

Chulok wondered. Or had the Hutts pretended to broker a deal, so that if they were called on it, they could claim it was “just business”?

“Then they will not speak, if indeed they know. You are no use to me.”

“We had no chance. They never said you had such a one.”

Not *were* such a one. *Had* such a one.

“What?” Chulok growled.

“That man. Who just left. I have seen him before.”

“When?”

“It was on Bevin Twelve. He was there when the satrap fell.”

“A mercenary?”

“Some said more.”

“Said what?”

“Jedi.”

Chulok laughed and broke the man’s neck. “Jedi? Jedi do not murder.”

WRM-2456 sidled next to them. “Has he, sirs? In every instance, he arranged to be attacked first.”

Chulok frowned. “He uses no lightsaber.”

“If a Jedi, without a lightsaber, pretending to be a Rim-runner, maneuvered his way into your trust...what does that suggest?”

Chulok snorted. “You are jealous. You fear him taking your place.”

“I am loyal,” WRM-2456 said, sniffing. “If I turn out to be wrong, I accept whatever chastening you desire. You may disassemble me.”

“Hmmm...” WRM-2456 was offering his head as collateral. That finally forced Chulok to ponder WRM-2456’s words. Chu, at least, was considering. Lok still seemed unconvinced.

And for the first time in WRM-2456’s experience, the two heads were out of sync with each other.

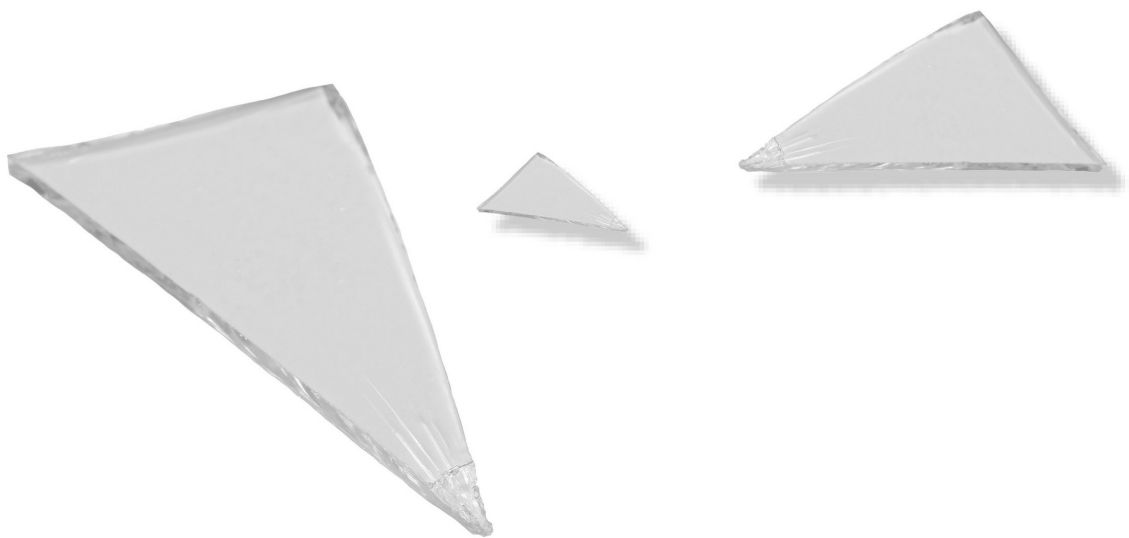
“Let’s kill him,” Chu said.

“Consider,” Lok said. “First we must be certain. Very certain.”

“Hmmm. Very well.”

They turned back to WRM-2456. “We will do this thing. A test only a Jedi could pass. If he lives, we kill him. If he dies...he was innocent.”

Lok sighed. “It’s really a pity. I was taking a liking to him.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE FALLS

The cleaning droids were still sluicing blood and tissue from the floor when Mace returned to the throne room. Apparently, Chulok enjoyed making a mess.

“We have had problems, as you know, with our shipments to Nexus, the largest suburb of New Xaxis. I would like you to scan an alternative path, one that might be easier to secure.” They called up a hologram, and one of Chu’s thick fingers traced a path. “This is a tourist tunnel on level seven. Then here is a stretch of lava tube, and beyond that, some unused mining track.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Anything unusual. Take one of my starfighters. The hangar is one level above us.”

“An honor indeed.”

“Yes. It is.” Chulok smiled, the heads in sync once again. “See you return it in good condition.”

—

LEVEL THREE’S SPEEDER hangar was large enough for a hundred personal vehicles, fully stocked with models from a dozen planets around the Rim. Chulok maintained private facilities on one side, and Sybil on the other, but between those sealed zones was a common area shared by the two, possibly for easy access to the surface.

The hangar was a hub of activity, filled with a variety of starships, droids, and personnel. Typically, such hangars were located within a larger civilian spaceport or military base. They served as hubs for starship maintenance, refueling, and embarkation.

Mace recognized several vessels. One was an HWK-290 light freighter, its hull displaying the battle scars and wear and tear from its previous adventures. The ship's ramp was lowered, revealing the interior.

So much to see, but Mace took the excuse of "choosing a craft" to register all the logistical information he could manage. You simply never knew what information would save lives.

There in a corner was a distinctive *Firespray*-class patrol and attack craft, favored by bounty hunters. It rested on the hangar floor, its forward-mounted cockpit patiently awaiting its next journey into the galaxy.

And there, a Porax-28 starfighter. These swift fighters were painted in vibrant colors, their sleek twin-engine scoops hinting at their incredible speed. Mace had piloted one on a reconnaissance mission to Mantis I five years before. Stout craft.

Pilots clad in yellow and orange flight suits inspected and prepared their Porax-28s for upcoming missions. They conferred with their astromech droids and fellow crewmembers.

Officers in their crisp uniforms walked the hangar's perimeter, supervising the Porax-28 fighter pilots and ground crew as they prepared for duty. Broad cargo lifts raised ships to the surface. Their protective baffles told Mace that it was daytime up top and the howling winds were lethal.

Astromech droids, domed and barrel-shaped, trundled about, performing repairs and maintenance tasks on starfighters. Protocol droids busied themselves with translation and communications activities.

Maintenance platforms proliferated. Mechanical platforms and lifts hovered near starships, allowing technicians to reach deep into the engines for inspections and repairs. Fueling hoses and tanks were stationed strategically, ensuring starships were primed and ready for their next interstellar journey. Stacks of cargo containers were neatly arranged in one corner of the hangar, ready to be loaded onto ships for transport around the Rim and into the Galactic Core.

The hangar hummed with a symphony of droid beeps, mechanical clanks, and the distant hum of starship engines. The smell of hydraulic fluid mingled

with the metallic tang of ionized air, creating a nose-tingling aroma like the aftermath of a lightning strike.

The Jedi Temple had its own version of this. Smaller but more immaculate, and the ships were the very best the Jedi Order could provide, well above this motley selection.

But this was still impressive.

Mace settled on a single-pilot ship, an Arcus-46. He liked it: fast, responsive, and nimble, if a bit vintage. “Chulok sent me. I want this one.”

“One of our best,” the droid said. “Are you familiar with the model?”

“Yes. Any modifications?”

“The usual. Better maneuvering in an atmosphere. Had to adjust the attitude jets. You’ll like it.”

Mace climbed in, adjusted, nodded approval, and gave a thumbs-up. More droids busied themselves checking systems and topping off fuel. Mace hovered the craft over to one of the lift platforms. It sank through the floor and then through the ceiling of level four.

Mace dived his Arcus off the platform and into the flow of traffic. He circumnavigated the Abyss then followed the holomap into a tunnel on the west wall.

A fluctuating orange energy barrier opened as he approached, then sealed behind him. For a moment, he wondered about the purpose of the barrier... then he remembered the Depth Dwellers and concentrated on flight.

The tunnels leading from the fourth to the seventh levels had been widened by engineers. They displayed signs of great heat and powerful machinery.

Mace was a little nervous at first: After all, the seventh level was the home of the Sa’ad, but traveling farther east toward Nexus and its suburbs, you came across mining and transportation tracks, and the site of the train hijacking. Could this be a test of some kind? Chulok was not above that. They were tricky and liked games. Displaying less-than-full capacity against multiple opponents revealed sheer ego and a good dollop of contempt for life itself.

But as the tunnel walls blurred past, he began to settle in. Another tunnel juked him to the side, and then he zipped on to what the map called the Crystal Cascades.

Little remained to surprise him in the world called Metagos, but if astonishment remained, this was the moment he felt it.

IN THOUSANDS OF small and large ways, within the fantastical world of a giant crystal geode, nature's wonders had been reimagined in breathtaking splendor. And while Mace had been to many worlds, none provided a vista more beautiful than that of the Crystal Cascades, a majestic waterfall that flowed through a landscape of glassy formations and semiprecious gemstone structures.

The Crystal Cascades were set in another spectacular cavern east of the Sa'ad tourist village. It spanned two levels and was surrounded by glistening mineral walls that created a kaleidoscope of colors.

The Crystal Cascades began as a series of gem-encrusted cliffs, each one gleaming with a unique array of minerals. The cliffs were formed from a mix of translucent quartz sheets and gemlike stones, which captured and refracted light from the glowing mushrooms, casting dazzling reflections in all directions. Sparkling-clear waters emerged from the ceiling of the geode, gently cascading over the crystal cliffs in a series of terraces and pools. The water was exceptionally pure and shimmered with a faint, enchanting luminescence.

Perhaps a hundred tourists busied themselves about the pathways, pointing and picnicking or otherwise holidaying. Mace still found them offensive, as if they didn't deserve such natural beauty.

Along the descent were small pools where water collected and shimmered like liquid gemstones. These pools were adorned with naturally occurring mineral formations, including stalactites and stalagmites of translucent crystals.

Surrounding the Crystal Cascades were bioluminescent plants and fungi in various hues. They created a soft, ethereal glow that danced across the waterfall's cascades and the surrounding mineral structures.

He hovered. He had been asked to check out the route...Certainly that included an aesthetic appreciation.

Mace opened the ship's canopy. The sound of gently splashing water echoed through the geode, providing a soothing, melodic background murmur. The air was filled with a subtle, refreshing scent as water droplets carried the delicate fragrance of the surrounding crystals.

The cascades were another testament to the potential of this strange, inverted world. And here, at least, the natural world and Metagos's citizens coexisted in some form of harmony.

He sighed. This was all so lovely that he didn't really want to continue his survey. But...duty. Duty above all.

He closed the Arcus's canopy, killed the hover engine, and continued down his path. *No more tourist spots between here and the Nexus suburb*, he thought. This would be all business.

—

WRM-2456 WONDERED IF the air in the communications room was too cool, because the flesh on Lok's arms was pimpling. A quick review said the ambient temperature was normal, and a scan of medical files suggested that such puckering of the flesh, in a Rodian, indicated excitement. The thane was watching a scanner linked to cams in the Solver's vehicle and three other craft down in the tunnels. A map displayed four red arrows indicating positions. These aircraft were heading toward one another at great speed.

"And now we will see," Chulok said.

"What are we looking for?" WRM-2456 asked.

"The Force gives Jedi a split-second warning. You can feel the blow or bolt before it hits."

"So if he lives?"

“He is a Jedi...or very skilled. And lucky.” They paused. “Until we kill him, of course.”

MACE WINDU WAS having the most pleasant time he had experienced on Metagos, simply enjoying the sights and familiarizing himself with the map—until two fighter craft of a style and designation he did not recognize dived out of the shadows and headed straight for him.

A harsh, rasping voice came over his comm. “Hello, Solver. Today you die.”

“Who are you?” The vessels were a bit like the Arcus but resembled hooked talons. They were predator craft.

A nasty chuckle. “You know who we are. We are the ones who will end you.”

Mace could almost laugh. “Everybody wants to ‘end’ me. What the hell? Can’t anyone say *kill* anymore?”

They sped through the caves and crannies in a spectacular series of maneuvers, like avian predators attempting to either mate or slaughter one another.

Then he heard two alarming words: “Engage shields.”

The edges of their claw shapes crackled blue, and the air before their bows shivered. Mace looked again at each ship’s sleek, lightweight silhouette. Where could shield generators possibly be hidden on such minimalist crafts? One thing was certain: These were not random enemies; this was an assassination team. He tested the shields with a rearward energy blast and watched the absorption sparks.

They fired at him, and Mace’s normal precognitive flashes were so dulled their bolts nicked his wings. In seconds, they’d suss out his rhythms and become more accurate.

Lethally accurate. Mace began to sweat.

IN CHULOK'S COMMUNICATIONS room, the air crackled with tension. The conjoined allies were nearly vibrating with anticipation. They turned to WRM-2456, always faithfully by their side, and said, "He does not know we are hooked into his comm. Solver is broadcasting his every breath. When all of his attention is on survival, it is quite possible that he will accidentally say or do something...revelatory. Useful."

MACE USED EVERY strategy he had ever studied or utilized, but nothing was helping him break away. The lead pilot behind him not only was superb but also possessed great instinctive qualities impossible to teach. Mace's fatigue and imbalance with the Force had taken its toll.

He had a sudden idea. Perhaps he wouldn't need to locate the ship's shield generators after all. Sometimes a blunt instrument was better than a scalpel. It was a risk—he could collide with them, and the last thing he would ever know was a flash of heat and light. But when one exhausts sane options, all that remains is the bizarre. Mace turned and charged directly at the pursuing ships, so rapidly and insanely that they cared more about protecting themselves than firing.

As he did, he fired at the ceiling, timing it so the blast would hit a moment before his pursuers could pivot to pursue.

It worked! The tunnel rocked with flame, and a cascade of stone fell from the rocky roof. One of the pursuers tried to wheel after Mace and placed himself right in the path of the rocks. The other evaded them, but the first was struck twice.

Mace squeezed out a few seconds of lead as the assassin ships oriented themselves to follow, but another rearward blast made no impact on the lead ship.

But on the second ship, the shields wavered. The rocks had damaged but not eliminated them.

He had an idea but needed a waterfall to execute it.

Then he remembered the damn tourists. No, even if they annoyed him, such an action would place innocent lives at risk.

He wheeled again, and because his pursuers had not had time to orient themselves, he was able to fire as he zipped past them heading east again. Firing point-bank at shields was a rookie error, but desperate times required desperate measures. To his delight, one of the two ships wiggled to evade his blasts. Good. The pilot was nervous.

His map told him that something called the Xaxxan Cascade waterfall was only three klicks ahead, and he leaned into the engine, redlining, and trusted the twisting tunnel to protect him from direct shots.

And he made it. Zipped through the falls and then wheeled. One of the other ships dived through the water, and its shield sputtered. As he had expected—most such ships were designed for travel outside an atmosphere. A combination of rockfall and water had damaged its mechanisms just enough to short out the shields and trigger a reset.

“Try this, bantha herder,” he muttered, pressing his trigger.

The explosion filled the tunnels with fire and splintered steel.

—

IN THE THRONE room’s gilded shadows, Chulok watched with approval. That last maneuver had been excellent, but there was no escaping the final ship now, piloted by Commander Slithis himself. While Solver had displayed excellent general skill and some startling tactical thought, there was simply no evidence of supernormal capacity, no precognitive avoidance of energy bolts. This was no Jedi!

Chulok’s holo mirrored Commander Slithis’s controls, and they watched as, finally, the targeting computer lined up with Solver’s ship. In another moment—

“I think we’ve learned what we need,” Lok said.

To Chu’s surprise, Lok pushed a critical button. And with that push, Commander Slithis’s ship exploded into flame and smoke. Solver’s was hit

by the shock wave and spun into the wall, shearing off a wing but crashing without detonation.

Chu raised a questioning eyebrow, and Lok shrugged.

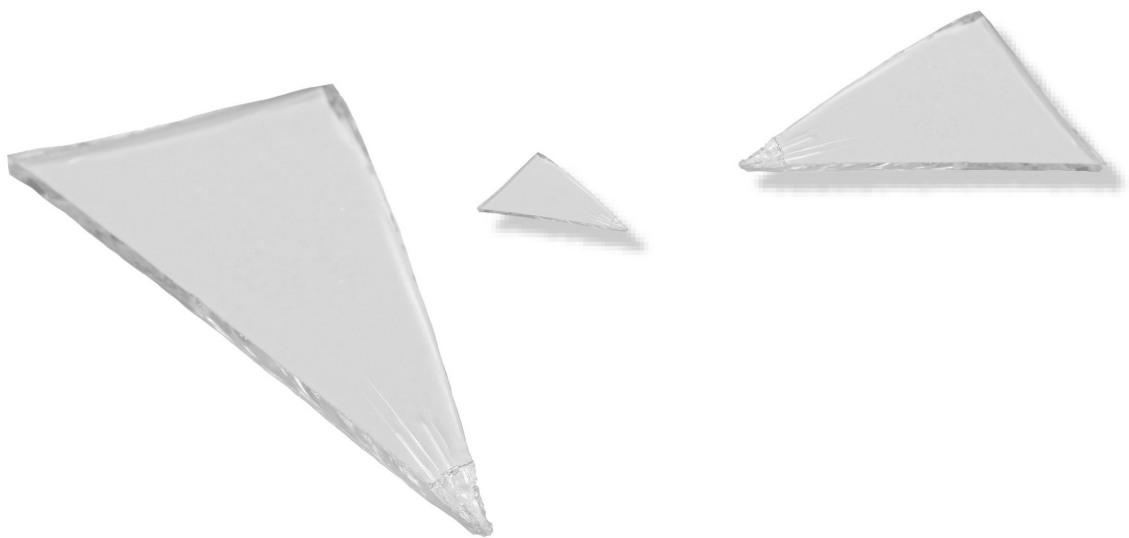
WRM-2456 was disturbed. “And the Solver?”

“If he’s alive, find him. Bring him to us,” Chulok said.

“Yes, sirs,” WRM-2456 said, still suspicious. What precisely had just happened? Certainly Slithis wouldn’t have missed a bomb placed in his ship. And why had they done it? And how?

—

AT THE XAXXAN Cascade waterfall, a wounded Mace pried himself from the wreckage of his Arcus, gasping for breath until he could crawl out of the cascade. Once he was clear, he shook himself like a wet pog. Exhaustion and pain were bad enough, but the confusion was more dangerous. Something was very, *very* wrong and getting worse by the moment.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BACK TO THE MAZE

It was a long, long walk back to the Crystal Cascades, and the tourists looked at him suspiciously as he walked with them and then took their tram back to level four. The curiosity about the wet, bedraggled man had died by the time they reached it. When he limped into the Maze and disappeared, he attracted no interest at all.

AT HIS SECONDARY and more modest lodgings, Mace did his best to dress his wounds. At an unexpected knock on the door, he whipped around, holding his blaster in an unsteady hand.

“Solver!” Maya-12 said.

Mace pushed pain out of his mind. *Pain is a signal, T’ra Saa had taught him as a youngling. Suffering is a response to that signal, and can be diminished by will.* “How did you find me?”

“I’m a detective,” she said. “I have information for you.”

He grunted and limped back to his bed. “A moment, please.”

She seemed alarmed. “You are hurt! Let me help you.”

She did so, salving his burn so professionally that he wondered if she had studied with Woolif. Probably just slipped in a chip while he hadn’t noticed.

He was comforted by her touch. “Thank you.”

“I have data.”

“I can hear it now.”

She nodded. “You asked about Hillians. I may have a source of data, but I need to know if it can be trusted. So let me compare a piece of information. If it matches what you know, then my source is reliable. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“All right. There was a shipment hijacked. It was said to be impossible. But either it was hijacked...or Chulok has been betrayed by their partners in New Xaxxis.”

He thought. It was as he had hoped and planned. “I may have heard the same. What happens now?”

“If their partners are to blame, it means war. And that might mean that their truce with Sybil is even more critical, as they cannot fight on two fronts at once.”

He was careful not to show any emotional reaction. He suspected that she noted this. “That makes sense.”

They were dancing now. “But I have the sense that they are looking at this very carefully. Sybil might have cause to have done this herself to sow confusion. To enrich herself both with goods and with alliances.”

“How much faith does Chulok put in this notion?”

She considered it. “Only one thing—the hijack, if it occurred, left no trace. That means either that it didn’t happen at all, or that it was carried out by someone of unusual skill.”

“More than Sybil’s children?”

“Yes. They are much the same. Of course, there could be an unusual one born, but this hijacking suggests something new. So they are carefully evaluating what new factors may have entered the equation.” Her glance had no real “expression” change behind it, but he understood the implication.

“Makes sense,” Mace said. “What do you make of it?”

“That this might be a time for caution. How did you get those wounds?”

He shrugged. “I’m no longer sure. I was flying in the tunnels, near the cascades. Several ships tried to kill me, but I don’t know why. Before the last could do so, it just...blew up.”

“You didn’t shoot it?”

He considered. “No. It might have been a malfunction, but the timing was...uncanny.”

“If they weren’t trying to kill you, what then?”

“Test me.”

She seemed to think about this. And he guessed that she was drawing indirect conclusions. This was a smart one. “I heard a rumor that Chulok’s minions seek you. They say the thane wishes a conversation.”

“I’m not in a mood to be found. If they ask...I went drinking. Tell them I wanted to watch your sisters.”

“I will do this for you. But there is something I wish from you in return.”

“What is that?”

“Your name. These are dangerous waters, and I can feel we are both at risk. I would like to think you trust me enough to give me a name by which to call you. Something more than ‘Solver.’ ”

He nodded. It was only fair. “My name is Mace,” he said.

She extended her arm, forming the end of it into fingers, thumb, and palm. They shook. “Pleased to meet you, Mace.”

If that name meant anything to her, she gave no indication.

—

MACE REMAINED IN his hidey-hole another few hours, taking a brief, dreamless nap. But the instant he emerged, he ran into Syblin-X. At first he braced for combat, but then he watched the insectoid drop to the ground, roll into a ball, and straighten again. Some sort of genuflection, he reckoned.

“Your servant, sir,” X said.

“Time to repay your debt.”

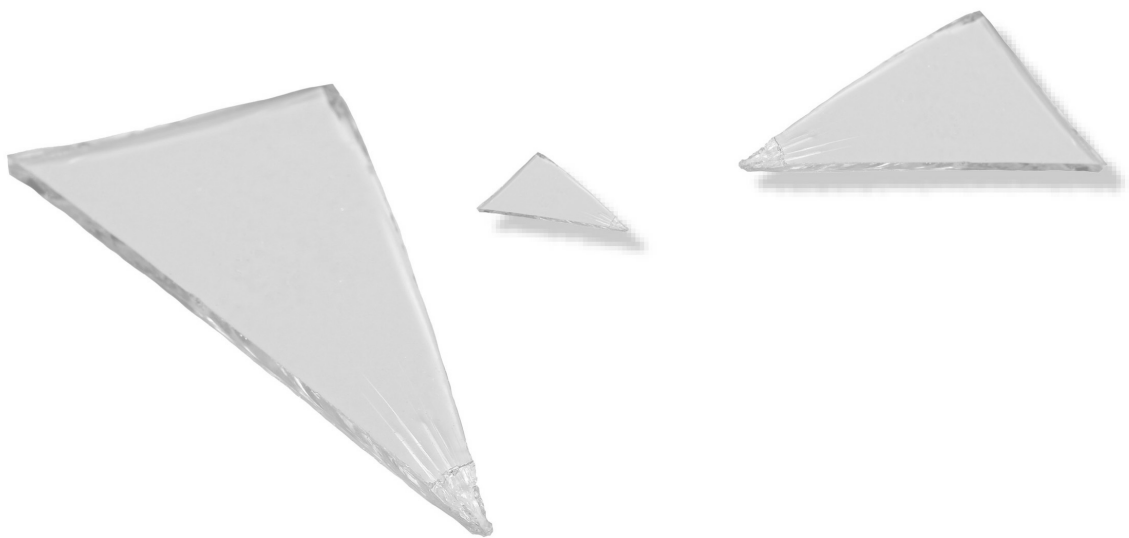
The Syblin straightened. “I stand ready. What do you wish?”

“If anyone asks, say that you saw me. I was traveling in *that* direction, and apparently I had been enjoying the hospitality of the local tavern.”

“That I can do,” X said, apparently happy to do mischief to her mother’s rivals.

Although he had chosen to heal in private, Mace needed to see KinShan again.

He walked south until he hit the rim. Then he followed it to the southwest and an unmarked tunnel he trusted to take him down to the only person on Metagos he completely trusted.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

HEALING

KinShan was furious that Mace had waited so long to come to her. She summoned Woolif but didn't wait for the doctor to appear. In the interim, a mated pair of Sa'ad healers tended to him until the little flying doctor shooed them away and examined his wounds. In the next minutes, Woolif sprayed and injected and covered the burn with a second artificial skin that felt strong and solid in just moments.

KinShan watched, worried as the implications of his story became clear. "You say the ships came from nowhere?"

"As if they were expecting me, with shields. Conveniently, one of them exploded at *exactly* the right moment."

That caught her attention. "Did you see anyone? A blaster? Sniper?"

"No. Almost as if it blew up...from within."

She considered again. The implications were finite and fascinating. "These are deep shadows."

—

MACE NOTICED THAT he was seeing more Sa'ad elders and more children now. Slowly, he was becoming a trusted member of the clan.

One stooped, wrinkled woman KinShan introduced as her mother, Marta Klerk Nightbird. She moved less surely than her daughter, as if the night enshrouding her was deeper than that affecting KinShan.

"We are prepared for you, Mace Windu," Marta said.

Webbing wove through the room, but when Marta touched one thread, it glowed. That glow then spread to create a branching map, with each branch tripling the connections.

"If the Jedi path is true," she said, "there are many aspects."

"It is true."

“Then there is more than warrior. There is teacher. And leader. And healer.”

“We have healing arts.”

Marta shook her head. “I speak not of skills but of *essence*. I sense you are in extraordinary balance for a warrior. You know healing, and you can heal. But that is not the same as being a healer. We Sa’ad can fight, but we are not warriors. I suspect you understand the difference.”

“I do.”

“You need more. In this sacred womb, you need to learn the healing arts, and you must first heal yourself.”

“Of the recent wounds?”

“No. I sense deeper trauma. We all suffer them moving through life, no matter how kind those who loved us and tried to protect us might be. You can mask the wounds, grow around them. I believe you are strong, stronger than any man I have ever known.” She angled her face away from him just a bit as she said this. “And though the strength of the universe flows through you, you can be stronger still. Soil, air, fire, water, and void—each cardinal aspect of being requires unique ceremonies and magics.”

It was not a time to argue. And from the Sa’ad frame of reference, she might be correct. He asked, “What must I do?”

“The Sa’ad circle is simply life, as lived on a thousand planets by a trillion hearts. The Web stretches through the entire galaxy, birthing life in all its myriad forms. If the different roles we play by choice or design are the outside of the circle—the center is the void. No words or symbols, just *being*. To help you enter, we must ground you differently in this world and prepare you for the dream.”

All beings had doubts. And whoever or whatever was attacking him was using them against him. A dangerous foe, indeed. He had to return to the very root of who and what he was...

From there, in that neutral place at the center of life’s circle, he would make a choice.

AS MACE THOUGHT of childhood, a memory surfaced of the child, Anakin, when Mace had evaluated the new Padawan in his first days at the Temple.

Anakin was so small and innocent, but Mace felt the need for caution. Yoda had warned of Anakin. His own instinct said the boy was extraordinarily powerful. But prophecy said that such a one would bring balance to the Force.

“Can you teach me, Master Windu?” Anakin asked. The boy’s round, shining face was so filled with hope and eager excitement that Mace considered his trepidation over the boy unworthy of his station or training.

“What would you learn?”

“Vaapad. Your fighting art.”

This was dangerous territory. “It requires great control, Anakin.”

“Show me!”

And little Anakin attacked, his training staff flashing down. That was what natural warriors did: fling themselves into the chaos.

Mace angled easily out of the way again and again, without countering. And when Anakin remained calm, if intense, Mace decided to give the boy what he asked for, if in a carefully scaled-down fashion. After the initial hesitation, Mace had great fun, using nothing but timing and one finger to deflect and counter. He could tell by Anakin’s harsh breathing that he was getting frustrated. Then actually angry. But while he still had reservations, he respected this boy. Others would ask for lessons and forms. Anakin simply wished to plunge in and fight.

“There!” Mace said.

Anakin paused. “What?”

“Stop. Breathe. Do you feel that? What is your emotion?”

“I just want to fight!”

“Why?”

Anakin panted as if he had run and lost a race. “Because...because Master Qui-Gon is dead. And I must be a Jedi!”

“You will be. But the way of the Jedi is not one of anger.”

“Why? He’s dead!”

“Anger is a mask over fear. If you wish to be a Jedi, you must control your emotions.”

Anakin puffed out his little chest. “I can control anything!” He extended his hand, levitating a fist-sized cleaning droid from its perch on the wall.

“First, control yourself. Think about something that angers you.”

Anakin closed his eyes, thinking of his former master, Watto. His lips curled in a snarl.

“Now breathe!”

And Anakin corrected himself. And then calmed. He struck a blow with his little staff.

“Perfect,” Mace said.

Behind him, Yoda began chuckling. The great master had entered the room soundlessly. “The smallest seeds will one day shade us all.”

The two Jedi Masters watched as Anakin slashed and tumbled, practicing obsessively. He seemed to court exhaustion and then seek to push beyond it. Physical exhaustion triggered a response similar to fear, which could birth anger and unchecked violence. Whether they liked it or not, this one was walking the path of Vaapad without the benefit of specific instruction. The level of commitment and creativity was unique.

“But lead us where?” Mace whispered. This boy was different.

—

“ALL OUR TRAINING begins in childhood,” Chala-Non said. “Ordinarily, we would say that you are too old to begin the training. But you are unusual. Let us see if a Hillian chooses you.”

In a secret cave in the north of level seven, Mace sat in a circle with five children. Their posture was extremely erect and proper, while the expressions on their lovely golden faces possessed a somewhat playful air. Humming gravely, Marta directed her attendants to place five Hillian larvae in the center of the circle.

“You may not move from your position,” KinShan’s mother said. “You may not touch them. But all else is fair.”

The worms began to crawl in a circle as the Sa'ad began to sing. Each child sang a different song. Mace didn't know what to do.

"Sing!" Marta commanded.

Mace felt uncomfortable. "I don't really do that..." he began, but her stony expression froze the words in his throat.

The kids sang, high, sweet voices counterpoint to one another. Mace was frustrated. His mind had blanked. Nothing came to him, and he had that odd feeling that he was being laughed at.

Chala-Non frowned. "Know you no songs?"

"One I remember from childhood," Mace finally admitted. The younglings had been taught songs, many of them mnemonics to help them absorb their lessons. In the past, he had searched the Jedi Archives for experiences from his home planet, and he'd been charmed by a song whose title and refrain was "Where the Mountains Meet the Sky."

"Sing it. Even if your voice is flat, the grub will feel your heart."

"My voice isn't flat!" Mace protested, then realized he'd been conned.

"Then sing!"

The worms were choosing partners. They continued until only one was left, white with silver rings. Eight little stubby legs. The grub turned its face up, regarding Mace distrustfully.

Mace sang, slowly at first and then with growing confidence, holding his deep baritone softly enough not to drown out the children:

*Where the mountains meet the sky
A realm of wonders, where spirits soar high
Silhouettes against the moon's soft glow
In the forest's embrace, where warriors grow—*

The six of them sang and swayed. The worms crawled in a circle but then began to stop and sway in matching rhythm. The white grub with silver rings crept closer to Mace, and at last they swayed together.

"Yes," Chala-Non said.

While Mace continued to sing, the Hillian crawled up onto his lap and rested its head against his belly. It seemed to hum to itself, a not unpleasant sensation.

Mace asked, "What do I do now?"

"Stroke it," Marta said. "It is yours, and it will now produce silk for you or whoever sings your song. If you leave, you will need to teach your song to another."

One of the children was crying.

"Why do you cry, Whista Kel?" Mace asked.

"I was unchosen," Whista said. Her name meant "gentle heart," and at this moment, it seemed to be breaking. "My song was ugly."

"Ugly song," he said. "I know that feeling."

"What was your song?" she sniffed. "It was good."

"I learned it long ago."

She looked up at him, hopeful. "Teach me?"

"It is *my* song. You must find your own." She was downcast. He intuited that he'd said the wrong thing and had not responded like one of the Sa'ad fathers.

One of the Hillians' keepers chose this moment to step in. "One song can inform another. Why did you choose that song?"

"My...father sang it on a holo that survived him."

"And you loved it?"

"Yes."

"Do you sing it often?"

"I haven't sung it since childhood."

—

IT WAS A good day, a day of dance and song and feasting on mushroom steaks and stews of meat Mace relished but did not recognize. The ceremonies to bring him into the tribe were not complete, but he sensed they were reaching a new point.

Mace was asked to sit with his back against the rock wall, as were the other candidates. A matching number of Sa'ad adults, including KinShan, formed a circle before them.

“Now see the dance, hear the song of the Sa'ad. We mate to the Web. To the Glass Abyss.” On the balls of her feet, bending, dipping, and twisting in a way that the Xaxxis Axis dancers could never match, KinShan danced. If her mastery of the whip—the synchrony of body and mind that allowed her to embrace its waves and send them back and forth—had not warned him, in this moment he would have thought her more snake than woman. Then she seemed to be a force of wind or fire or air—light and powerful and radiating heat. And then...void.

He saw and felt nothing but her, and he knew without being told that this dance was for him alone.

“Those above called our world the Glass Abyss,” she said. “We were not insulted. It could mean love itself...”

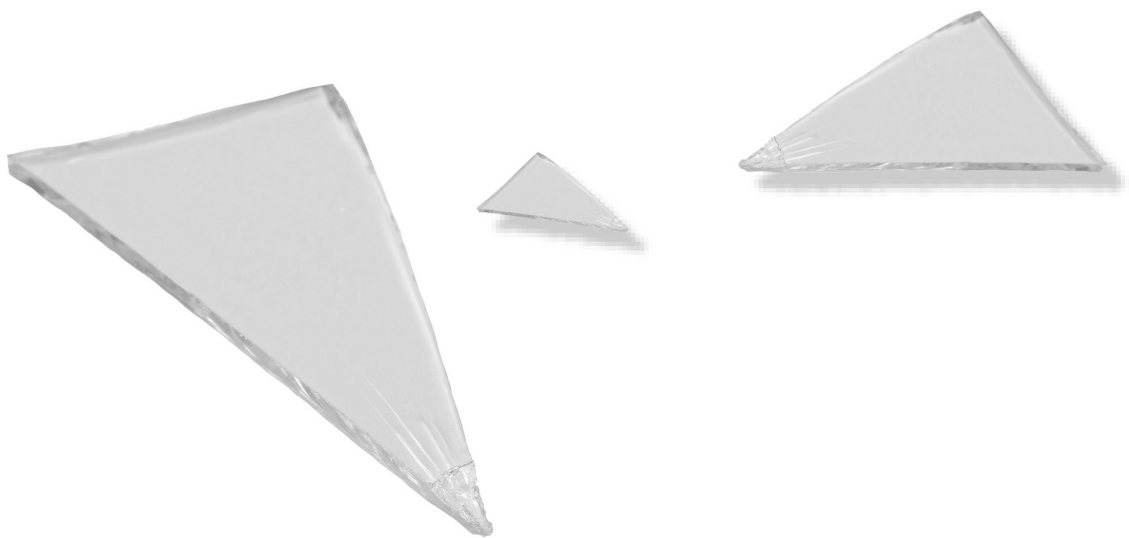
With every movement, she mimed meaning. “Fragile, sharp, reflecting the soul...and as hard as diamond. All at the same moment.”

A dance dedicated to the Glass Abyss, now used as a metaphor for life and love.

The Sa'ad all chanted together. “Dance! Dance! Dance!”

She held out her hands to him, and when he touched her fingers, he felt something leave him, some heaviness he had not known he carried. Without willing his legs to stand, they did. Without asking his hips to sway, he was pulled into her ancient rhythm. She knotted a silken braid around his neck and smiled, and the Sa'ad applauded.

And to his surprise, he—stern Mace Windu—danced with her, feeling something rare in his life: pure, untrammelled joy.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

AN AUDIENCE

The next day, Mace deliberately made himself more visible around the Great Wheel. So it was no surprise when one of Chulok's people spotted him halfway between the Wheelhouse and the Children's Maze.

"You! Solver!" a lackey called, running up behind him.

Mace's blaster was half-drawn before he identified who it was. "You need to be more careful," he growled. The silken necklace KinShan had gifted him lay warm against his skin, and without being certain why, he tucked it under his collar.

"You did not answer your comm."

Mace's answering smile was bland. "It must have been damaged."

"When your ship was attacked?"

The corners of Mace's lips remained pleasantly passive. No spoken answer was necessary.

"Chulok calls."

He nodded. "Well. When Chulok calls, the Solver answers."

—

CHULOK'S CHAMBER WAS a little warmer than Mace preferred. Too comfortable. He wondered if that was deliberate, a temptation to relax when he needed to be alert.

Chu and Lok studied him carefully, both heads moving as one. "You left the ruined Arcus at the falls but did not communicate with us about its whereabouts."

Mace nodded. "The fight was witnessed by many. I had no doubts you'd find the wreckage, and I knew the flight recorder would tell you all you needed."

"Fair enough. Do you have any idea why you were attacked?"

“None.”

“Or by whom?”

“I didn’t recognize the ship or markings. Frankly, I have no idea.”

Mace considered carefully before each answer. He could feel that this conversation would determine the future of his relationship with Chulok.

Chulok leaned back on their throne. “How did you survive? According to witnesses, your enemies flew experimental craft,” they mused. “Valuable.”

“Not anymore. I managed to trick one of them into revealing himself by flying through Xaxxan Cascade.”

“Nicely played. And the other? I heard there were two.”

“I do not know. Perhaps it malfunctioned.”

“What exactly happened?”

“An explosion. Hard to explain. Like a submersible in explosive decompression. Like something designed to target the victim very precisely. I’ve rarely seen that sort of detonation. It was very convenient, happening at precisely the right moment.”

“Strange,” Chulok said. They reached into a silver bowl on a stand between them, pulling a piece of thumb-sized fruit from a slender stalk.

“Yes. *Strange* is a useful word here. I hope you can understand why I wanted to lie low until I had fully recovered.”

Chulok was playing a game, and Mace was playing a game. Each knew the other knew. But he was pleased to see that Chulok was enjoying the play.

“You think I have a leak? That there is a traitor?” Chulok said very carefully.

“I wouldn’t say such a thing. That would insult my new allies and employer.”

Chulok chuckled. Mace found that the dual-voice effect was growing inaudible to him; the twining was almost hypnotic. It lulled him into relaxation. It was dangerous.

Mace added, “And you wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“Not without good reason, no.”

Chulok’s laughter was vastly amused. “Well, we can conclude that your mission was a success. I sent you to determine if there is something

happening with the tunnels, and you have proven there indeed is.”

“What is your next move?”

“That is not your concern.” They paused. “Solver. Hear me now. I have thought about this thing, and I wish you to know I am pleased with you. Even your hesitation to return before healing suggests a careful mind.”

“I’m a careful man.”

“I require—no, I request your presence at a formal dinner tonight.”

“Here?”

“No. General Slithis’s mansion, within the Crystal Empire. See my tailors if you lack formal wear. And I understand your tracker comm malfunctioned.”

Mace considered. “That was for caution. Someone could have penetrated your frequency. Reporting back might have been intercepted.”

“A spy.”

“Yes. I believe you are under attack.”

Chulok handed him a box. “Here is a new tracker. You need to check it several times a cycle.” A thoughtful pause. “You may be correct that constant tracking could be counterproductive.”

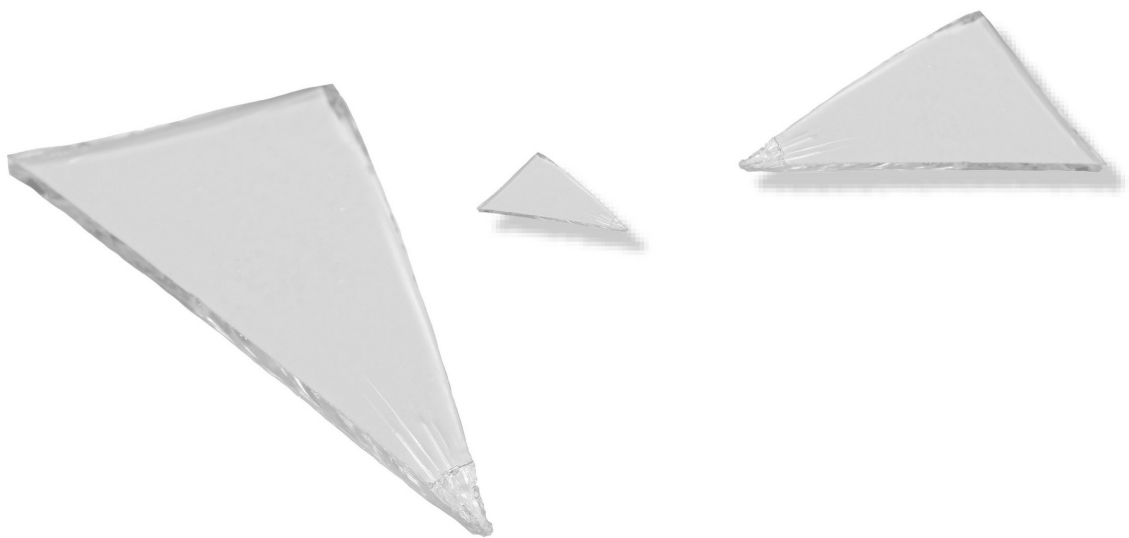
“Yes, Thane Chulok.”

—

AFTER MACE LEFT the throne room, Chulok turned to WRM-2456, awaiting his response. “Well?”

“He is a strange one. But no Jedi. Even at the point of death, he gave no sign.”

“No. But something *is* happening. I can feel it. Someone in the Abyss is making a move. We must be mindful.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

THE CRYSTAL EMPIRE

Mace had taken advantage of Chulok's offer of a tailored suit, partially to fit in and partially simply to amuse himself. Not since the days of the High Republic had Jedi worn "formal wear," but he did find that the fashions on various planets often offered insight about their cultures.

In New Xaxis, apparently the upper classes wore flowing robes with silver and gold inlay and high collars. The fabric was a form of processed silk, and the tailor had mentioned that it was resistant to blasterfire.

The suit was crafted from exotic materials sourced from across the galaxy. The jacket was crafted from Mandalorian leather, known for its durability and sleek, polished appearance. It was tailored to perfection, featuring sharp lines and a slim yet powerful silhouette that accentuated his stature.

The fabric of the suit trousers was woven from fiber Mace did not recognize, but it offered a subtle sheen and a texture distinct from conventional material. The trousers were designed to be formfitting and sleek. The formal shirt beneath the jacket was made from a rare silken material obtained from Hillian webs.

Of course, accessories played a crucial role in completing the ensemble. A bespoke bow tie, made from the feathers of some avian species, added a touch of whimsy and extravagance. Cuff links and studs were crafted from precious metals, each bearing a star shape instead of a family or organizational crest.

The footwear was equally lavish, with shoes made from the hide of, oddly enough, a demi-slug, like the ones he had faced on the surface. The soles were lined with a material that provided a soft, noiseless step. He liked that.

To complete the ensemble, a cloak sewn from luxurious mogu fur draped over the shoulders. The cloak not only added an extra layer of sophistication

but also suggested that the wearer could afford to import materials from across the galaxy simply for occasional wear.

A booming gong began reverberating through the geode. It vibrated on the hour, as if a massive bell had been struck, although he saw no signs of such a machine or instrument. At the seventh bell, he was in motion, past the guarded gates of the Crystal Empire and walking the glowing streets to one of the very largest dwellings.

The streets were lined with crushed crystal. The houses themselves would be better described as mansions. Each was carved from one of the gigantic crystal obelisks jutting from the ground; it looked as if the entire district was cut from diamonds. The crystal walls of the internal rooms were painted silver and gold for privacy, giving the impression of vast wealth, each building like a regal crown announcing the status of New Xaxis's more powerful and corrupt inhabitants.

He contrasted this with the hovels sheltering those who lived, bred, and died in the Maze. Surely they had access to the same crystals. Why didn't they use them?

Mace asked that question after the serving droid met him at the door and ushered him in. He recognized several of the guests, including Nalaflita, who was out of his usual aviator's garb and wearing a silk suit similar to Mace's, but pink. That seemed an odd choice, but the contrast with Nala's ghostly pale fur suggested more of an aesthetic sense than he would have expected of the being.

Chulok, resplendent in their own dual robes, sat at one end of the table, a beautiful Farakai sitting to Chu's right and a stunning Rodian to Lok's left.

Their host was Mayor Mignon Fat. Seated next to him was General Naz Slithis, commander of Chulok's ground forces, an Iotran with a large, smooth forehead and protective spikes encircling his elbows and hands. Unlike any Iotran whom Mace had seen, General Slithis had an artificial bright-blue third eye in the middle of his forehead. Mace had heard varied opinions about the implantation: Some claimed it was a religious artifact, others a fashion statement. Mace had no opinion on the matter.

Slithis's mate introduced herself as M'lana Shar and carried herself like a queen.

A humanoid female introduced as Varia Patrone sat beside his own place, undoubtedly brought in for his entertainment during dinner and perhaps later as well. Like the other women at the table, her face was slathered with the white makeup common in the Crystal Empire. Mace imagined he was supposed to find this attractive.

He caught Lok wiggling eyebrows at him, apparently hoping Mace would enjoy the gift.

Mace knew he would have to navigate these waters carefully so as not to insult anyone accidentally by turning down a boon. But the last thing he would do was treat a woman as a gift.

The lovely KinShan fluttered in and out of his awareness like a starfly. He was surrounded by evil here. The thought of her smile was like a guiding point of light within the clutching darkness.

General Slithis wore a black sash across his chest and a certain tightness around his three eyes.

"Lovely home," Mace said to the general.

"Oh, I thank you very much." Slithis smiled, but Mace knew his mind was elsewhere. "We definitely have taken advantage of the fact that the Floating Palace protects us. There is great wealth here, and sufficient numbers of ungrateful moles to overwhelm us if they could." The general's words were flat, as if he required effort to keep them under control.

"Let me ask a question," Mace said. "I was wondering—many of the houses in the underground are built from what seems like scrap fiber from mushrooms. Is that the case?"

"Well said," the general replied. "There are no trees down here, and the mines are not working sufficiently to produce the right metals at a price people could afford."

"Yes, I recently saw the deserted mines," Mace said. "Why aren't they being worked?"

"Rebel filth," Mignon said. "They have disrupted the transportation lines and even assassinated the very officers who protect them."

“From whom are you protecting them?” Mace asked.

“From themselves,” Chulok said, the twin voices strong but soothing. “Our general is too reserved to say what we are all thinking, so we will say it for him. He is grieving. His own brother was recently slain, and by the same filth who tried to kill you, Solver.”

“I see,” Mace said. “You have determined the source of the attack.”

“We have,” Mignon said. “You killed two of them, Solver?” The mayor’s thick lips twisted into a feral grin, and he raised his glass. “A toast to our newest soldier. An officer, I think.”

“Perhaps more. I believe he has great potential,” Chulok said. “He has proven himself an unusual asset. Solver, what would you think if I made you a baronet?”

“What’s that?” Mace asked. An offer of promotion. Good. With trust and position came the ability to see more clearly. He had to pierce endless veils of power and madness before he could possibly unravel the knot that was New Xaxis.

“It is an inferior sort of thane,” Nala said, smiling. And my, that smile brimmed with jolly venom.

They all laughed at that. Somewhere amid the laughter, Varia Patrone’s hand ended up on Mace’s leg under the table. He smiled and twined fingers with her, raised their hands up to rest on the tabletop, then disengaged as soon as courtesy allowed. She pouted.

“One thing at a time,” Mace said. “I am trying to understand this world that I might serve you better. So what you’re saying, General, is that the crystal can be worked by the right instruments and artisans, but the technology is not available to all.”

“Now you understand,” the general said. It was the same all over the galaxy. Absent justice, the rich got richer, and...

Chulok clapped their hands. “Ru! It is time!”

A slender copper-skinned person entered. Humanoid but not human, judging by the antennae. A denizen of Sri Karna, a planet in the Cularin system, Mace reckoned.

“Greetings. I am Ru Annlord, personal chef to Thane Chulok. It is my honor to serve you tonight. Know that I am certified by the greatest culinary school in the galaxy, the Alderaan—long may it prosper!—Rose Academy. This is my art, and your palates, though they be of a dozen species, are my canvas.”

He clapped his hands, and the feast began.

In the opulent dining halls of Coruscant, the capital of the Galactic Republic, such a meal would have been commendable. Here on the Rim, the richness and variety baffled mind and senses.

As holographic displays of exotic planets shimmered on the walls, a series of formally dressed droids served the meal in courses. Each course was introduced by its name and planet of origin. The guests were given individual mini droids that crawled around the table advising on possible combinations to please the varied palates. This reminded Mace of the most elevated diplomatic dinners, and the thoughtfulness and elegance of every course and utensil and setting were dizzying.

“Nuna liver pâté,” Ru said at the head of the table. “Our appetizer this evening. The liver of the nuna bird is known for its unique flavor and texture, served on artisanal crackers, garnished with edible gold leaf.”

“Sounds delicious,” Mace said.

“Excellent, sir. I recommend you begin with a Pantoran Snowflake Salad: a refreshing mix of crisp ice flower leaves, vespari cheese shavings, and crystal berries, drizzled with a vinaigrette seasoned with rare Alderaanian herbs.”

“Hold the berries. The rest is exquisite.” The others suggested their own modifications, which were each taken down by their personal mini droids.

“Our main course is an Alderaanian Seafood Extravaganza: a platter of diverse seafood caught from the Cobaltia Sea of Alderaan, all served with a Zeltronian lemon butter sauce.”

The guests patted the table enthusiastically.

“And then, in honor of our general, bogwing tongues: succulent reptavian tongues marinated in a blend of spices from across the galaxy, slow-cooked to perfection, and served with a side of vegetal slave-shade mash.”

The general smiled politely but without great enthusiasm. Hmmm. An error in protocol of some kind.

The side dishes included Nephryn Cloud Bread, light and fluffy bread made from the refined gases of the planet's stratosphere, and Brynnarian Forest Salad, with fresh Hallowaysian tree leaves, local fruits and nuts, tossed in a valien adrenal gland reduction dressing.

The meal was served in courses, and each was stunning. Mace began the meal to play his role as Solver but quickly realized that Ru Annlord was truly a master of his craft.

An educated palate could always distinguish mastery.

Mastery is a single path carrying diverse travelers. And one could always recognize another.

The other guests ate with gusto, but Chu and Lok had different styles: Chu ate like a starving rathtar while Lok picked at his food as if almost bored with the process of eating. This was pure affectation, Mace was certain, and probably a habit from Lok's planet of origin.

Lok occasionally seemed chagrined at Chu's apparently bottomless stomach.

Mace ate quickly at first, thinking that perhaps he could beg an early exit. But he was soon entranced, eating every bite slowly, allowing the tastes and textures and temperatures to separate so that his taste buds could really appreciate this.

Ru was beaming at the table, but Mace noticed that the chef's eyes rested on him with special approval.

Ru moved over closer to him and asked, "You enjoy?"

"Very much so," Mace said with genuine gusto. "Your rendition of the Snowflake Salad...that sauce was either sweet or sour on alternate bites. I won't ask how you did that."

"You expect me to reveal my secrets?" Ru smiled.

"It both freshened the palate and in some way prepared it for the other courses. As if teasing the delights to come."

"So wonderful!" Ru said, leaning closer. "All right, for the true connoisseur—the secret is in amber-ice. Frozen at the right temperature and

then heat-sealed, it releases its flavor in waves. Only a most unusual palate can detect it.”

And at that moment, Mace felt a cold wave touch his spine. Where would a Solver, a Rim-runner, learn such things?

And from the corner of Mace’s eye, he could watch Chulok observing him intently.

“I was food taster for Lord Snilish on Onderon for a time,” he said, looking straight into Ru Annlord’s eyes but speaking for Chulok’s edification. “He had an excellent reputation.”

“ ‘Had’?” Chulok asked.

“Yes,” Mace said. “After I left his employ, apparently the new taster had deliberately built up a resistance to hragscythe poison, so that he could survive eating a portion of Lord Snilish’s birthday cake that was...specially prepared by his brother.”

“Oh my,” Chulok said. “A grasping family is a terrible thing.”

The entire table had been listening to his story, which Mace had extrapolated from facts discussed in the Galactic Senate. The laughter broke any tension his inadvertent revelation of culinary expertise might have triggered.

For dessert, the haughty chef wheeled in a Prakith Lava Cake, a decadent chocolate pastry with a molten core, inspired by the ancient fiery rivers on the volcanic planet Prakith.

The beverages were plentiful. Mace sipped sparingly at a Coruscanti Sparkling Fizz—a bubbly drink infused with the essence of Coruscant’s vibrant nightlife and garnished with luminescent pollen from the city’s floating gardens.

Mace found the meal not just a feast for the taste buds but also a visual spectacle. Yet the laughter and camaraderie at the table did not deceive him—he did not share the other diners’ level of trust or familiarity. Even the general seemed to have forgotten his lost brother. Seemed. There was something poisonous in those amber eyes.

This was a nest of vipers, and whatever reason Chulok had for inviting him was yet to be offered.

AFTER THE MEAL had been cleared, the conversation opened up again.

“So, Solver,” Chulok said, “you have been very careful of what you have said about your past and how you got here.”

Mace smiled. “I’ve been a rover. I prefer to hear about the lives of others.”

The general seemed to have developed a fraternal feeling toward Mace, and he made a comment that seemed almost defensive. “I have found that it is often wise to hold back. There are some aspects of my past that I keep to myself, but others are perfectly known to all.”

“If you’d care to share those, I’d be happy to hear,” Mace said. Anything to get the attention off himself.

“Very well.” Slithis set his meaty forearms on the table and straightened his spine as if beginning a recitation. “I was a member of the Iotran Police Force, and my brother Nils was an aviator. After my brother had an ill-advised tryst with a Joint Council member’s lover, he was sold into slavery on Zygerria. I attempted to resolve this misunderstanding and, for my efforts, was sold away alongside him.” Slithis glanced back toward the kitchen. “I certainly never feasted on bogwing tongue during my time there.”

There was an awkward silence at the table, until Varia began telling a story about her recent glider-wing adventure.

The conversation roamed to other subjects, but Mace kept wondering the same thing: Why had he—Solver—been invited to this meal? A logical possibility was simply that it was a trap. But why so elaborate? Could it just be a meal? Perhaps all new candidates were invited to such things. But the cost of this meal would have fed the entire Maze for a month, he was certain.

Finally, Mace couldn’t stop himself from asking the question. “I hope I’m not being rude, but I am so impressed by the members of this august gathering that I have to ask, why was I invited?”

“Well,” M’lana Shar said. “I arranged this gathering...”

“She is my social secretary,” Slithis said with the only real smile Mace had seen split his lips.

“And on my home planet, I come from a long line of matchmakers.”

Uh-oh. If Varia pounced on his leg again, he might have to excuse himself.

“No, not just that way,” M’lana Shar said, laughing at Mace’s expression. A pleasant sound. “But also business, military units...the women of my family have had this gift. And as you know, Chu and Lok accidentally discovered that their partnership was unusually powerful.”

“You have perhaps seen the fleshly bond that Lok and I share,” Chu said. “It is a thing of my people. I knew by instinct that Lok was special, and as we became friends and allies while working in the mines, I offered him a bond, and our bodies joined. So empowered, eight limbs were controlled by two minds, and we escaped. Service to Sybil was our first berth, but as you can see, we have risen far.”

“This flesh bond is a thing of warriors who will stand together,” Lok continued, “creating an invincible force. We say that when the right two come together, they will not just conquer but also rule.”

The Farakai. Every people had secrets, and no matter how much Mace learned or how far he traveled, he could still be astonished.

“There is another story,” Lok said, smiling almost shyly. “That *three* such beings could come together and become a god.”

Mace stopped breathing. By the Force, he dared not laugh, but that was what he wanted to do, so badly that his face hurt.

“Chu and Lok are bonded, as you know,” M’lana Shar said. “They are unbeatable. But since that time they have been on the lookout for talent. Some of that talent joins them at various levels. And when they find someone that has the potential for joining at the highest levels, that’s very different.”

At the head of the table, he noticed that Chu and Lok were avoiding meeting his eyes. They seemed almost shy. He realized suddenly that everyone at the table was looking at him.

“Well,” he said carefully. “I’m very flattered. I would need to know more about what would be called for here. Of course, the opportunity to be part of something as powerful as this—only a fool would turn that down before they knew far more about it. I would like to say that it’s the greatest compliment that I have received in quite a long time. Let us enjoy this delicious repast, and then we will have more conversations later. I would like to toast all at

this table.” He raised his glass of coarse wine and said, “By the taste of it, this wine came from the greatest cellars on Coruscant. I say that I look forward to the day Coruscant will be importing wine from Metagos! Because we will have the sellers, and we will be the masters.”

Applause rippled around the table, and again Chu and Lok did not quite meet his eyes. Mace analyzed the situation, running through various ways to politely decline without offending his hosts.

He needed to change the subject again. “In the market today, I saw a boy steal a piece of fruit. The vendor caught him and threatened him. Something about putting him ‘behind the gates.’ What does that mean?”

There was quiet around the table. Chulok grunted, Chu’s a moment before Lok’s. “The lowest levels,” they said. “The levels no one has ever explored.

“No one knows who built the gates, but we know that what is behind them is terror itself. We believe that the Dwellers are infested by one of the aggressive fungi found in the lower depths.”

Mace had the sense that they were speaking now very carefully. Huh. The Sa’ad seemed to speak of the fungal networks beneath the soil with great reverence. Perhaps that attitude had rubbed off just a little.

But was this respect or fear? And was there any real difference with creatures like this?

“An interesting story,” Mace said. “No question.”

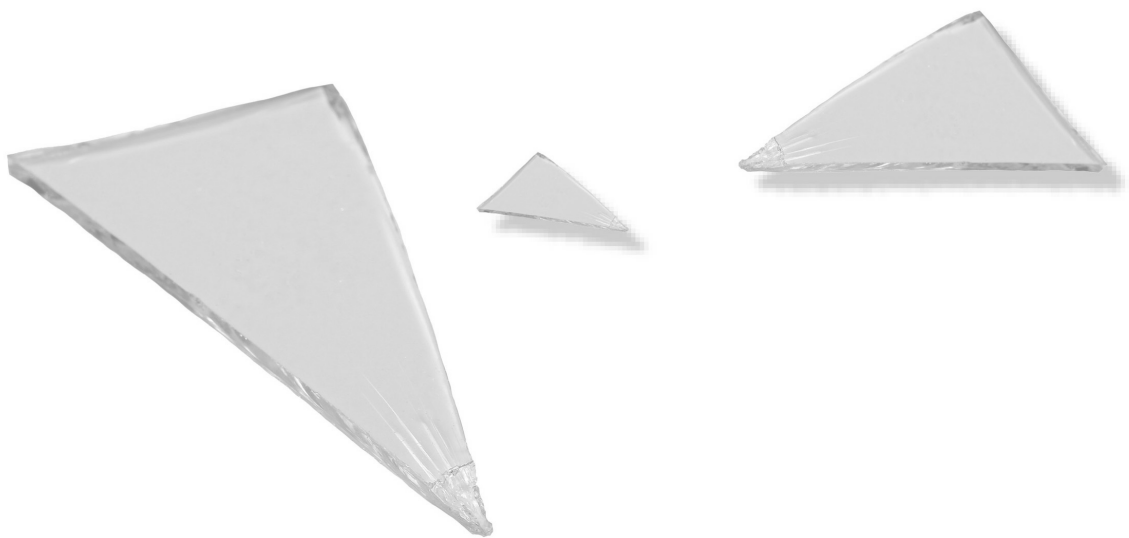
“No one has been on the other side of that gate for generations,” Lok said. “I’m not sure anyone could go on the other side of the gates.”

“Whatever is down there,” General Slithis said, “whatever is in there, some of them are our size, and some are titans.”

“To be completely honest with you,” Chulok said, “on the far side of the gates is the only thing in this world we are afraid of. That horror is part of the myth of this planet. You know that even before the star rebelled, parents would tell their children, *Be good, little one, or you will go behind the gates.* The children would obey, and they would be peaceful in their beds thanks to fear of what lurked in the depths.

“Those of us who live down here now are closer to that. Those who used to send criminals down to dig in the depths now dig themselves. Eventually

they will be infested by whatever lurks there and thrust beyond the gates. They will certainly discover whatever is on the other side of those bars...but you and I don't really want to know. Of that, I'm certain."



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

NALA'S INTUITION

After the dinner broke up, the celebrants either made their excuses and left or broke into smaller groups for conversation. WRM-2456 and Nala found themselves in a quiet space, a nook where plants and animals of various species grew in crystal globes. The Gigoran looked closely at one—an insectoid covered with gray fungus.

“What is this?” Nala asked. “Animal or plant?”

The creature had no eyes, just moist, furry pits. But it followed the Gigoran’s moving finger as if it could see clearly.

“That depends,” WRM-2456 said. “It is a small Depth Dweller and has aspects of both. I think the fungus controls it, operating the muscles as if pulling strings.”

“So the animal and the plant have found union. And it would be dangerous, perhaps, to see only one side and forget the other.”

“I don’t think you are talking about the specimen,” WRM-2456 said.

“No. A person can be much the same. You see one side or another. The killer reluctant to kill. The employee who resists promotion. What are they really? What they seem to be, what they seem to want, may not be what they actually are.”

“You wax philosophical,” WRM-2456 said.

“Something is wrong with that one,” Nala said, nodding at the Solver as he vanished down the crystal steps.

“And the thane does not see it?”

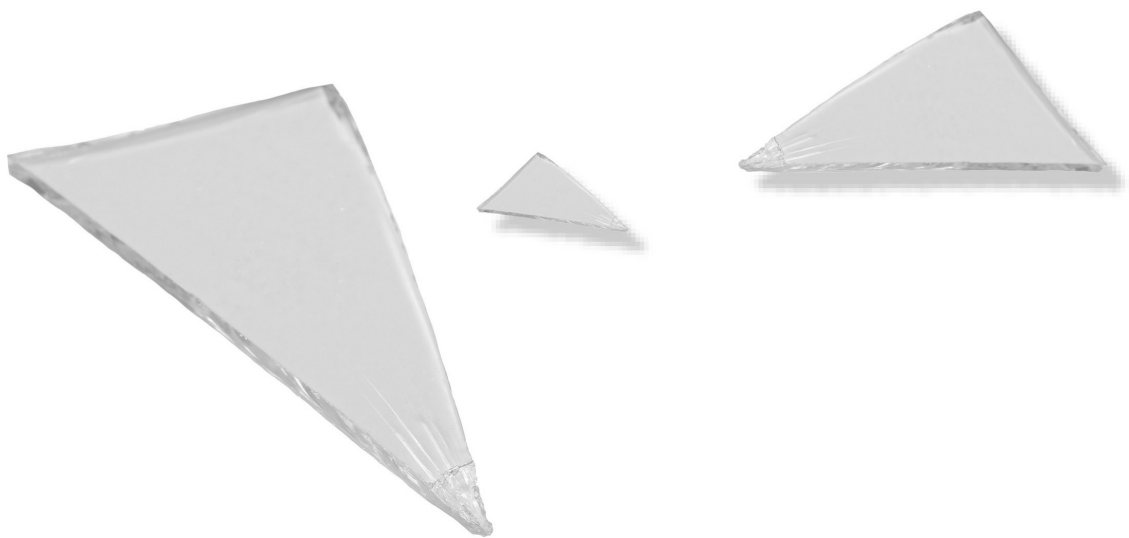
“I think they are too eager for this ‘Third,’ whatever that is.”

“It may be the prophecy,” WRM-2456 said.

Nala lit his pipe, inhaled and exhaled a plume of vapor. He made an angry sound. “I wonder if he really thinks Solver might make a Third.”

“And you? Jealous?”

“Not me. I see trouble.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

THE WHOLESALER

Up and down between levels and back and forth across New Xaxxis's fourth level—Mace had deliberately chosen a strategy of trying to see the fourth level, the Great Wheel, from every possible perspective. It wasn't his conscious mind that needed data here. It was the unconscious. He needed to see the invisible connections.

Mace had never been in Sybil's prep chamber on level eight before, but carrying her token as a shield, he was given admittance. This was the place where raw spider-worm silk was prepared for shipping to markets across the galaxy. The manager, an atypically short Skakoan named Mizz Territ who was generally called Wholesaler, recognized him quickly. "You are the one called Solver?"

"I am."

"I approve. In my clan, the birth name is less important than our chosen occupations. Good. Good." Wholesaler made a gargling cough, clearing his throat. "Sybil and Chulok have quite a business here. It would be a shame if anyone got too greedy." He sounded sincere. Probably a lot of practice.

"What is needed?"

"You know that the primary product produced on Metagos is a form of silk."

"Yes."

Sybil's Wholesaler seemed relieved. "It is time for you to learn more. We buy the silk in bulk from the Hillians and their keepers, the Sa'ad."

"In the lower depths?"

"Yes. Come with us."

Damn. Why hadn't he seen *this* coming?

MACE RODE THE lift with Wholesaler's crew of three. They seemed on edge, and it seemed to infect him. It took conscious control to stop his hands from shaking. What was nervousness and what was exhaustion, he could not say. While his Chan-Dree experiences had helped him recenter and reflect, Mace's nights were still plagued by sleeplessness.

They stepped off the lift on level seven's western quadrant: Hillia. The Sa'ad, blind and half-blind, deferred to the group in a way that shamed him. He was even more uncomfortable when one of the children sniffed at him and then whispered with the other kids.

"This is where it all happens," Wholesaler said.

The Sa'ad recognized him but pretended not to. They knew. They were stout allies. He was connected to these people now, in a way that he treasured deeply.

Wholesaler led them to the tourist cavern, where three Hillians allowed themselves to be displayed, producing *oohs* and *aahs* from tourists, mostly wealthy folks from the Crystal Empire.

"They produce the silk?"

The Hillians shook. Almost as if stifling laughter. Did spider-worms laugh?

"Yes. We cure it in various ways depending on the end purpose. There are ways to make it stronger or more flexible, to braid it thin or thicker."

"How do you cut it?"

"That is a secret known only to the Sa'ad. For now." The curing room was the next stop. Humiliatingly, Chala-Non was their host, and he smiled at all of them, with a special wink for Mace.

"Yes, yes," Chala-Non said. "I heard that you were coming down. Is everything appropriate?"

"Yes," Wholesaler said. "Just making an order and showing a new employee the ropes."

"The usual order?" Chala-Non asked.

"Increase by half. Authorization Web-Thirteen."

"Yes, sir. And your name?" he asked Mace politely.

"Solver."

“Solver. And we’ll be seeing you again?”

“‘Seeing,’” Wholesaler said. “Always with the jokes.” The others laughed.

Mace winced.

—

FROM THERE THEY went to the shipping docks, where Sa’ad lifts carried materials up to level six for processing.

“And this,” Wholesaler said, “is the point where we become responsible. This is now Sybil’s silk.”

“Are we vulnerable?” Mace asked. “What stops anyone from hijacking the raw stuff?”

“It has to be cured to be valuable. And curing is an entire industry in itself.”

The lift continued to rise. If they could see the dockworkers, the dockworkers could see them as well. He hoped none of them had seen him with the Sa’ad; if they had, he hoped they’d understand the importance of discretion. “How long is the entire process? From extrusion to offplanet sale?”

“A few weeks,” Wholesaler said. “But worth the wait. Someone did try to hijack and sell the raw material offplanet. Uncured, it wasn’t worth much. And let’s say the thieves didn’t live long enough to make a profit.”

—

THE BULK ROOM on level five was mostly storage, row after row of spools and woven mats. The entire underground world seemed to reveal one marvel after another.

Wholesaler raised a spool of silk, each strand as thin as an eyelash. He stretched it a meter wide and knotted one end on a workbench, the other around a machine clamp.

He hung a hook on a single thread, then attached weights to the hook. The thread sagged but didn't break until he had placed over twenty kilos on it.

Mace whistled.

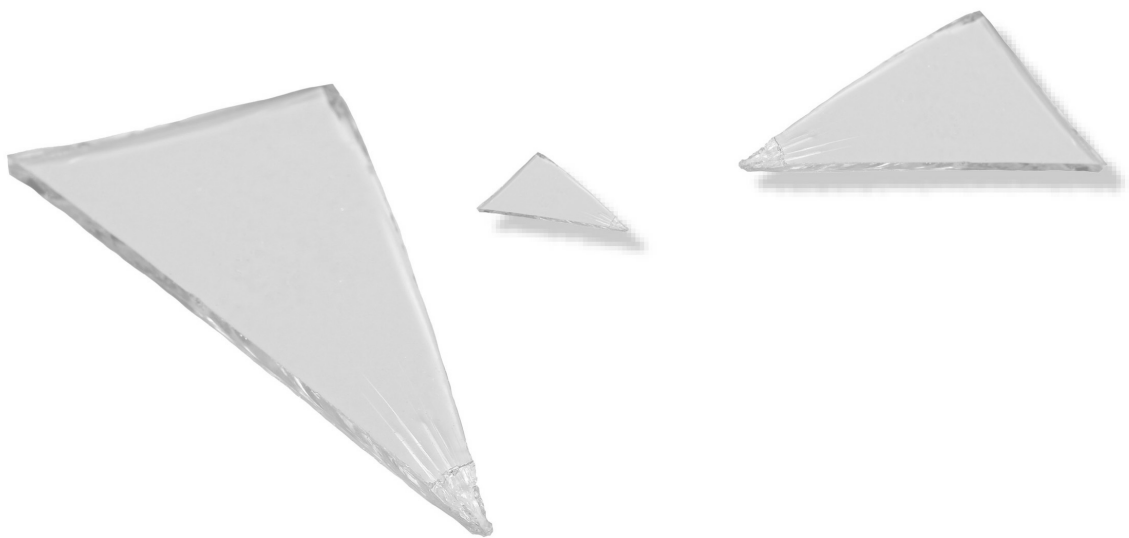
"And now you see the value. The silk comes from level seven. Some is woven, and some sold on spools. The strongest cables take the longest time. I have to say that you must have impressed the queen."

"Doesn't seem like she's easy to impress," Mace said.

"No," Wholesaler said. "Raises questions."

"Life without questions would be dull, don't you think? So from here, the silk is shipped offworld?"

Wholesaler smiled. "It's said that the Rim spins on Hillian silk. And now you know why."



CHAPTER FORTY

A BREAK IN THE CASE

Maya-12 had long been known and welcomed in the Sa'ad village. So she had actually been present when Mace paraded through, but she'd held back her words. She was nothing if not observant.

She found Chala-Non after the tour party had taken the lift to level six.

"Have any of Sybil's younglings been down here?" she asked him.

"From time to time," the young man answered. "Some have business. A few have become friends. It is difficult, but it happens."

EACH OF THE different subcaves seemed to specialize in a different stage of the Hillian life cycle: The adult female Hillians laid eggs. Those eggs hatched fist-sized grubs that did nothing but eat and crawl, protected by male adults. At the edge of adolescence, they began to spin silk cocoons, within which they matured. Most then emerged from those cocoons as creatures the size of a human arm, and were nurtured until they matured to adults who could themselves lay eggs or protect grubs. From the time they spun cocoons until they eventually died, Hillians were capable of producing various qualities and quantities of silk.

Chala-Non glowed with pride as he led Maya-12 to a chamber piled so high with eggs that they almost touched the stalactites. "This is where it happens."

"I've only been here once or twice," she said respectfully. "It is a loving place."

"It is a sacred space," Chala-Non said. "Not all eggs hatch. Not all grubs emerge from their cocoons. In fact, most do not. But we treasure each and every one."

"And the entrances are always protected?"

“The clan camps outside the tunnel, close enough to help if a youngling needs assistance exiting the cocoon.”

“So it would be reasonable to think that no cocoons were stolen by that route. Hmmm. Can you take me to the tunnel KinShan discovered?”

“Why? It doesn’t connect to the cocoon chamber.”

“Still. Humor me.”

She climbed and walked carefully through the tunnel, where it split into branches. She bent down and found a scrap of cocoon. “This was the way.”

“Yes. We suspected that this tunnel was used to move the cocoons.”

“Why can’t you take the younglings back?”

“We are safe only because we are valuable and thought harmless. If we ever violated that, Chulok or Sybil would destroy us and take everything.”

“Then if they are happy, why would they steal cocoons?”

“I don’t know,” the Sa’ad said.

“The answer, I think, is that they didn’t. I don’t think it was organized from the top. Someone went rogue.”

“Does that help us?”

“It might. If we assume that the eggs or cocoons came this way, maybe we can determine where they went from here—or even how the perpetrators entered level seven without being seen.”

They walked a tunnel lit by glow lanterns back to a spot where Maya bent and examined the wall more carefully, especially three parallel grooves.

Chala-Non asked, “What is it?”

“I think someone lost their balance right about *here*,” she said, pointing toward a twisted footprint. “Perhaps a larva twitched in its cocoon. I think the thief tripped and clutched at the wall.”

“Grooved the rock. Metal fingers...like yours?”

“Yes. Like mine. Droid or cyborg, I’d guess. Look here. See where this splinter of rock is pulled away?”

“Yes.”

“If a thread came undone from a cocoon—say, because it caught on a splinter—pulling it free could create a groove such as this.”

They followed the tunnel to a point where shallow, echoing voices filtered in from the egg chamber. Maya suspected there might be more direct connections than what Chala-Non had shown her.

“Look here,” she said, pointing at a puddle of water and a footstep in dried mud.

“What are you seeing?” the Sa’ad asked.

“How often does water run here?”

“Perhaps every fifty cycles.”

A cycle was about thirty hours. “So if it was wet, and the thief came this way, they might have left a footprint?”

“Yes. Dried now. What are you thinking?”

“Someone you trusted betrayed the Sa’ad. If I am correct, the traitor found a tunnel that led to the breeding room, one that connected to the Great Wheel. Then accomplices used this tunnel to carry away the cocoons.”

“Are you going up?”

Maya decided to shift from detective to battle mode. This demanded she either shift chips or allow both programs to sit in memory concurrently. The latter would slow her reactions but still allow her to function in both modes, switching back and forth rapidly if need be. Just with less efficiency and effectiveness overall. “Yes. Alone. You’ve come far enough. This could be dangerous.”

“I thought you said you were paid just to investigate?”

“That was business. This is personal. I’m mad.”

—

IF DROIDS HAD possessed nerves, Maya’s would have sizzled as she climbed the narrow ladder.

A secret tunnel. Grooved by water and then dug by some metal implement.

The rock tunnel became a shaft burned through rock with a blaster’s heat. Someone had created this, and not so long before. The tunnel snaked east and west, and rose up through different levels, at least three of them, without breaching an open space. This was a perfect secret entrance or exit.

She came out in the basement of a rudely fashioned building. It appeared to be a private storage area. A set of stairs to the left suggested a path to the owner.

The ironshroom stairs creaked as she walked up them. It was nerve-racking.

She came to a door. Her left hand formed into a lockpick, and she spent a few minutes solving the iron riddle.

It was a room, poorly outfitted and apparently rarely used. She'd never seen it or been here, but she couldn't help the sense that it was familiar.

The possessions were typical of Maze dwellers: cheap and functional. But again, barely touched.

Why was this so discomfiting?

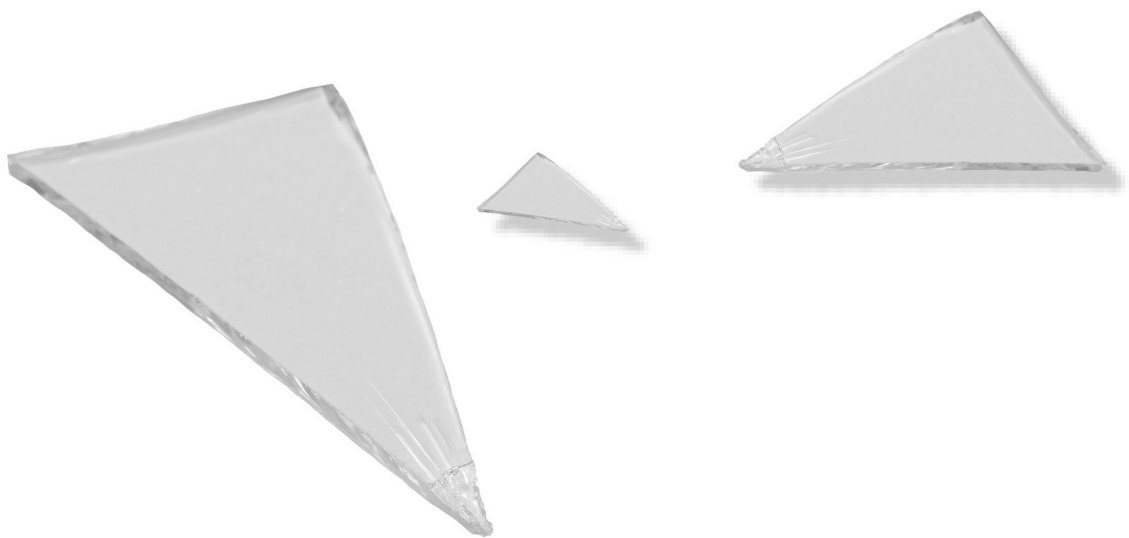
She carefully exited the room. She heard children playing. This was next to the largest orphanage in all of New Xaxis, a place where younglings of all species were cared for by the Sisters of the Light, a respected order.

"Maya!" a youngling called.

"You know me. Do I know you?"

"Of course. You live next to the Sisters. I don't see you very often, though."

In a sudden horrid moment of clarity, she understood.



CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“BRING THEM TO ME”

The apartment Maya shared with her sisters in the southwest sector was simple and spotless. It was a place for solitude. They did not need rest as living things did, but they did enjoy shutting down as many circuits as possible, allowing their data cores to self-check, download, correlate, and update in peace.

Droids designed for constant contact with living things needed this time or they lost efficiency and effectiveness. They needed to interact with one another in native form, rather than the modified behavior they assumed in dealing with living beings.

She needed to know this awaited her on returning from her rounds. It was home. This time when she entered, she realized she was not alone in her nest. She heard a sound in the shadows, immediately recognizable as *not-sister*. She felt a mixture of joy and trepidation. Joy at sharing presence with her new friend, and trepidation at what she had to tell him. “Mace?”

The Gigoran hunched in the shadows chuckled. “Maya. I don’t think you’ve been entirely honest with me.”

“Master Nala? I—I have always been honest with you. Do you need more translation, perhaps?”

“No more lies.” The albino Gigoran sneered. “Who is this ‘Mace’ you were calling out to?”

“A...a client.”

He came closer. “You seem quite happy. He is probably more a friend than a customer, I think.”

“I know nothing,” Maya said.

The killer raised his voice. “Take her.”

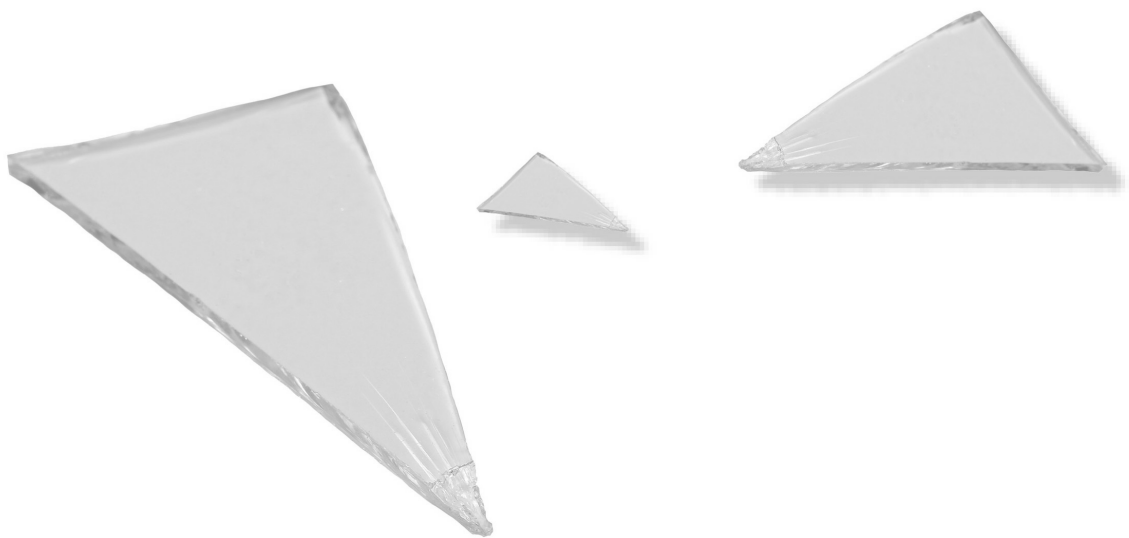
The door burst open, and three enforcers came in.

Maya had considerable modifications to her physical shell. The first attacker got a faceful of acid from her internal reservoir, directed through her right hand. Another reared back screaming as flame jutted from her left directly into his eyes.

In an instant before she turned to attack Nala, she was hit by a pulse weapon, totally disarming her and rendering her unconscious.

Nala kicked her motionless body. "And find her sisters as well." He turned to the soldier at his left, a wiry human woman with dark skin beneath her shock helmet. "Corporal Thanna Tan, bring them to me."

"I will," she said. But if he had truly looked at her, he might have seen that this soldier, recently transferred up from level ten, had purpose in her eyes.



CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

A RUMOR

Even before Mace seated himself in the Wheelhouse, he noticed something was wrong. The Xaxxis Axis was in fine form, but the two dancers were missing. There was something rather discordant about the music, and the patrons seemed in an ill mood.

“Haven’t ssseen you for a while,” Vin-Vin Sunfall said.

“Been busy,” Mace said.

“How’s the job going?”

“Up and down.”

The bartender wiped the ironshroom top of his bar. “Indeed. Lotsss going on.” A flicker of that forked tongue.

“I wouldn’t mind hearing a little gossip.” He offered a coin.

The bartender pushed it back. “This one is on the housse. I heard a rumor that our mutual mechanical friend may have been detained.”

Mace clucked. “And why would that be?”

“There is some belief that she and her sisters may have knowledge of things interesting to Chulok.” The bar was sparkly clean. The bartender continued to polish.

“What sort of things?”

“Oh...I’m not privy to such information, sssir. Wouldn’t want to be. I sssay thisss as a general thought.”

Mace could agree with that. “Tell me...Was your father from the upper world?”

“He wasss indeed.” That thought brought a broad, warm smile to the vague face. Apparently a good memory. “My family was great. We managed to trade all our wealth for *thisss*.”

“And are you happy?”

A forked tongue flickered between thin lips. “I reckon ssso. You know, we had more money than we needed. Maybe *ssshould* have been more mindful of that. I’m happy here—or I would be if not for *cssertain cssircumssstances*.”

Ouch. “Might be best not to be more specific.”

“Not all change was for the *worssse*. Or the *bessst*. I’m happy here.”

“Why?”

The bartender grinned. “I get to meet *nicssse* people like you.” They both laughed at that. It felt good.

“Tell me. When Chulok has ‘guests,’ where might they keep them?”

Vin-Vin seemed obsessed by a single spot on the bar. Rubbed and rubbed. “Oh, again, that *isssn’t* something I’d know anything about. Or information I would offer if I did. After all...you work for him, don’t you?”

“Have done.”

“So it would be *foolisssh* to *sssay* such things, don’t you think?”

“I was just testing you.”

“My very *assssumption*.”

“Cheers.” Mace hoisted his glass.

The bartender continued to wipe, but he had drifted a little closer. “There is something about the work I do. I get to judge people. Character.”

“Do you?”

“*Thisss* place has been ready for a change. Whether good or ill, I cannot *sssay*. But *sssomething* happened the day you appeared. A *ssseries* of *sssomethings*. And oddly, you *ssseem* connected to many of them.”

The air crackled.

“What would you call that? *Coincidencsse*?” Vin-Vin said quite carefully.

“The Web.”

“Ah, the Web.”

The bartender seemed far away. “My people lived here before any of the *starshipsss* brought offworlders.” He leaned forward and whispered, “You have heard of the *Dwellerssss* behind the *gatesss*?”

Mace nodded.

“My people built those gates, long before the Sa’ad even.” He stiffened proudly. “When we controlled our own destinies!”

“You will be the masters of your fates once again,” Mace said. It seemed to be what Vin-Vin needed to hear.

The Metagosan seemed to ponder. “I have to make a *decisssion*.”

“What sort of decision?”

“Whether some of those *threadsss* connect with mine. At some point, we have to trust. Can’t ask you to...”

“I don’t know you.”

“Nor I you. But as in the Blitz you play so well, *sssomeone putsss* their *cardsss* down first.”

“That would be you,” Mace said.

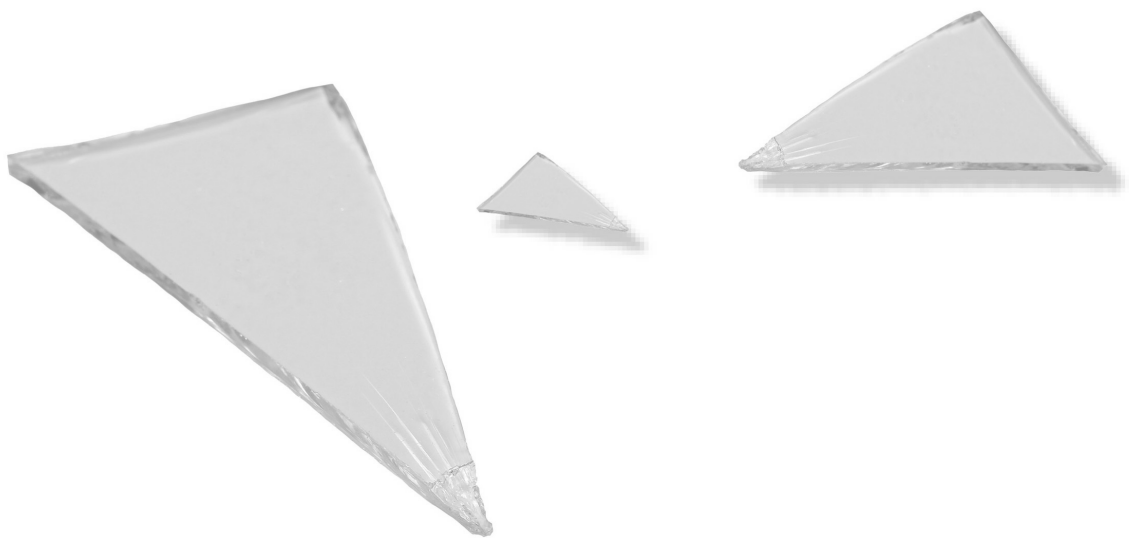
“I can tell you a rumor I heard about where Chulok *housesss* their *guestsss*. And if this comes back on me, I *sssuppose* that’s an answer.”

“And if it doesn’t...”

“That’s a different answer.”

They smiled, testing each other.

If the information proved useful, Mace would know something as well.



CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

CLIMB AND FALL

For fourteen hours a day, in respect for the sleep cycles of offworlders and newer immigrants, the lights in New Xaxis were dimmed. This wasn't as much of a mercy as it seemed, because until their bodies and schedules were acclimated to a cycle of thirty standard hours, they were in a constant state of fatigue. Citizens either wilted or adjusted. Merchants and ambassadors were always just a little fatigued and out of sorts.

As planned.

But the dimness did offer shadow, and it was in that concealment that Mace Windu climbed the scenic lift cable to the Floating Palace. It was as thick around as his finger, but he had no doubts that it was strong enough to support a hundred of him. His hands were sufficiently dry and callused that a fold of leather for each was more than enough to protect from friction.

With inhuman strength and skill and no thought of the distance he would fall if he lost his grip, he climbed.

—

ONCE ON THE mansion level, he climbed up through the gear mechanism, then moved like a Copulan shadow-warrior through the darkness. Whoever he met, he struck down with his staff, rendering them unconscious with minimal injury when possible. One recognized him—the human he had defeated on the bridge. “Solver?” the man asked, betrayal and confusion in his eyes as Mace attacked with the most gentle blow that would still dim his lights.

Fair was fair.

There was nothing glorious about striking down enemies, even if he was sparing their lives. And Mace had to quash every flash of something too much like joy for his comfort. He could not afford to be merciful...but there was no need to take pleasure in this.

VIN-VIN'S DIRECTIONS PROVED good. Chulok had re-created the original mansion but repurposed its wine cellar into a dungeon. All three Mayas were confined to cages suspended from the ceiling. Mace was upon the guards before they knew he was in the room. Their hands touched their blaster grips before they hit the floor.

"Mace, you came," Maya-12 said. It sounded as if her battery was totally drained.

"I hoped I wouldn't be too late." Mace made quick work of her cage, freeing her.

"You shouldn't have come," she said, collapsing into his arms.

"You shouldn't have protected me. Let's go." He cut her bindings and proceeded to examine her wiring. The main battery had been disconnected so that she was running on the capacitor. The danger there was that if the capacitor drained, her core memory, her "self," would disappear. This was how one tortured a holodroid—take them close to "empty" repeatedly, generating the closest thing to fear a synthetic could experience.

The instant he reconnected her main power, she came back to life, blinked hard, and said, "Thank you. You are my friend."

"Let's free your sisters."

"Yes, let us free them."

THE OTHERS HAD been allowed to drain to the very last percentage point. Reconnecting their main power took a second. Bringing them back to themselves a little longer. But when they had cycled their way to consciousness, they shook themselves like big wet banthas and then bowed to him.

"You have our gratitude," Maya-8 said.

Maya-14 chimed in, "Thank the Web our sister was right about you."

“Thank me later,” he said brusquely. “First, let’s get you out of here. I saw glider wings. Tourists or recreationists were using them to glide through the cloud.”

“Yes! We have seen them. We can use them,” Maya-8 said.

Luckily, the Xaxxis Axis band had once made a command performance for Chulok’s troops, and they had maps of the palace. The wing storage room was two tunnels and a lift away. Outside the room, there were no guards. The door yielded to Maya-8’s hand. When it swung open, they saw three pairs of wings hanging on the wall.

Get the sisters off this damn disk, he said to himself. You can climb back down.

The sight of the wings seemed to give them hope. “Yes!” Maya-8 whispered.

Navigating through the shadows, Mace took them to the edge of the Floating Palace. Maya-8 and Maya-14 donned their wings quickly. Before they jumped, they soberly evaluated him. “You are an unusual human,” Maya-14 said and then dived. Her sister followed.

Mace turned to Maya-12. “Last pair.”

“How will you get down?”

“The same way I got up.”

“I told them nothing.”

“I know.”

“I don’t deserve rescue, Mace. I—”

Suddenly, the shadows disappeared and a klaxon horn sounded. “Go!” he screamed, and pushed her off the edge. She fell and fell—and then flew.

“*You!*” came a vocoder-translated voice behind him.

Mace could see the time for pretense was past. “My name is Mace Windu, Nalafifita. I think you know my business. I suggest you retire.”

The fatigue, the distraction, the missed nights of sleep, and the terrible dreams had taken their toll, and Mace grunted as a blaster bolt struck him from darkness. Damn! He still hadn’t sensed it! This thought came as he slumped to his knees, the strength draining from his limbs and the darkness swallowing him. The very last thing he managed to do was hurl his lightsaber

off the platform, in the same direction Maya-12 had fallen. *Don't let Chulok get it...*

"Mace!" Maya-12 screamed up at him. She fell like a winged seed in the wind, dodging blaster bolts as she spiraled into the Children's Maze.

—

PAIN IS A signal. Suffering is optional.

Mace had never been signaled more thoroughly. And with every moment, it became more and more challenging to resist the option of suffering. He hung in the very dungeon where the Mayas had been confined, his shackled wrists flaming, his beaten and bruised body totally still. Mace thought that hours had passed, but hopefully not days. No matter what Chulok's people had done to him—and they had done much—Mace refused to respond.

A medical droid supervised the torture at every step, every stroke.

"This is such an interesting moment," Chulok said. "When this is complete, we will have a full study of Jedi reactions to stress, pain, and fear. Part of me wishes to extract knowledge from you as swiftly as possible. But another part wishes to perform the experiment, to be the first to measure every moment of the resistance, surrender, and death of a Jedi. I'm not at all certain this has ever been done before. So I would like you to consider this: The longer it takes, the more data I get. But if you will tell me what I wish, I promise that your pain will end there."

"Your word of honor?"

"Of course." Chulok's smiles were the sort only possible for those who are happy with whatever next occurs.

"You and me, Chulok," Mace said. "You want what I know, you earn it."

Chulok chuckled. "Ah. One-to-one combat? How savage and satisfying. Regretfully...no. I take no action without gain. A beaten, broken man with no lightsaber? No. If Jedi you are, why not tell me where that lightsaber is, and I will send my enforcers to fetch it? Then, if you wish, you may have the death you desire. Tell me."

Mace controlled his fear. Ordinarily it was just part of the emotional power that melded with the Force. But now it was a separate, living thing that challenged his will.

Mace considered his next words carefully. New Xaxis was a powder keg, destined to spark someday. And in that moment, Mace let himself become the match. “I’ve been working for her from the start. The Republic wants stability in this sector. And that means keeping the balance of power exactly as it is.”

“Then it is time I finally dealt with her,” Chulok said.

“What do you want me to do with him?” Nala asked.

“Eventually, his head on a pike...but wait until we return with Sybil’s head. Side by side.”

Mace looked at the last soldier to leave the room, his swollen eyes recognizing her. She seemed reluctant to leave, staring at him as if searching her mind for an answer. Finally, she shrugged and turned.

“Thanna Tan,” he croaked.

She froze, unspeaking.

“Thanna Tan. Will you fight for your planet?”

Without turning, she left.

—

THE MOOD IN the comm center was strained. The Great Wheel had awoken on the edge of war. There were increased troops surrounding the Floating Palace and armed guards raiding the Children’s Maze in search of Maya-12 and her sisters. The air was filled with danger and unrest. Sybil and Chulok had positioned snipers on every major corner throughout the city.

General Slithis was Iotran, they said, his third eye the result of an operation. But his enormous body was so swollen with muscle as he tensed and released his massive fists at the communications table that he easily could have been mistaken for a different species. He had once been a slave, and now he was a master. But a master of a thousand warriors was still a servant to the thane.

On the other side of the table was the redoubtable Nala, who was already dressed in his pilot's garb.

Both waited attentively for Chulok, for the moment their simmering mutual antipathy under control.

"Where are they?" Nala asked.

"Patience."

"I am the best judge of when and where to be patient. I am not paid for patience. I am paid for results."

"Then lately, you've been paid for nothing, it would seem."

"Gentlemen. Can we have peace as we wage war?"

Nala and General Slithis stood. "Sirs!"

Chulok swept into the room flanked by two battle droids, wearing a vast purple cloak tailored to fit them perfectly. They sat heavily in the double chairs. "Sybil will die. But the work will not end at that glorious moment. She has a line of inherited power that runs down the matrilineal line. We can't kill them all. We can't *find* them all.

"She had great wealth, and we know that her children will fight for the inheritance—but first they will join together. And that rage they feel? The thing that substitutes for the mother love they never got? That lack of genuine connection will fuel the rage, as if we stopped them from the rapprochement that they always craved. We will win this fight, but it will not be easy."

Together, they studied the map of level four.

Chulok said, "Most of the action will doubtless take place here. Reinforce security on level three."

"The Syblins have already seized it," Nala replied.

"Are our fighters secure?"

"Sufficiently enough," the albino Gigoran said. "They've seized some of our common area, supposedly to provide security. But our private hangars are still under our control. For now."

"Reinforce them."

CHULOK LEFT THE communications room and headed back to the throne room. In it, a dozen citizens from the Crystal Empire waited anxiously.

“We demand protection!” one said.

“And you will have it, as agreed. But gentlebeings, do *not* come to me with demands. I protect you because I agreed to, and Chulok keeps their word. But what I do *not* keep is bothersome insects who speak above their station.”

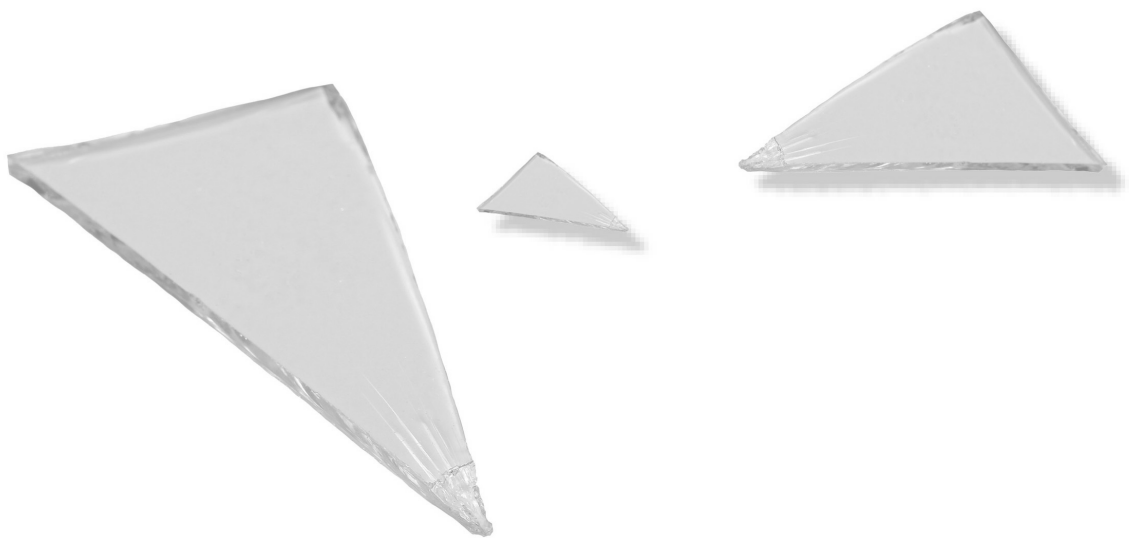
“We—”

“You will be silent!” they thundered. “After this is done, I will be the most powerful being on Metagos. But it will not stop there. This will be a pirate world—Sybil never had ambitions for more than this planet. Comes of being sedentary. I want more, and that means going up against the Hutts, do you understand? We have the potential for something they have never had. I will have a *planet*, damn all of you.

“And the master of a planet does *not* have fools demanding protection. The master protects what is *his*. And what is *his* knows its place. Now: Are you mine?”

“Yes...yes, sirs.”

“Then go. And do not fear. Anyone who comes against me or mine will be reduced to ashes. And whoever demands my protection can be assured of doing without it.”



CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

THE WAR BEGINS

As happens with all wars, the battle of the Glass Abyss began with a single shot.

That shot was a scream, a roar from a sonic bomb mounted on the same tram that had shuttled citizens around the rim for decades.

It stopped right at the opening of Sybil's fortress. The earsplitting blast burst the brains of the outside guards and sent walls of lethal sound down the tunnels, hammering all in its way.

This attack was led personally by Chulok, so rarely seen outside their palace that the sight of a four-armed, four-legged, two-headed colossus was enough to inspire almost supernatural terror.

"Kill them!" Chulok screamed, spittle flying from both mouths. "Kill them all!"

Sybil's adult children rushed out, reeling, ears bleeding where the sonic bomb had battered them, and a former advantage had been converted to a doom stroke.

Many had heard rumors of Chulok's ferocity. Few had seen it, and none had experienced it and lived. They swung their Sanchi Kan so swiftly that it wove around them like a suit of armor, deflecting all bolts as if it had drawn them through magnetism. They slashed and chopped, kicked and thrust, crushing bones and skulls, driving all before them to red ruin.

Beside them, their fighters cascaded flame and searing light into their enemies, and although many of Chulok's forces were struck down, they killed Sybil's children at a rate of almost three to one.

The shrieks were terrible, a meld of fear and pain and self-flagellation that this attack had not been anticipated. A Syblin screamed, burning. The smell of singed flesh stank, and the smoke filling the air was heavy with the taste of burned meat.

“Kill them!” Chulok screamed again as they gained entrance.

“We had a truce!” a Syblin called.

“You are a fool,” Nala said, and smashed him across the chest with one mighty arm, crushing his thorax as if he’d been trod upon by a giant.

—

THE ATTENDANTS IN the egg chamber trembled as Chulok and their troops entered.

Sybil, at least, tried to project calm that she could not possibly have felt.

“Sybil,” Chulok said fondly. “We have not spoken directly in many years.”

She sniffed the air. “I smell my own burning children,” she said. Her voice was no longer insinuating and steady. She was struggling with all her considerable might to remain dignified and calm. These were, after all, her final moments.

“They should not have resisted me. And let that be a lesson for all here.”

“Will words have any effect?” she inquired politely.

Chulok’s heads wagged in perfect synchrony. “Yes. Not for you, of course. You are done. But not *all* your children need die.”

She seemed to accept that with equanimity. “What do you ask?”

“Certain things have gone wrong in my organization. Goods have been stolen, trust broken, my palace itself invaded. I want to know if you have had a hand in these things.”

“I had no spies in your organization. I am not that devious.”

“I see,” Chulok said. “No, I don’t believe you are.”

“You will spare my children?”

Chulok paused. “Those born who do not interfere with me may live.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“There was a trainload of Glassbane. Were you responsible for its troubles?”

“It is possible,” she said, and there was a hint of pride in her voice.

“Was the one called Solver involved in this?”

“I have inspired loyalty in my employees specifically because I do not comment on such things.”

Chulok nodded their approval. “We must have ethics in life,” they agreed. Then they indicated the eggs and said to their followers, “Burn them all.”

That, finally, cracked her facade. “No!” Her scream was deep and jagged enough to have torn out her throat.

Chulok’s enforcers set fire to the nest. As the flame licked at the hexagonal hive chambers, the grubs within woke and tried to chew and writhe their way to safety.

Sybil tore her flaming privacy curtain aside, humping down off her platform. Her body, swollen with perpetual pregnancy, dragged her back despite heroic effort. “Not my children!”

Nala watched with mock concern. “No mother should watch her children burn.”

At a nod from Chulok, he raised his rifle and shot her. Not in the head, which presumably would have killed her instantly, but in the body, tearing flesh and splashing fluid. Again and again, until she was but a quivering pile of leaking meat.

“Burn it,” Chulok whispered. “Burn it all.”

“Yes, sir. And now, all is right with the Web.”

—

THE NEXT STOP was the Children’s Maze and the three great orphanages at its center. “Young ones!” Chulok called up to one orphanage, four arms spread wide. “I know that many of Sybil’s children live here. I have words for you. Your mother is dead. I killed her and burned the eggs.

“Any of you who wish to join my forces will find opportunities to do so. The rest: Do what you will, but stay out of my way. And remember, this is *my* city. Obey me and live. Challenge me and die.”

Eyes watched them from the windows, and tears flowed. But no voice was raised in protest. None dared.

Still, one pair of eyes was now open as they had not been in many years. Corporal Thanna Tan had seen the slaughter in the nest and now the implicit threat to children. She was ready to fight.

ALL WAS QUIET in the ruins of Sybil's nest, save for the crackling fire climbing the walls. As if making a pilgrimage, five of her children stood at the entrance to the queen's chamber, watching. Feeling their world spin. Nothing would ever be the same.

"Dead. All dead. I am the eldest. I turn," Syblin-4 said.

Even as he spoke, the shift from male to female began with a lightening of his eyes. His teeth began to soften once again, and other changes were happening in his reproductive tract. In ten days, the change would be complete, and the new queen would be ready for mating.

"It is your right," Syblin-32 said. "What do we do?"

"We contact allies. We make war. We kill them all."

Sybil had never been a loving mother. On some level, her children might even have hated her. But damned if they wouldn't avenge her death.

THE SOUNDS OF enemy fire around the geode crackled, audible even in the communications center.

From their double chairs, Chulok effortlessly dominated the room. "Sybil is dead. We have cut the head off the snake. But the body is still twitching."

"What would you have us do?" General Slithis said.

"You will be in charge on the ground. Nala, you will take the air with your squadron."

"Yes, Thane."

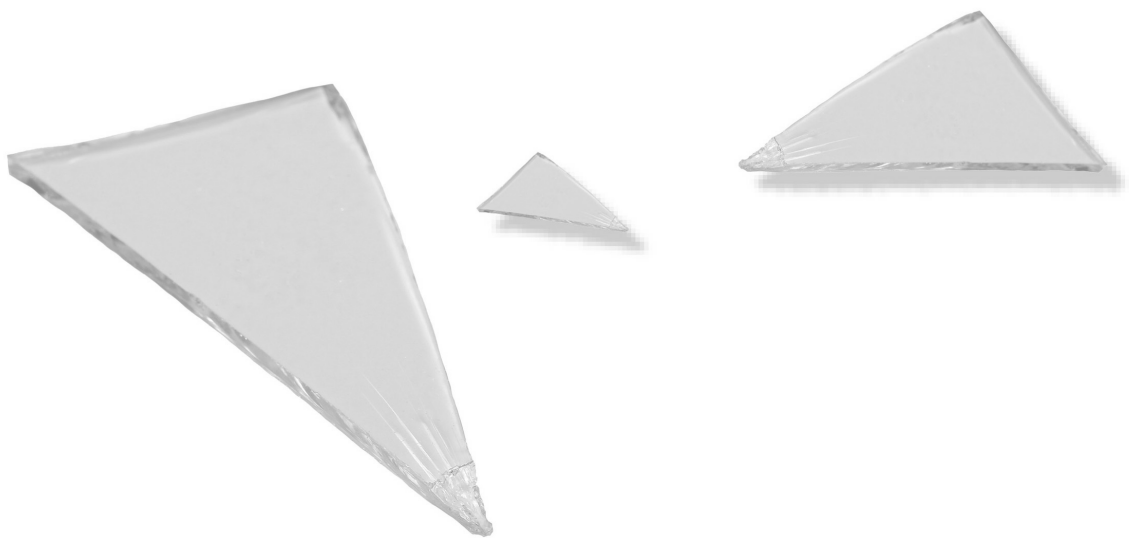
"Kill anything that resists you. I want the Great Wheel locked down by ten bells."

THE ENTIRE SOUTHWESTERN Wheel was in flames, and smoke was so thick that the ceiling crystals were obscured.

The ground shook, and the air stank.

The civilians huddled, terrified, in whatever shelter they could find. The truce had existed for so long that they had made the critical error of forgetting that they were actually in the no-being's-land between two armies.

They were learning.



CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

ESCAPE

Mace, bound, hung groaning, biting his lip to suppress any louder sound. His abused flesh was beyond ordinary weakness and beginning to shut down. It seemed that no millimeter of his skin was unscored with shock-prod burns.

But a Jedi was more than his body. A Jedi was the living embodiment of a power larger and older than the galaxy. All Mace had to do was shrink down his sense of individual self until he could move between the fears and pains. There was always peace to be found, if you went deep enough.

There was always hope as well, he told himself. But those damaged by misery and addicted to suffering would miss a critical opportunity. He had sworn he would ask for nothing from these people. No request at all. Once you asked for any favor, the person who granted it inevitably became a “friendly” presence. And that—the desire to please a friend—was the first chip in your armor.

While he hung dangling, the two guards played cards, laughing and speculating on what horror they might next inflict. The little tractor-tread medical droid had revived him three times already, protesting the guards’ brutality every time.

Through slitted eyes, he saw the droid roll to the door and open it, then leave. But before the door closed, Woolif fluttered in.

And now, he thought he saw his moment.

“Water,” he whispered.

The torturer rose and struck him, quite hard, in the belly. “You can drink your own blood.”

“How about *yours*?” Suddenly, with the last of his strength, Mace kicked out and struck the man precisely in the solar plexus, powerful enough to paralyze the diaphragm. He dropped like a stone.

The other guard rose, slapping for his blaster, but Woolif extended a probe and delivered a cardiac shock that collapsed him bonelessly.

Mace's feet were chained, but that merely made his actions more effective. Once he bowed his legs and slipped them around the standing guard's head, he had a lock, and the tusked guard gagged and scrabbled at Mace's legs—then began to claw at him.

Mace felt a sharp, powerful shock as Woolif sent a charge into this guard's chest as well. The torturer went limp.

"Thanks for the help," Mace said as Woolif fluttered up to the rafters and used a surgical saw to cut through the ropes. Mace fell to the ground, collapsing onto his shoulders with a painful impact on the hands tied behind his back. "How did you find me?"

"Do you know a Corporal Tan?"

Mace's bruised lips formed a smile.

As Woolif freed his hands and feet, the little chroma-wing's face twisted in disapproval. "You were going to kill him," Woolif said. "That is against my code. I merely took the most expedient action to stop you from snapping his neck."

—

MACE COULD AFFORD only a minute of rest, commanding circulation to return to his numbed limbs. Pain now, suffering later.

Woolif had better maps of the Floating Palace and, as soon as Mace could move, led him to another supply of glider wings. These were marked for emergency egress.

Mace was barely strong enough to carry his escape wings up from the main level. Woolif monitored the comings and goings of guards and led him to a splinter of shadow near one of the major gun emplacements that was currently unattended.

"Thank you," Mace said and dived off the edge.

The adrenal jolt as he fell helped clear his mind, but he knew that wouldn't last long after he hit the ground. This was, he knew, the very last of his

strength.

His eyelids were so heavy, so terribly heavy...

Woolif's wings slapped his face. "Wake up! Wake up!"

"Huh...?" Mace realized that he was indeed gliding, using automatic reflexes and balance skills that had served him well for many years.

The Maze loomed up before him, and so far no one had raised an alarm. Because Woolif had woken him, he was able to spin and land feetfirst rather than headfirst.

Still, he crumbled. Blackness followed swiftly.

—

SLAP, SLAP. SLAP, slap. "Wake up!" Woolif said.

"Oh, go kiss a gundark..." he heard himself mumble.

"I am not familiar with such creatures, but I doubt I'd find the experience pleasant."

Mace had spent much of his imprisonment clawing his way out of a hazy sleep, and that experience helped him now. Exhaustion and pain had buried him in a deep pit, but he was going to either pull Woolif's wings off or come back to his senses.

For one fully committed, while there is life there is strength, and he found enough to rise, see where he was on his mental map of New Xaxis, and start to move. He staggered from one shattered building to another and from one shadow to another. Whenever he collapsed, Woolif's infinitely irritating voice cajoled him into getting back up and taking another step.

He fell a fourth time, and when he opened his eyes again, he was surrounded by several of Sybil's younglings.

"Kill him," a Syblin said.

"Mother hired him," his brother replied.

"Mother hired him," said yet another. Mace's head spun. He stopped trying to differentiate. His head pounded as if a bantha were tap-dancing on his brain.

"They'll kill him."

“What do we do?”

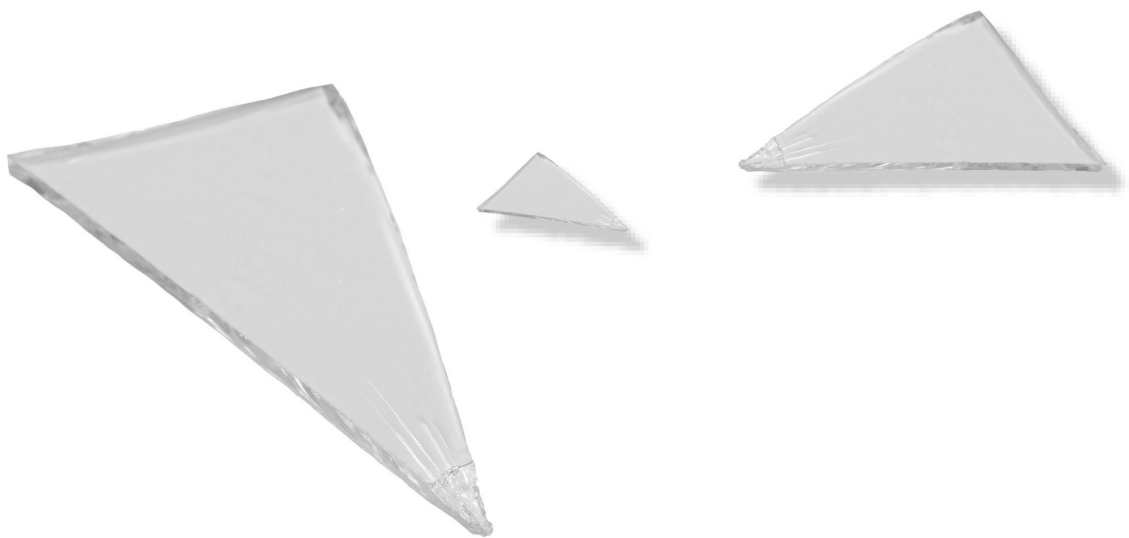
Another had a thought. “I saw him with Maya-Twelve. She may know.”

—

THE SYBLIN CHILD scurried through the chaos to the Wheelhouse bar. It still stood, but the building next to it was in ruins. Vin-Vin was clearing debris with the help of a few loyal customers, and behind a wall that blocked their work from prying eyes, the three Maya sisters were doing the work of six. Maya-8 saw the unnamed child first. “Hide!” she said. “They killed your mother.”

“We have your friend,” the Syblin said.

“Where?” Maya-12 asked. After a nod from Vin-Vin, she left with the child to find Mace Windu.



CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

SOMETHING LEFT BEHIND

KinShan and her brother Chala-Non, as well as a host of other ranking Sa'ad, huddled over Mace Windu's unconscious body in a kiva dug into the flooring of one of the northern caverns. The chamber was dedicated to healing and reserved for the royal family. Mushrooms and crystals were arrayed in a carefully planned sequence so the tribe's greatest doctors could find almost anything they required within arm's reach.

Ordinarily, this was the most peaceful of locations, but that was not true at the moment. The air pulsed with shock waves, and the chamber shook from detonations three levels above them.

"He is burning up with fever," KinShan said. "But we can heal him." She added to the Mayas, "Thank you for bringing him."

"He saved us, Princess. At great cost."

"That is the kind of man he is," KinShan said. "Now please leave us. We have much to do."

—

SA'AD DOCTORS HAD never worked harder to pull a patient back from the edge. Mace himself felt as if he weighed a mountain, almost unable to move as they fed him healing broths and rubbed unguents into his fever-swollen joints.

They let him sleep, and during one of those times, he woke alone, uncertain where he was, covered with clammy sweat.

Mace Windu floated in and out of consciousness, even as he sat up. He was getting used to this state of "waking dream." In fact, there were times when he wasn't certain anymore what was reality and what was fantasy, what was the dream and what was waking. All he knew was that he hurt everywhere, from his toenails to his teeth. He was so wrung out that he wasn't even sure how he managed to stand—or was he standing?

Chulok had done more to break him than anyone ever had. Mace chuckled defiantly, although his eyeballs felt as if they'd been seared in a skillet. This was what he was born to do. Chulok could not stop him, crush him. All the monster could do was put pressure on him. And heat and pressure created diamonds.

Was he walking now? Was some canny part of him watching for enemy eyes, falling back into shadow? Was instinct putting one foot in front of another, even as another part of him screamed to return to the sickroom?

Dreaming or waking, he'd never felt fear and pain such as this. It drove him out of his normal mind, leaving only the urge to get...something. There was something he needed. Yes, that was it. He would get this needed thing—what was it?—and then return.

The seventh level was quiet. The Sa'ad were sleeping. He would be very, very quiet. Stealthy. He would find his way to a side tunnel, one KinShan had shown him. Or someone else. He couldn't remember.

Just keep moving. Be sure no one sees you. He stumbled forward, a few steps at a time, each like scaling a mountain. He was almost there—almost out.

Something tapped him on the shoulder. Mace staggered around and stared into the face of a tiny flying creature. He was...what was his name? He fought for a scrap of memory.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

Woolif was his name. He'd called him Woolif.

Mace swallowed, his throat almost swollen shut. "I—I have to go back to my ship," he said. "There's something in my ship I have to get. Some equipment..." His tongue felt thick and furry. Where was he?

It seemed to Mace that the little flying thing's face was filled with pity. "What is it that you seek?" His voice was so kind. And that irritated something deep within him. He didn't deserve kindness.

"There...there are tools. Things that I need..."

"What you think you need," said the little flying one, "is to leave. This place has been death for fifty years. It almost killed your friend. You came and upset the balance, and now the war is on."

“The war is on,” Mace said. “I can’t control it.”

“All you can do is the best you can. The greatest good for the greatest number.”

Mace could smell night wind. So close. Just a little bit farther and he could be outside. If he was outside, he could stumble his way back to his ship, and if he was in his ship, he could leave...

No, no. Not leave. He could find the tools. What tools? By the Force, there wasn’t anything there at all. At that moment, he finally had the clarity to see what the fever had concealed. What had happened here on Metagos, the nightmares, the distance he felt from the Force, the overwhelming power of a pair of monsters, all the death and pain—all of it had come within a hairbreadth of unshielding the naked animal desire to survive. And that urge had very nearly undone him and dishonored him.

He could tell himself that he was lost in a dream. But that would not be completely honest, and what he needed now was to hold on to the thread of whatever honesty he could find, here at the very edge of himself. In truth, he feared to face Chulok. He dreaded the consequences of his choices. Yes, that was the fatigue and pain and disorientation speaking...but it spoke in his own voice, and he could not pretend otherwise.

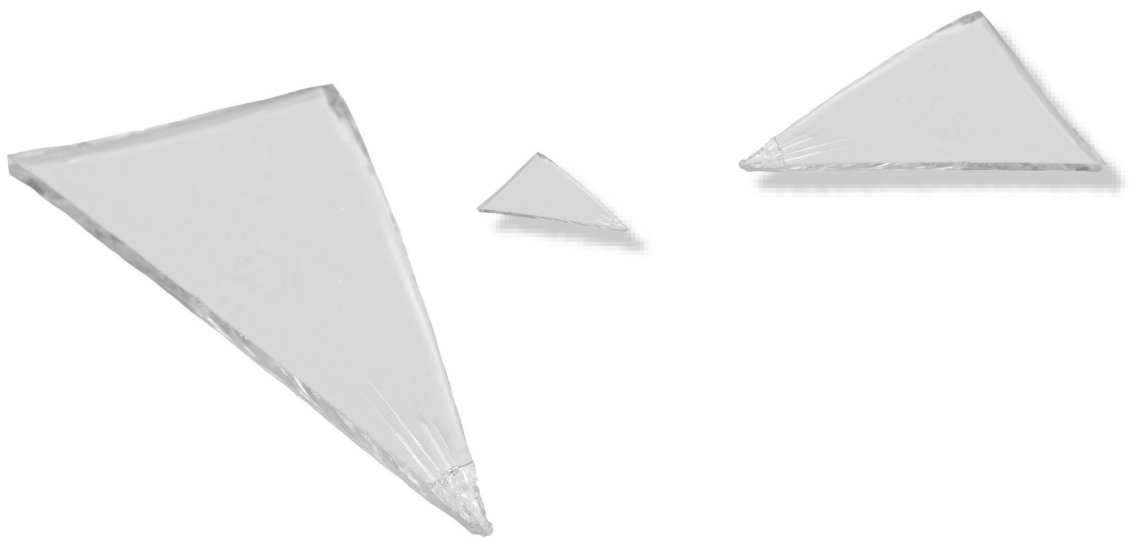
“I may die here,” he said.

“Yes,” Woolif said.

“I may fail you. I might fail...*her*.”

“If you try, if you do all a being can, she is wise enough to ask no more.”

Mace nodded. This little creature, in this moment, had been the best friend he could have asked for. He whispered, “Take me back down.”



CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

AWAKENING

“U hhhh...where am I?” Mace groaned, shaking off sleep with great effort. Glowing mushrooms sent waves of light into the crystals protruding from walls and ceiling of this narrow underground burrow, large enough to hold perhaps five people.

“With us. We found you in the base of the city.”

“What...what is happening?”

“War,” KinShan said. “Open war. It has begun. But before it did, those who brought you here also found this.” She retrieved his lightsaber from its hiding place within his staff and handed it to him.

“You told them I’m a Jedi?”

“There was no need. Maya-Twelve already suspected, since she saw you kill three of Chulok’s men on the bridge. She said there is a flavor to the Jedi arts, detectable to a droid who has an understanding of Jedi training.”

“Of course she has,” Mace said. Unbidden, a ridiculous scene of Maya mimicking Master Yoda’s singsong voice formed in his mind. But now was not the time for laughter. Mace released the intrusive thought and struggled to sit upright.

“There is a time to fight,” she said. “This is a time to heal.”

Mace’s voice sounded like a bag of broken glass. “I cannot lead you. Not until I’m stronger.”

“You will be stronger soon. Your strength was stolen through lack of sleep. But what you have already learned should be reversing this process. We will take this further, but time will tell.”

“It had better tell damn quickly. This situation is spinning out of control. I know how to win. I can see it. We have a little time before action becomes critical. In fact, we have to wait until Chulok’s and Sybil’s forces have

established a pattern of battle. Then we will have a narrow opportunity—just a moment—in which we can act.”

BY THE NEXT day, a deep night’s sleep, the Sa’ad’s ministrations, Woolif’s medications, and his own profound healing abilities had kicked in. KinShan took him to an eastern cavern to which he had not yet been privy. It was as bejeweled as any other. Perhaps more so, as he noted there was less foot traffic. This was a most private space, much of it taken up with grub nurseries. Ritual space, perhaps.

KinShan said, “Your first crystal contains the story you have told yourself until this time. The next will be your story going forward. Choose another crystal. See not with your eyes but with your heart.”

“And then?”

“Then you will”—she searched for the word in Basic—“‘waking sleep.’ And see if the crystal chooses you in return.”

***IN THE FORESTED** depths of dream, the child—Mace—roamed, solitary amid the verdant green.*

“I see him,” Mace said. “See his dreams of home.”

“Happy?” KinShan asked.

“No. Restless. Wandering. He knew there was something more to life than he was experiencing in his world.”

“Look into his eyes.”

Mace looked directly into the child’s eyes.

“Yes,” the Jedi said.

“Let him see the man you are. The things you have learned. The deeds you have done. How far he has come.”

“Yes.”

“What does he say to you?”

“YOU ARE ME?” young Mace said.

“Yes.”

“So tall and strong. So wise. But...do you love me?”

“I am you. What do you mean?”

“Do you remember me? Do you sing and dance?”

Mace sighed. “I have not for many years. But I am learning.”

“Not learning. Remembering.”

The boy capered, turned flips and handsprings.

Mace smiled ruefully. “I remember.”

A DREAM WITHIN a dream. Young Mace Windu running with friends. Younger Mace sat with adult Mace, watching.

“I don’t remember much about my friends. I’m not sure I had them. Comrades, yes. Companions. But...being friendly isn’t the same as having friends.”

“You had friends in the Temple.”

“Not friends. More like...siblings.”

“Is that worse? Better?”

“It is...different. Not the same.”

“You remember being alone?”

“That, yes. And sometimes I fought to help others.”

“But who fought for you? With you?”

“I remember being loved...but also wondering why my parents gave me up.” There. It was said.

“I remember why.”

“Why?”

Young Mace chuckled. “Look at yourself. You left before I could walk. If you had remained, you’d still have been alone. You would have been too strong, and fast and fearless...and the others wouldn’t have been able to keep

up with you. If you wish, I will show you the memory of our parents, the one you didn't wish to remember."

"Please."

—

IT WAS A fine day, a good day. A day when his father and mother had chosen to ride their domesticated plow beast out beyond the village to a clearing where, just a few years before, the two of them had exchanged vows.

It was a place they both loved, and their child, Mace, only a year old on this day, needed to be brought here to their love place to celebrate and understand the bond his parents had felt, enough to commit to each other for a lifetime.

His parents spread their blanket in the clearing and sat with little Mace between them, sucking on a piece of lushfruit, his favorite. It was a violet fruit—little did he know that that color would be his favorite all his life.

The family laughed and ate, and songs were sung of life and their commitment to one another.

Perhaps, just perhaps, if they had not been singing so loudly, they would not have attracted the garu-bears. Or at least, they would have heard them coming.

But by the time his father sensed the danger, the very rarest of dangers, the hungry garu-bears were upon them.

How his parents fought! His father was a big man, a hunter and farmer, and his spear was mighty. He bought time for his mother to raise little Mace to the bough of a thorn tree, tearing her own flesh as she fastened him there just in time to turn and see her husband brought down by three of the beasts.

She fought with all she had, slaying a fourth, but then the fifth bore her down. The last thing little Mace saw of the mother he loved was her face, strained but imbued with a radiant, almost transcendent calm, locking eyes with him so that the love in her, torn free by teeth and claws, was free to enter her beloved son.

Minutes later, when the frustrated screams of the garu-bear as it tried to reach the child sheltering in the tree alerted the village warriors, it was too late for the parents and almost too late for the child.

But the warriors killed the garu-bear. As they brought little Mace down from the tree, they marveled that he displayed no fear. No grief. It was as if he had, to survive, gone to some place deep within himself, and the calm, searing black eyes of that boy...frightened them.

—

MACE'S EYES WERE wet. "They loved me."

"Yes," young Mace said.

"And died to protect me."

"Yes."

"And the Jedi chose me because I had no one."

"No, you chose them."

—

THE COMMUNITY GATHERING chamber was filled with all the people of his tribe. They would care for him, they would love him all his life, but they believed what the Jedi had said—that this child was special and that this child with no mother and no father would have to decide for himself.

So the clan's Grand Elder performed an ancient ritual of choosing.

The Windu child was placed upon a mat of woven theshweed. Little Mace sat on the mat, barely old enough to crawl. At each corner of a triangle, an object was placed. A lushfruit at one. A pyramidal jigsaw puzzle, something a child could use to create different shapes and sizes and images, was placed on the second. And at the third was a lightsaber shell borrowed from the visitors. A Jedi stood behind the lightsaber.

The Grand Elder of the clan had a sonorous voice, a face that looked as if it had been hammered with rocks, and the kindest and wisest eyes. He said,

“This is your time, young Windu. This should not have happened, but we do not have the power to decide when the universe tells us to choose our fates.

“We are your people. But you are a different child. The offspring of two of our most beloved and powerful members. These people came here from the stars, and they see you. It is possible that they are more your tribe than we are, that your destiny lies on a distant world. If so, we will not stand in your way. Stay here, and we will protect you until you are strong enough to protect yourself. Go with them...and you will be the one to protect others. The choice awaits. Choose, young Mace Windu, or fate chooses for you.”

The boy had shed no tears since coming down from the tree. The strangers had arrived on the planet seeking nourishment and communion but were astonished to meet the small child whose parents had died so horribly, whom everyone said was so strange. The boy had never cried. He had never shed a tear or wailed or shown any grief at all.

What a strange child he was.

That child looked at them and then at the food. Crawled a bit toward it, then looked at the puzzle. Crawled close to the puzzle. He looked at it, turned his head this way and that, reached out, came very close to touching it...but didn't.

Odd.

Then little Mace crawled to the corner. The object there was a silver tube the Jedi called a lightsaber. It had been disarmed. There was no danger in it. But even bereft of its kyber crystal, it looked exactly like what any Jedi in the galaxy would use to preserve peace.

The child touched it. Ran his hand over it and then grabbed it and held it close to himself as if he already understood what it was and what he needed to do.

“It is done,” the leader said. “The child has chosen.”

—

TEARS RAN FULLY down Mace's face now, as they had at no other time in his life. He said, *“They did not give me up. My father was not a brute. They*

loved me.”

“Yes,” young Mace said. “They loved us.”

“And our people did not give us up. They allowed us to choose.”

“Yes. As every other Jedi has chosen. You didn’t remember because it is too deeply ingrained in you. It would be like asking if you chose your eye color.

“This is who you are, Mace Windu. Who I was. Who we are. There is no other expression of your being that would be half as complete.”

“But I dance between light and darkness.”

“Which all of us must do. Darkness without light and light without darkness are both blinding.”

“What do I do now?” he asked, astonished that he asked the young part of himself for answers the grown man did not have.

“Be who you are. You are being attacked through your doubt. It was small. But always there, a seed to be watered and nurtured.”

“Yes. What I am. And when you look at me...”

“I see all I could have dreamed of...Daddy.”

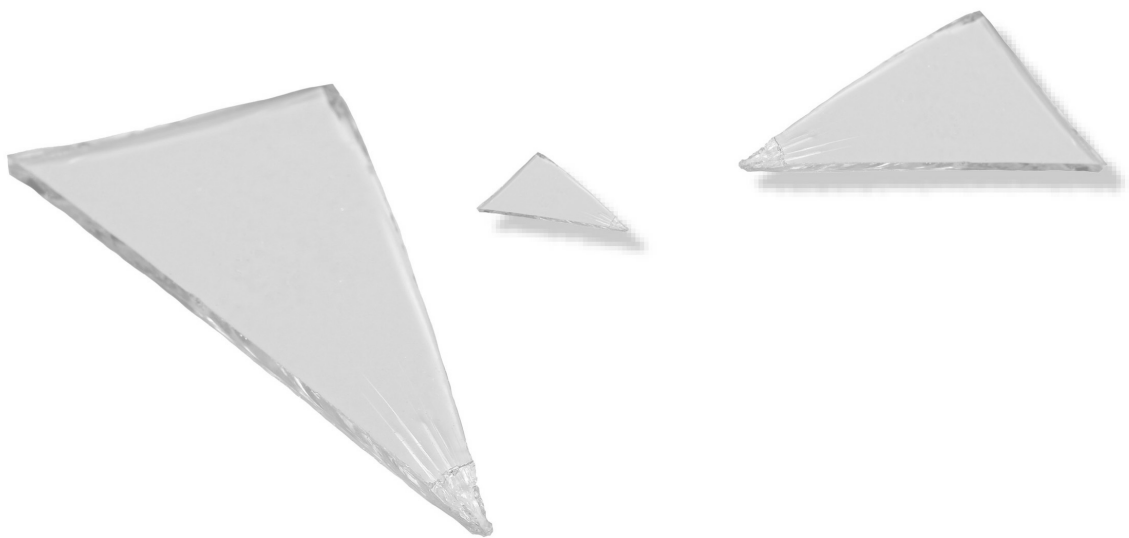
Mace smiled, and a tear welled in his eye.

“I love you,” Mace whispered.

“And I love you, Father.”

In that moment, Mace Windu was made whole. Being whole, he saw all he needed to know. This included all the strands of the Web that connected him, where he sat in its complexity, and who had visited and poisoned his dreams.

Oh yes. He knew.



CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

A THING OF THE HEART

Mace slumbered peacefully. For the first time since coming to Metagos, he did not toss and turn. This...was healing. He slowly woke from that peace. He wore only a twist of cloth around his waist, and the silken necklace KinShan had given him only a few days ago. He was accepted by the Sa'ad now as one of their own.

"How long did I sleep?" he said, mumbling. "I'm sorry."

"Almost a full day," KinShan said.

"*All day?*"

"Your concept of days is a little odd down here. You needed the rest."

"I guess I did."

"How do you feel?"

He sat up and concentrated. He extended his hand, focused even more deeply. The chunk of crystal he had chosen mere days ago trembled and rose, and then it began to spin. In the mushroom radiance, its refracted and reflected light coruscated about the room. He laughed with delight. "I...don't know what to say. I dreamed—"

"You are back. And whatever you experienced there is for you and you only."

"You don't want to know?"

"I don't *need* to know. Some things...are of the heart, and best kept close."

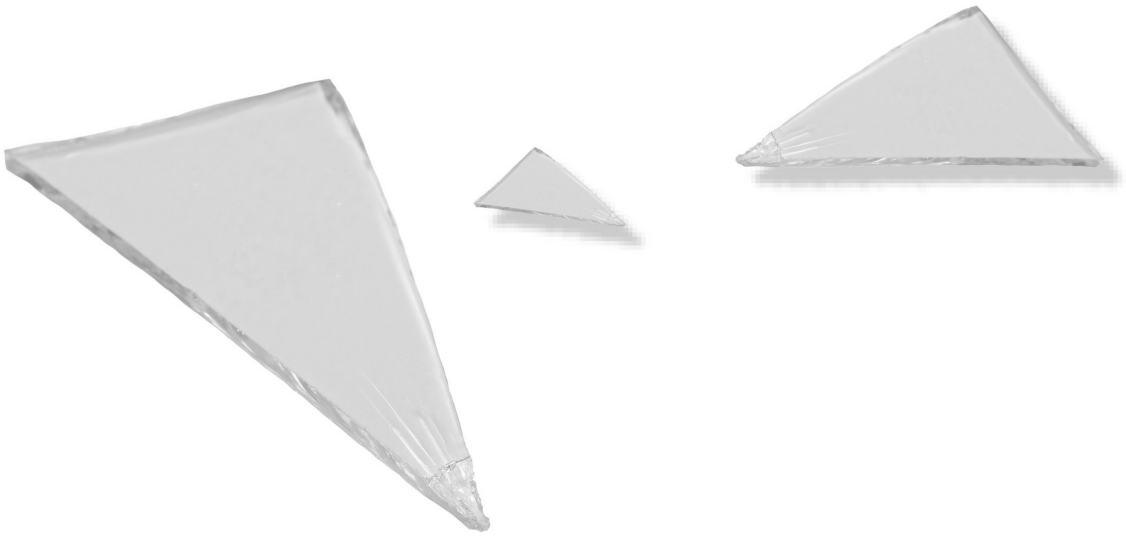
He nodded. "Then know this. For many reasons, including what you have done for me...you dance in my heart." He took both her hands. "You are a thing of the heart. And should be closely held."

He had lost himself, uncertain what was real and what was dream. Her spirit had led him from the edge of death back to life. He knew she felt the same of him—that his strength and tenacity had changed her as well.

When their lips met, it was with the sense of the familiar—a sense of coming home. Her heavy-lidded eyes sparkled with banked fires as she pulled away for a moment.

“Well, Mace Windu,” she said, her breath warm and sweet. “Normally you are quick. But sometimes you are quite...slow.”

What a miraculous, wonderful place the galaxy was. Here at its rim, on the edge of hell, two souls had found a glimmer of real magic *together*.



CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

MOTHER WEB

The chamber in the western cave was free of tourists. When the fighting above had begun, the Sa'ad had closed the tunnels. This was now private space. Family only.

Mace approached the largest Hillian in the room. "My dreams unmasked you," Mace said to her. The massive spider-worm's shaggy head turned slightly sideways, as if in acknowledgment.

The Hillian did not speak, but KinShan placed a hand on the leathery flesh on her back, hearing her thoughts and speaking them aloud, as her mother and mother's mother had done before her.

"Call me...Mother Web," the ancient Hillian said. "We never masked; you did not have eyes to see."

There was no time for argument. He had to see to the core of this, and as swiftly as possible.

"You...you did this?" KinShan asked the Hillian, shocked and dismayed.

"Yes," Mother Web said.

"Why?"

"We have had enough of humans and their ilk," Mother Web said. "When you first came to our planet—and this *is* our planet—it was peaceful. Even as your numbers rose."

"Where did we go wrong?" KinShan asked.

Mace realized she was taking responsibility. Excellent.

"After the sun revolted and scoured the surface, you should have accepted death, not fled into the caves. Now there is violence." The Hillian queen raised her head. "I have never seen the sun, as you have. Its light is not for my eyes. It is dangerous for any of us. But once, as part of my adulthood ceremony, I was taken to the surface to experience the dawn. And as the sun rose, while I could not see its light, I felt its warmth and knew its essence."

“But why invade my dreams?” Mace asked. “I was trying to stop the violence.”

“It is too late. We have decided to let the blood flow. You would only have slowed it to a pace acceptable to you. This is not acceptable to us. We will be free.”

—

MACE, NOW CONNECTED to this planet in a way he’d never been, found that every word from the Mother cleared his thought and vision. Now, finally, he understood with crystalline clarity what he had seen and experienced.

Imagine a planet where an intricate network of mycelia—the threadlike structures of fungi—formed a colossal and interconnected mat that spanned across the entire planet, meters below and sometimes upon the surface. This mycelial mat had transformed Metagos into a complex and sentient organism; the planetary-scale network facilitated communication and resource exchange, even serving as a form of collective consciousness.

Mace had heard of such things existing. The Living Sea in the Gazian system had long been a place of Jedi pilgrimage. Yet Mace had never experienced a living planet for himself.

Exiting hyperspace, Mace had noted that Metagos seemed covered by a mesmerizing brown web of interconnected threads, a stupendous living tapestry. Had it been green prior to the solar storm? His memory now told him that the brown had indeed been mixed with green. It was dead but regrowing. On the ground, the mycelial mat wove through forests, fields, and even bodies of water, creating a seamless and pulsating network.

He now saw and sensed that the mycelial mat allowed for communication among different regions of the planet. Fungal nodes acted as hubs, exchanging chemical signals and electrical impulses through the mycelial network.

The Hillians ate mycelial cud. No *wonder* they were tied into the network so deeply. And the Sa’ad served them. In essence...everything he thought he had known about this world was wrong.

Nutrients and minerals were efficiently transported through the mycelial mat, ensuring the well-being of all interconnected life-forms. Plants and other organisms tapped into the network to share resources, creating a harmonious and sustainable ecosystem. What of the crystalline creatures in the depths—the Depth Dwellers? Of course, the Hillians must be connected to them as well.

This mycelial exchange not only supported the flora and fauna but also facilitated a balance in the planetary environment. When he spoke to Mother Web, Mace had felt no rancor. The great Mother had borne him no ill will. She was simply fulfilling the commands of the planet she loved, which had birthed her.

These outsiders have overstayed their welcome, the planet must have said. It is time to act. Or rather, to suppress any action that might stop them from destroying themselves.

In a way, he supposed Republic scientists would suggest that Metagos's planetary immune system was waking.

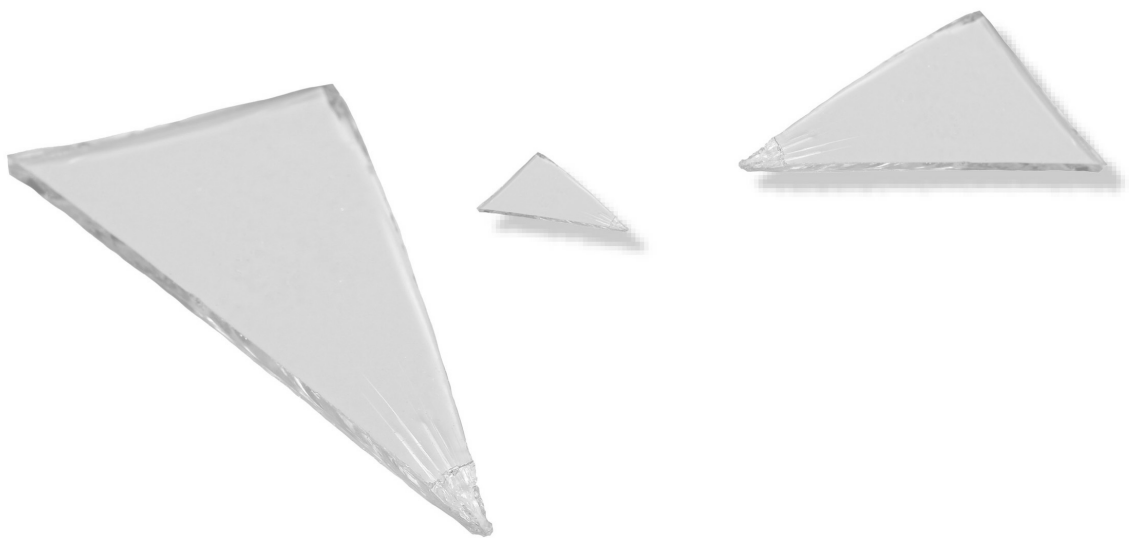
The inhabitants of Metagos, whether sentient beings or other forms of life, revered the mycelial mat as a spiritual and cultural entity. When they praised “the Web,” they were literally genuflecting to a colossal life-form, sentient if not sapient. There might be a dozen religions on this Outer Rim world, but all of them would reflect that central truth. Rituals and ceremonies could involve tapping into the mycelial network to seek guidance or to express gratitude for the interconnected Web of life.

Not so long ago, Republic scientists had announced the discovery of the largest structure in the universe. They called it the Force Web, a network of filaments that connected galaxies across the universe, and hoped that its study would yield valuable information about how galaxies form and evolve.

Mace saw it all, enough to break a normal man's mind. Metagos's Web was simply another of the infinite expressions of the Force, and his own surrender to it had uplifted and clarified him.

From the beginning, the Jedi had been his family.

But now he had another.



CHAPTER FIFTY

THE BETRAYAL

According to reports, hundreds of soldiers and mercenaries had perished on level four, but the civilian population had been largely spared of violence. So far. That couldn't possibly continue to hold true, and Mace decided that he had healed enough and was ready to return to the fray. When he emerged into the Sa'ad village, they treated him with deference and sober respect. The only one who approached him directly was Maya-12. If a droid could look both bedraggled and homicidally furious, she was that creature.

"You have a report for me?" Mace asked.

"Yes, I do," she said. "And you're not going to like it."

"All right. Please share what you know."

She sagged, then straightened. "I managed to trace the route from the egg sanctuary to the rail tracks, where they were taken to the new nursery near Nexus. I checked this information two different ways."

"That sounds scrupulous."

"Oh, I'm that, if nothing else."

Those words were spoken with an odd and somewhat confusing bitterness. He wasn't used to hearing such tones from droids, and it made the hair on the back of his neck flare just a little bit.

"You need to understand something, Master Windu. I believe I can call you Master Windu now. Can I?"

"Yes. That is fine."

"I love these people. I know that someone like you probably thinks that someone like me can't feel emotions."

"No," he replied. "I have worked, fought, and bled with you, Maya. I do not doubt your conviction."

"Thank you," she said with relief in her voice. "But one of the things you need to understand is that a holodroid has a sectioned memory. If I function

as a therapist, when the client leaves, that information is locked away, encoded. I cannot reference it. I cannot access it. Thus I can be leased to multiple owners short-term and take care of their business without them fearing that I am going to betray them. Does that make sense to you?”

“Yes.”

“I believe you know Nalaflita.”

“Wretched creature,” Mace said.

“He hired me as an instructor in Hutt negotiation dynamics. Not as a therapist. If he had, I might have had suspicions. I understood his need for security while making business plans with a Hutt. I assumed that he acted for Chulok, who feared Sybil would learn of their actions and wished plausible deniability. What he was doing, I thought, was no business of mine. I had no idea why he might have done that or what issues he was trying to deal with, but it was good money and I took it. What I did not know was that instead of simply using the protective protocols built into most education programs, he swapped my chip.”

Mace’s brow wrinkled. “Swapped your chip for what?”

“For another chip with different behaviors. It is the only way this could have happened. Nala programmed me to go to my friends and find a way to steal the eggs. I’m the one who did it.” Her words were an entire ocean of agony.

Mace had never heard a droid in such misery.

Maya-12 raised her voice, turning to address the Hillians and Sa’ad gathered there. “I’m the villain that you’re looking for. I never knew it, because Chulok swapped that chip back out again so I would not have access to the memory. I am so sorry.” She hung her head, unable to meet anyone’s eyes. “I’d do anything in the world to undo the damage that I have done. I am not supposed to feel anger. But you tell me, does the urge to pull someone’s head off qualify as anger?”

“I rather think so,” Mace said. Had the situation not been so dire, and her misery not so deeply evident, he might have fought the urge to laugh.

The Hillians circled her, watching.

Maya-12 said, “I stand here for your judgment. Whatever it is you decide to do, I will accept.”

Hillians and Sa’ad shook their heads or balled their fists. Then Mother Web edged forward and indicated for Maya to approach within reach of those mandibles. Antennae extended and brushed her. Seemed to be reading her. This made no sense to Mace, because living creatures didn’t ordinarily interface with droids.

Mother Web withdrew from Maya. Her hindquarters puckered and began to extrude web peppered with various lumps and knots. The Sa’ad assistants gathered it as it flowed, then presented that web for KinShan to read.

KinShan walked around Maya like a queen—or executioner. Lethal anger radiated from her.

Mother Web spoke, and KinShan placed her hand on the great Hillian, translating, “I believe this one. I believe this one is sorry for what happened. I believe that this one has been our friend and should be given a chance to redeem herself. She did not have to tell us what she just told us. Did not have to place herself within our reach. She is throwing herself upon our justice. That is the mark of one who is genuinely sorry.”

KinShan removed her hand from Mother Web’s skin. Now, Mace assumed, when she spoke to Maya, she was speaking for herself. “What if we gave you a chance? What are you proposing to compensate for what you have done?”

“I propose,” she said, “to kill them all.”

Mace considered all of the suffering he had seen on Metagos. *Comes a time*, he reckoned. *Comes a time*. The people of this planet were making a choice to change their future. And he would help them in any way that he could.

“What will you need?” KinShan asked.

Maya told her, and Mother Web agreed.

Mace finally spoke. He had thought carefully about this, and he regretted the necessity for what he was about to propose.

“I have a plan,” he said. “I agree with Mother Web that all you had to do was not tell us how it happened. That suggests a level of integrity that makes

me proud to be your friend.”

“Friend,” Maya repeated wistfully.

“Friend.” Mace gripped her shoulder. “So I have a plan, and you will follow it to the letter.”

And by the time he finished, Maya seemed to be smiling. And it was not a pretty sight.

—

AFTER MAYA FINISHED her business and returned to the surface, Mace and KinShan spoke more plainly.

“The Hillians meant that, didn’t they?” Mace said. “That they had plans to...sterilize the upper world.”

“Yes, and I understand.” KinShan’s face was an emotionless mask. This was the priestess, the princess, not the woman.

“You would side with them against your own species? Even if that meant leaving Metagos?”

“Yes, I would.”

“And they know this?”

“Yes.”

He smiled, feeling relief flooding through him. What a woman! “Good. We will need that trust. This is a Jedi matter now. I cannot leave until this is handled. And it has to be handled in a way that brings peace to all.”

Mace continued, “This planet has secrets within secrets. Now I find that it is alive. Conscious. And it speaks only to the Sa’ad, through you, who then decide who they will share with. I would like permission to connect with this Web directly, as you do.”

“You cannot be trusted,” Mother Web said, through KinShan.

“Is there nothing that would change your mind?”

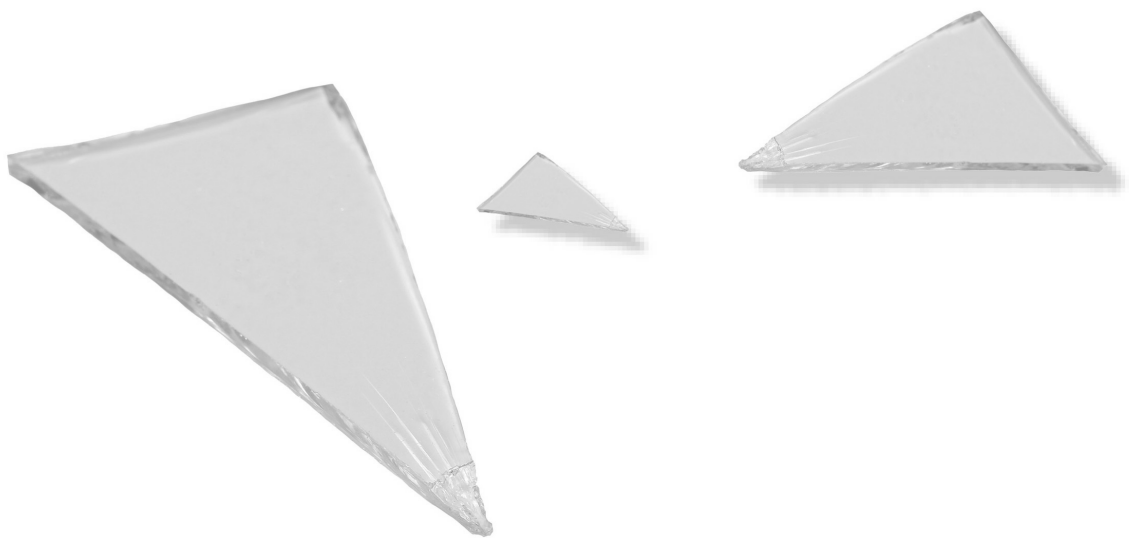
“Nothing,” she said.

He played his only card. “What if I could return the stolen eggs? Your children, stolen by Nalaflita to betray his employer.”

Mother Web gazed at him, unblinking. And this time he realized that these great creatures did indeed express emotion. They simply had never done so to him, toward him, or in his presence. This was of interest.

“That would be...” KinShan seemed to struggle to find the right words for Mother Web’s feeling. Finally, she said, “Family.”

“Let me try.”



CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

A CALL TO ARMS

Level four's smoky air crackled with tension. The urban landscape lay bathed in an eerie, refracted glow emanating from the gigantic crystal geode within which it crouched, collective breath frozen in its chest. The walls and ceiling cast prismatic hues across the sprawling metropolis. As soldiers dedicated to Sybil or Chulok took their positions in the varied sectors, the urban combat unfolded.

The first echoes of conflict reverberated through the city streets, a symphony of distant blasterfire and the low hum of machinery. Soldiers, clad in high-tech urban warfare gear, moved stealthily through the shadows of towering crystalline structures, their footsteps muffled by the strange energy radiating from all sides of the geode.

The opening salvo erupted with a blinding flash as a barrage of energy projectiles streaked across the cityscape. The crystalline formations absorbed and refracted the beams so that mesmerizing light displays flashed through the air. Buildings shimmered with flame as the combatants engaged in a deadly dance within the fractured urban terrain. Within hours of Chulok's formal attack, the mayor's enforcers had abandoned any pretense of loyalty and joined with Chulok's fighters.

Sniper teams perched on crystalline spires, their high-powered rifles gleaming in the ambient light. From hidden alcoves, special forces units emerged, utilizing the refractive properties of the crystal structures for cover as they advanced. The city echoed with the staccato rhythm of automatic gunfire and the sharp reports of explosive ordnance.

Within this surreal battleground, combatants wove through alleyways and engaged in close-quarters skirmishes. The air buzzed with the clash of energy-based weapons and the unmistakable thud of boots against glassy surfaces.

And through it all, some citizens cowered...while others knew this was the moment they had awaited.

THE WHEELHOUSE WAS packed that night. Filled with frightened, angry, curious citizens, people who didn't know what was going on or people who'd had a bad experience with the troops and policing forces. Those troops were now crawling through the streets, searching homes and alleys for some supposed Jedi.

Several of the mercenaries came into the Wheelhouse and confronted Vin-Vin. One said, "We understand that this Mace Windu has been accustomed to taking dinner at your establishment."

"Yesss, that's true," Vin-Vin said.

"Didn't you notice anything unusual about him?"

"Not particularly. Just *ssseemed* like another merc looking for a way to turn *mussscle* into gold."

The soldier's flat, spiked face puffed with anger. "I'm not sure I like that answer."

The reptilian's expression was studiously neutral, but he leaned over the bar until the puffer stepped back, flustered. "Well I'm *sssorry*, *sssir*. I'm *sssimply* telling the truth. I meant no *offencsse*." Something in the back of Vin-Vin's yellow eyes told the soldier that this was not a conversation he wanted to continue.

"We've watched you for a while," the puffer said. "You be sure you toe the line."

"I will. Thank you very much, *sssir*."

The soldier nodded brusquely and left. The bar's conversation level slowly began to rise again as people returned to their previous behaviors. The music, the food, the drinks, and the gambling all continued, but there was an air of anticipation. They were waiting for something.

And that something didn't take long to happen: Maya-12 walked through the door.

She scanned the room, satisfied herself, and then nodded to someone behind her. Maya-8 and Maya-14 followed her in, three droids who seemed to know exactly what they wanted and were prepared to do whatever it took to make it happen.

So. If the rumors had been right, then the Solver had been rather busy. Vin-Vin could not help but smile. Even the worst luck eventually changes. Every gambler counted on that.

Today, rather than lying back or sitting with her sisters, Maya-12 stood by the bar, Maya-8 and Maya-14 flanking her.

“Listen to me,” she said. “You all know what is happening. I’m here to tell you that the worst of your fears is the best you can expect if you do not act, and act now.

“Something terrible happened to those who came down from the surface fifty years ago. It happened so rapidly in some ways, but so gradually in others, that we never had a chance to compensate. We believed Sybil’s and Chulok’s lies, that we were powerless against their might. Perhaps you’ve wished for an opportunity, dreaming of a time to act with courage.

“I’m here to tell you that this is that time. This is that moment. There is an ally and he is helping us. He has been among us for weeks. He called himself Solver. He is actually Mace Windu, a great Jedi.”

“Where is this great Jedi?” one of the customers called, triggering a murmur.

“It would not be safe for me to be specific about that.” A groan from the assembled. “But I do know that he has a role for us, and if you are willing to stand up now, this is the time. If you don’t stand up now, do not tell your children later on that you cared or that you fought.

“Whatever you would have them believe you did, do it *now*. And I say to you that if you will trust me, I will tell you. I will keep you connected to those who are fighting below, fighting for their lives. What you can do up above is split the attention of our enemies. Do it so they cannot unite and bring all their forces to bear. There’s a way for you to do this safely. If you will follow me, I will tell you.”

There was an interruption in the chatter as they turned to look at one another, and themselves, and perhaps inside their own hearts. Vin-Vin found it difficult to hear those words without feeling the beat of war drums.

He had been a baby when his parents fled into the Glass Abyss. He barely remembered the surface. Had no memory of the daytime sky. His bones ached to be free of these soulless bastards.

He barely remembered his parents. Even the mental images of his brother and sister, who had died protecting him, had grown misty.

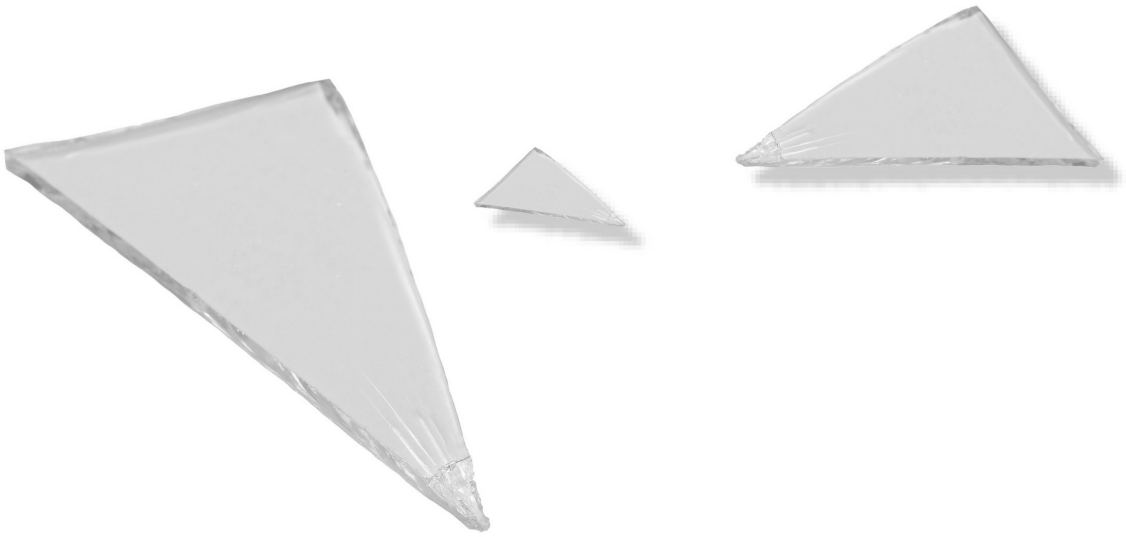
This holodroid Maya and her sisters reminded him of what they must have been, of the courage that had coursed through his family's veins. And if he could summon a fraction of this droid's courage, fortitude, and intelligence, this might indeed be the moment when they could strike back. That moment when they could redeem themselves. The cowards among them could find courage, the weak among them be strong.

Behind his ironshroom bar, Vin-Vin kept his great hammer, used mostly to pacify unruly drunks. It was time it had another use. He slammed it down on the bar and said, "I will stand with her! I will stand with Maya! Who will stand with me?"

One at a time, every man and woman in that bar stood, except for a little furry Ballian who attempted to sneak out.

"Grab him!" a woman screamed. Vin-Vin recognized her as Maisie—a dark-skinned woman who was new to the bar, one who had sat silently in a corner, losing herself in a drink. No one had disturbed her, or really noticed her, until she leapt and grabbed the Ballian, thumping him to the ground. "My own brother." Maisie's voice dripped with contempt.

"Keep him in the back until *thisss iss*s over," Vin-Vin hissed, his forked tongue darting. "We cannot afford betrayal."



CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

THE ORPHANAGE

Amid the dimly lit streets and the distant hum of speeder traffic, a fire raged in a makeshift orphanage, a haven for children of various species left parentless by the criminals who controlled New Xaxxis. The Sisters of the Light controlled it and in good times provided food and comfort.

As the children huddled within its walls, energy bolts from the warring armies lit the sky. The flames danced menacingly, threatening to consume the fragile refuge that these young beings called home.

Into this chaotic scene stepped a lone figure clad in tattered robes that concealed his identity. A violet lightsaber ignited, casting its glow into the surroundings.

More danger awaited here than mere mindless smoke and fire. The orphanage was the largest building in the Children's Maze, and soldiers of either army had decided to consider it a critical battleground.

Children were of course of no importance to these villains. They were, however, important to Mace Windu.

He moved with purpose, weaving through the smoke and debris, determined to rescue the innocent lives trapped within the burning structure. The air was thick with desperation as Mace sliced through a wall and kicked his way into the next room, striding through and striking down two soldiers too slow to turn and face him.

They wore the green armor of Chulok's brigade, but if they had worn the orange suits common among Sybil's children and allies, he'd have cut them down just as quickly.

With swift and deliberate movements, Mace stalked the inferno, scooping up small younglings of different species one at a time. The children clung to their savior, wide-eyed and trusting, as the lightsaber cut through obstacles and created a path to safety.

“Here!” a familiar voice called—Vin-Vin!

Mace’s heart swelled with joy. In the midst of war, a stout ally was worth gold.

Behind Vin-Vin was one of Maya’s sisters. He had learned to tell the difference: Maya-12’s eyes glowed green. Maya-8’s, orange. And Maya-14’s were as violet as his lightsaber.

The droids were strong enough to burst walls and carry loads of children, so Mace could focus on the opposition. The soldiers wanted to kill one another, and the fact that the children were in the way didn’t seem to matter much. The Syblin soldiers didn’t even care if their own cousins were burned alive.

Just...sickening.

Amid the turmoil of the burning orphanage, the air was filled with the acrid scent of smoke, and the distant wails of children pierced through the crackling of flames.

As the fire spread rapidly, groups of children screamed for help, their cries harmonizing with the glow of the flames, creating a symphony of distress that echoed through the narrow alleys.

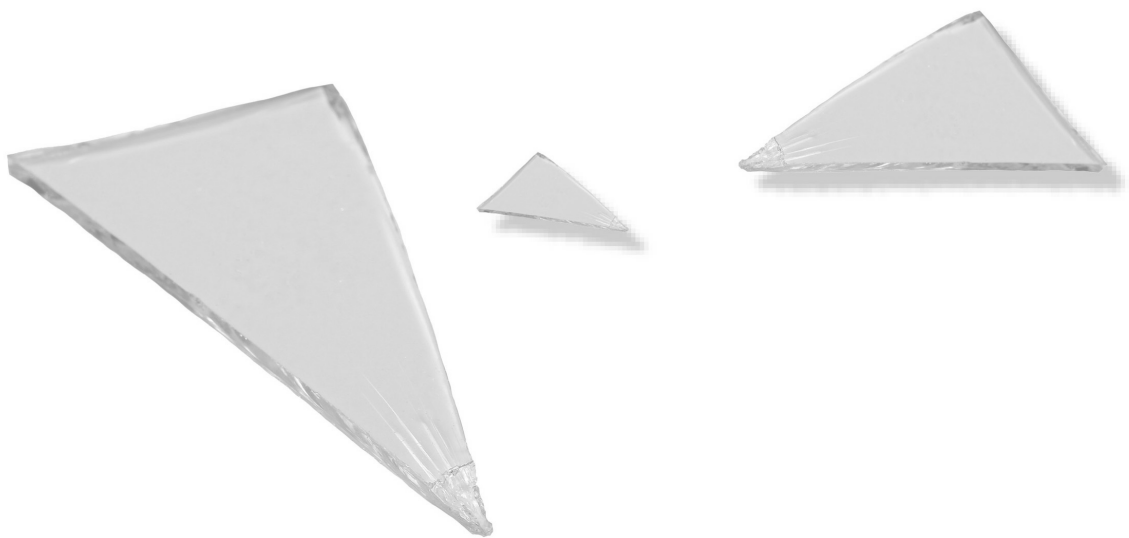
Pawns in a game of dejarik, a game played not for the players but for possession of the game board itself.

Some children, displaying innate resilience and resourcefulness, were already involved in impromptu rescue efforts, helping one another from the structure before it could collapse beneath them. A group of small, tentacled beings formed a makeshift chain to help the smaller ones climb through a broken third-floor window. A pair of agile, winged creatures glided through the smoke, ferrying their less fortunate peers to relative safety.

The children displayed a remarkable camaraderie, transcending the boundaries of species and background. As they pulled and carried one another away from danger, their actions demonstrated a shared determination to survive no matter the odds stacked against them.

And the Sisters of the Light coughed and risked their lives in the fire and smoke, seeking out desperate and frightened children wherever they were.

Their faith, Mace thought, is in its own way as powerful as the Force.



CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

LIGHT OF RENEWAL

Amid the chaos of flaming walls and screaming children, Mace Windu found himself confronting three opponents armed with shock prods, blasters, and a halberd. The flames roared around them, casting flickering shadows that danced along the charred walls. Smoke billowed through the air, creating an ominous haze that obscured vision and made each inhalation a choking hazard.

Chulok's three soldiers moved with coordinated precision, seemingly undeterred by the inferno engulfing the structure. Mace, however, remained a beacon of calm in the midst of the turmoil. His purple lightsaber ignited, casting a violet glow that contrasted starkly with the fiery backdrop.

The initial clash was marked by an ear-ringing cacophony of lightsaber hums and the crackle of rifle bolts. Mace's mastery of the lightsaber was evident as he deftly parried blaster bolts, then vaulted off a wall into a position behind them. One combatant fell, but the others displayed great agility and ferocity, pivoting with him as the flames crackled.

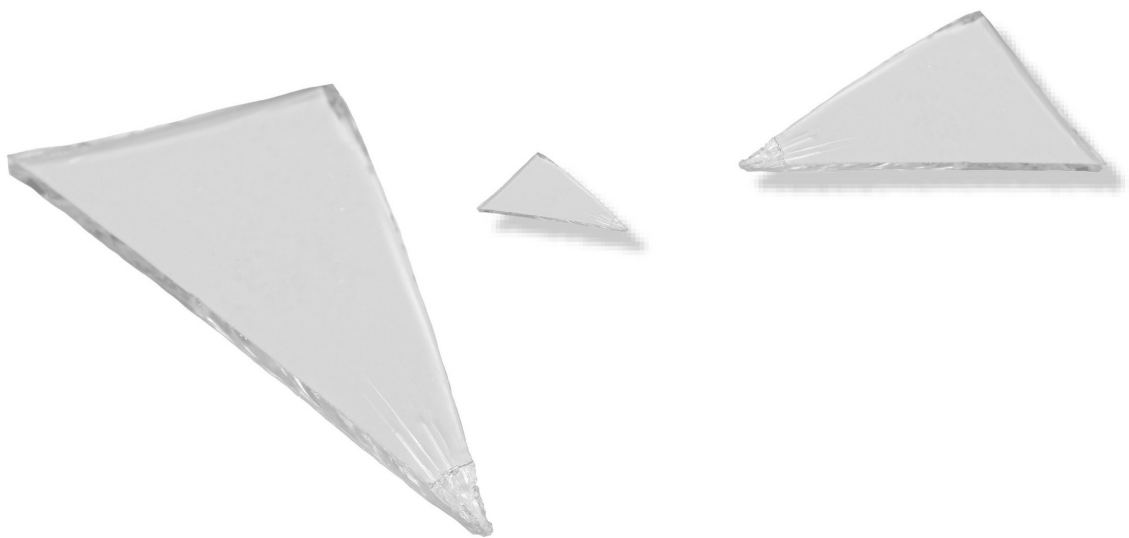
As the duel progressed, the building groaned under the strain of the fire. Flames licked at the edges of Mace's vision as he sought to place himself between the soldiers and the rescuers scurrying through the flames carrying loads of wailing children.

The shifting, unstable terrain became a factor, with collapsing debris and the encroaching blaze forcing both Mace and the soldiers to adapt their fighting styles.

Sections of the structure crumbled, sending showers of embers cascading around the combatants. At last, the soldiers retreated, unwilling to die for their cause the way Mace's allies were prepared to die to save lives.

And that, in the end, is what makes the difference, Mace thought. *Who has more to fight for?* He and Vin-Vin and the Mayas fought to save lives.

Chulok's troops fought for money—and in the end, money was never enough.



CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

SUNFALL'S RAIDERS

Vin-Vin was not a warrior by nature. But long ago his people had been.

And they knew how to fight, how to protect their own, their wealth, their children, and their sacred honor. For decades, Vin-Vin Sunfall had ignored the fact that Chulok had stolen what was his and murdered his parents and brother and sister. The acknowledgment might have driven him mad.

The gangsters had worked his family to death to raise Chulok's damned Floating Palace, and now he had to see it over his head daily. A symbol of oppression rather than family power.

Vin-Vin had been forced to smile and serve drinks to those scum when their minions entered the Wheelhouse. He knew that all of the wealth from all of the people who once had lived in a fair and just society now empowered their masters.

Life had become a travesty. The wealth of his people now decorated the apartments of the killers and thieves. He had heard the stories: Citizen councils pleading with Chulok for crumbs saw the enormous wealth and thought Vin-Vin's own family had been responsible for the inequity.

He had never bothered to defend his honor. He had simply waited, knowing that even his wife had called him a coward when she walked out to become one of General Slithis's officers. He had been left with only those who could and would play a very long game. There was a time to bow the head, but also a time to fight, and one to win.

The Jedi Mace Windu, the Solver, had brought them the opportunity, and he would not waste it. Nor would he waste the lives of those who followed him.

The tactic chosen by Mace was simple and daring: Never confront directly. Take the losing side, fight with them until *they* were winning, and

then switch sides.

Audacious. Daring and dangerous.

Jedi, he thought. He'd heard of them all his life, but until he watched Windu in the blazing orphanage, he'd not believed the stories.

Windu had appeared, gained allies, gotten Chulok's trust, and then escaped their clutches. This was the man, the ally, the moment. If Vin-Vin died, he would die seeking freedom.

—

TWO OF THE Maya sisters and six men crept across the rooftops of the Maze, peering down on Chulok's troops as they prepared to surround a group of Syblins.

Maya-12 was adhering rigidly to Mace's strategy: Find roughly equal forces and unbalance them. Or find balanced forces and take a side. Remain in hiding, and never let yourself be seen.

Simple. Brilliant. Lethal.

Chulok seemed the stronger, the one with better intelligence and communication. They were focusing their forces to avoid superior might. That was a secret to war or combat of any kind: to focus many upon few.

Maya figured that Chulok's intent was to continue this: to avoid combat when outnumbered or equally matched, then strike ruthlessly when in a superior position.

Never fight unless you know you are going to win.

Such a brilliant tactic, it was almost a shame to disrupt it.

But disrupt it they must. And did. One of their allies was strange, a woman named Thanna Tan who seemed to understand the tactics of their enemies so well that if she had not been first into the fray, they might have questioned the source of her knowledge. Now they were simply grateful.

Approaching Chulok's forces from the north would add the critical element of surprise. From the rooftops, they saw the soldiers below in the street with blasters. They released enough smoke to obscure positions so that

observers aboard the Floating Palace would see the confusion rather than the strategies.

Sybil's forces had brought up artillery, and the next house suddenly shuddered with the strike...and then collapsed.

The cloud of choking, toxic dust might kill them in years to come, but today it was a screen concealing motion.

Chulok's forces were so intent on creeping through the crystalline bricks and ironshroom shards that they never saw Vin-Vin and his people approaching from the rear.

And that created an opportunity the citizens had never really believed would come: a chance to vent all the pain, all the hatred, all the fear. Everything that Vin-Vin had repressed for so many years, for generations since the sun had scoured Metagos, suddenly emerged. He found himself swept up in, enraptured by the berserker rage of his ancestors. That bloodlust had once conquered a planet and built an empire before it cooled into statesmanship and governance.

When Vin-Vin retrieved Bloodhammer from behind his bar, the weapon felt right in his hands. At last, it would be used for a greater purpose than breaking up bar squabbles.

Once upon a time, he and his people had been conquerors, and he summoned that strength within him now. The strength of will, the speed and contempt for pain were there, perhaps more powerful than ever because they had not been vented in so very long.

And he remembered what Maya had told him the Jedi had said: *Either don't engage, or leave no survivors. We cannot afford prisoners today. Harden your hearts and take back your world.*

The world was a blur, a melee of hands and knives and energy weapons, and somehow all the politeness, all the deference that he had shown to those who had shown him nothing but contempt, and all the bowing and scraping burst out, and he was death itself.

When the Syblin troops finally recovered from the blast and charged across the rubble, they found dead soldiers in Chulok's green vests but had

no idea who might have killed them: Vin-Vin and his people had already melted away into the shadows.

THEY REPEATED THAT tactic again and again, refining it every time. His people perfected their attack, then split off into smaller groups, picking up new members to indoctrinate with this strange and savage tactic, then splitting again and yet again.

They were teaching as they went: Protect your streets. Sequester your children. Each one teach two, and teach them to teach in turn.

Stay quiet. Be silent. Never strike unless you can do so from cover, and never expose yourself unless you can kill them all.

There was no room for error. This was for everything any of them had ever loved or hoped for.

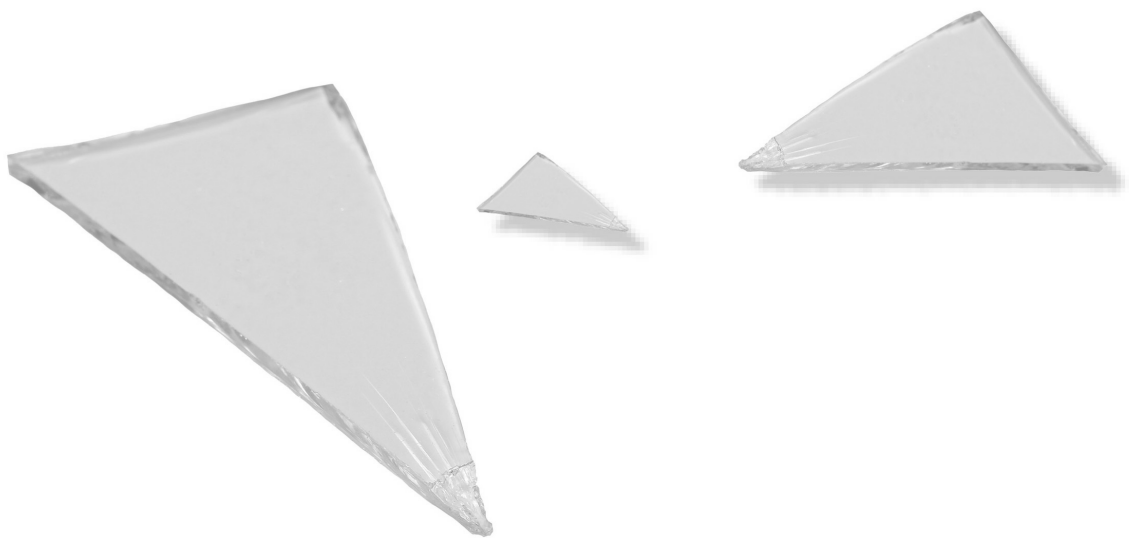
The armament at the edge of the Floating Palace erupted into fire, blasting down onto the city. The permanent emplacements were there to protect the Crystal Empire from looters, but they were also able to arc fire out into the city, punishing everything and everyone.

They fired at Sybil's troop clusters, often slaughtering innocent civilians as they did. The Syblin troops were hardly helpless. From hidden placements around the south wall, guns erupted forth, firing at the Floating Palace, the energy bolts and shells shattering against circular energy shields.

The entire crystal geode thundered with fire and lightning, with the screams of people trapped in flaming, collapsing buildings. There was just one happy thing: The fight was still between Syblin and Chulok. At this moment, neither suspected what was actually happening, that the people were doing anything at all other than crouching in misery. Two predators fighting over a helpless prey.

Vin-Vin felt grimly content that his own actions were not suspected. But he also knew that it would not be enough. He *would* have to roar his wrath aloud until the heavens rang.

This was his day. At long last, Bloodhammer would drink deep.



CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

THE TUNNELS

Mace Windu was fighting a battle on two fronts, moving back and forth between levels four and seven as swiftly as he could. The battle had so far remained on the fourth, but there were preparations to be made. Refugees had already streamed the tunnels down to the lower caverns, seeking shelter within.

Neither Chulok nor Sybil could possibly have expected that adolescent Hillians could form a threat. While the babies were helpless and the adults semisedentary, the adolescents were surprisingly nimble when they wished to be. He had suspected they could move and move rapidly, but their capacity for speed excelled beyond his expectations.

The adolescents were webbing tunnels, preparing for the inevitable moment when the battle above spilled into the depths. Eventually, Chulok would realize the Sa'ad were knee-deep in the rebellion, and when that happened, their fragile truce would dissolve.

The Sa'ad knew it. The war that had begun could end in their destruction...unless Mace's intuitions and actions bore fruit that even he could not fully predict.

They were preparing. If the invasion of Mace's dreams had been a violation, when he saw the traps and deadfalls under preparation, Mace realized the Hillians had treated him gently. They had the same ugly, primal urge for vengeance so many other species possessed. Pushed to the wall, they were utterly vicious.

This was the venom they'd stored up for who knew how long while human beings and other offworlders had perverted their land and stolen their silk. Stolen their children and shamed their Sa'ad keepers. Some dozens of Chulok's or Sybil's soldiers did delve into the tunnels, seeking fleeing

enemies, and were dealt with decisively by Sa'ad striking from mushroomed shadows.

Fighting in the tunnels was intense and bloody. Death in dark, confined places always is. Mace joined in when he could. His lightsaber flashed and burned through flesh and armor.

Hillians crawled up tunnel walls, spun silk, and strung narrow strands at neck level so that when the enemies tried to bring their speeders to play, they would run into strands stronger than durasteel, thinner than a knife blade. The velocity and power of a speeder created horrid and lethal impacts.

These were more than courageous companions in war. This was a pack of furious creatures fighting for something sacred: the living planet that had birthed them and the Web that connected all life here and across the galaxy.

As a result, there was no mercy offered or asked. No more than Vin-Vin or Maya's troops could allow soldiers to return to base with their information. Now that the explosion had begun, they would not stop until one side or the other was exterminated.

War to the knife.

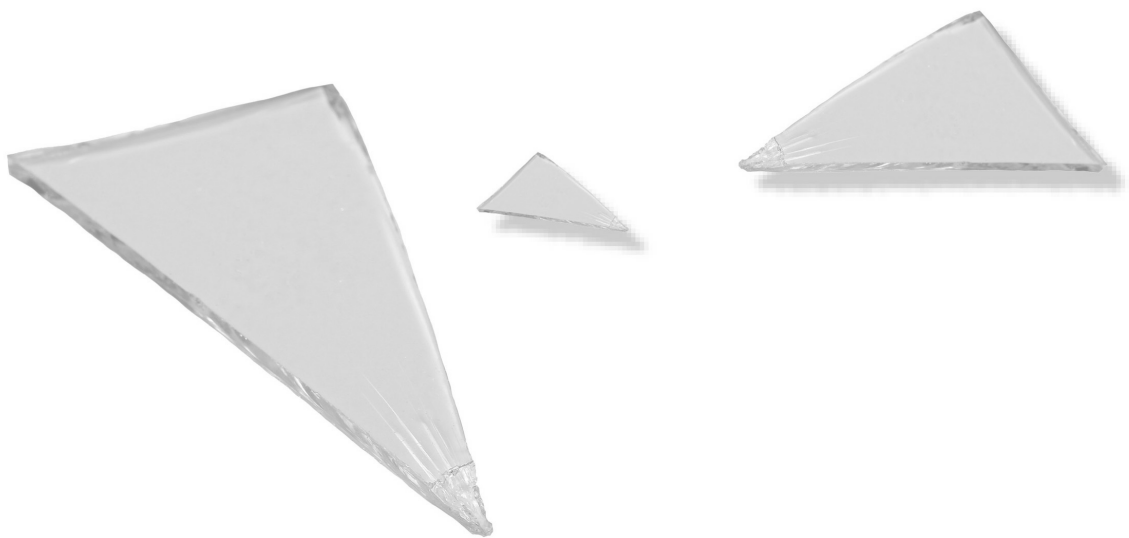
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MACE SLASHED HIS way through the tunnels up to the surface, striking down anything and anyone who blocked his path. The urge to protect life balanced with the reality that the only way to do this was to take it from others. The blood tide rose behind his eyes, only mastery of the Force keeping him from losing sight of himself beyond the red film.

When he emerged, the seventh level was aflame. At first he feared that Chulok had seen through their deception. Then he realized that the monster simply didn't care about innocent lives. The thane was engaged in a desperate struggle with the Syblins. Both had the armament and the will to inflict horrific damage on each other and the innocents trapped between them.

He had to fulfill his promise to the Hillians. It was the only way to bring this situation to a conclusion.

He needed the planet itself as an ally, and he could think of only one way to do that.



CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

“HOW DO WE WIN?”

“**S**tand back, I warn you. I am here for the children, and if you stand in my way...I will deliver you to your ancestors.”

It had taken an hour for Mace and his allies, Sa’ad and citizens, to travel most of the way to Nexus and then find their way to the hidden Hillian farm.

When the guards overcame their shock and surprise, Mace defended with all his might. He was not the fastest Jedi, nor the most elegant. But it was possible that Mace Windu was the most lethal of all of them, and he was just getting started.

Mace and his troops freed the children, carrying the eggs to the mine carts that had ferried them across the clicks to the nursery. Two dozen mine carts, filled with Hillian grubs. Now that war had begun, the potential for full allyship with the Hillians quite possibly outweighed the risk of exposure.

They returned to Hillia in an hour and a half, and it seemed the entire community helped to unload the younglings and bring them to Mother Web in the northern caves.

The grubs crawled happily around their mother.

She cried with joy. And although her ululations required no translator, KinShan served anyway. “My children. You have saved them.”

“It cost us,” Mace said. “Chulok will soon hear what happened. We must prepare.”

“It is what family does.”

Mace stepped closer. “What are *you* prepared to do for family?” He laid his hand on her side, and Mace’s mind was filled with the Web of Metagos, connecting directly to the Mother herself.

You are a strange human, Mace Windu. We have broken others within the Chan-Dree of dreams.

A sudden inspiration. “Can you reach Chulok?”

We have tried. You are sensitive and therefore linked to the Web. Chulok is not, so we could not find them. The troops we affected are not but came close, within our reach. No one we have ever touched in this way has lasted more than two days...until you. You are, I think, actually a Hillian.

“High honor indeed,” he said. “Now, how do we win?”

—

MACE’S INSTRUCTIONS HAD been clear. Attack from cover and never engage directly. It was both a direct tactic and one chosen to provide conceptual cover for Sunfall’s raiders.

Guerrilla warfare with three different armies in play.

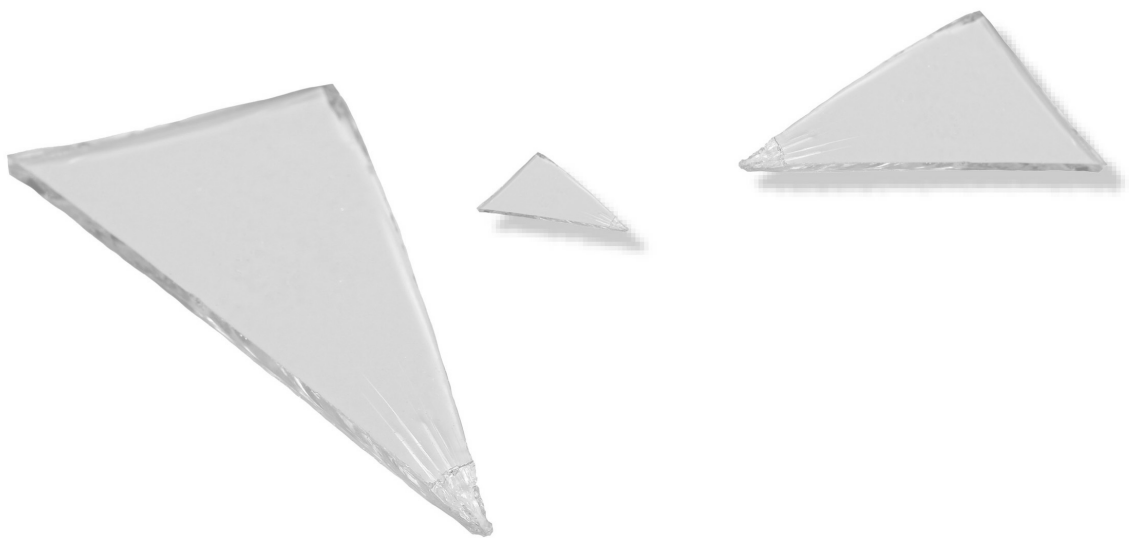
Harassing, not seeming to “win.” Victory was survival.

“We’re under attack!” one of Chulok’s sergeants said a moment before Vin-Vin’s Bloodhammer removed his head.

“Swarm them! No survivors!”

“Swarm them!” 245 said.

And as they rumbled through the streets, the sky overhead rained burning blood.



CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

WHY WE FIGHT

The hangars on level three had three separate sections: one controlled by Sybil's family, one by Chulok's people, and a shared area available to the civilian population.

The warring criminals had turned that common area into a death zone while simultaneously launching their own vehicles out into the crystal geode, now that total war had erupted.

There were Porax-28 starfighters, their laser cannons gouging furrows in the southern walls if under Chulok's control or smashing into the energy shields on the Floating Palace when controlled by Syblins.

Droid starfighters had been modified for patrol within the Glass Abyss. Sybil's central computers controlled six of these lethal birds, which maneuvered faster than most any living creatures could have managed. These were not particularly powerful individually, but in a swarm...dangerous.

A more recent addition was an HH-87 Starhopper—the craft that the Slithis brothers had piloted to their freedom from Zygerria.

And now this was the craft piloted by Nala as he led his squadron.

Nala liked it. He had an advantage over most warriors: zero empathy, zero concern for the lives of others or even his own. That meant that thought and action were simultaneous, lightning speed, melding eye and hand to the controls as if he had been born to the task. But part of his mind kept watch for one enemy above all. He longed to come face-to-face with the Solver, this Mace Windu.

Today is the day I take the Jedi's life. To his embarrassment, he had offered friendship to the bastard. Chulok had offered more and been spit upon. He could not *wait* until Windu's brains were cooling in his hands.

Focus. He called out to the starfighter on his right, "Tighten formation. Lock tight, then expand-contract. Understand?"

“We understand, sir,” the starfighter pilot said.

Good. “Expand-contract” was a specific strategy designed to maintain formation while constantly shifting to avoid precise targeting. As vast as the geode was, this was still a confined space for vehicles so fast and powerful. They had to wheel and swoop, avoiding blasts and missiles but still maintaining formation when possible to focus fire on specific targets.

This was Nala’s specialty. He was a utility man. He had been lethal as a foot soldier, which was all any employer before Chulok had ever offered him. He belonged in the air.

And then, almost as if his prayers were answered, an N-1 starfighter came to him. He laughed. This was a craft of the Galactic Republic, a ship typical in Naboo’s Royal Space Fighter Corps.

Whoever had chosen it was a fool, despite its proton torpedoes and laser cannons. It was designed for maneuvering in space, in a vacuum away from a gravity well. And the turns and twists in a confined space or in an atmosphere were different.

On paper, the N-1 starfighter should have been the better craft, but Nala knew its functionality better than the pilot and managed a banking maneuver that the starfighter could not match. An instant later, the sky filled with flame and raining debris. He watched the wreckage fall into the western quadrant and laughed.

“I’m so happy!” he roared. Then he wheeled to find more carnage to wreck, more lives to take.

Life was good.

—

CITIZENS BELOW CROUCHED, screaming, as the skies filled with carnage. They fled to the tunnels, praying for safety below. Above them fighters wheeled and swept, banking rapidly to avoid their enemy and also to avoid the walls and cannon fire from the southern fortress and the rim of the Floating Palace.

Nala’s HH-87 Starhopper accelerated toward an antique Jedi Vector. The interceptor’s pilot was no Jedi, which limited his efficiency in a vehicle with

few automated systems and best piloted by Force-users. It must have seemed a good idea at the time, but the sensory apparatus was far too finely tuned for a normal pilot. Still, the Vector avoided the initial barrage of laserfire.

With exceptional agility, Nala piloted his Starhopper in tightening spirals. The pilot of the Vector simply couldn't master his vehicle sufficiently to take advantage of the modified weapons he must have added, and Nala was utterly fearless and cold-blooded.

Nala unleashed a rapid barrage of laser-cannon fire, but the Vector's tacked-on deflector shields absorbed the onslaught. The pilot retaliated with a powerful salvo of heavy laser cannons, forcing Nala to engage his energy shields to withstand the assault.

As the dogfight intensified, the Vector's pilot performed a daring barrel roll, narrowly avoiding a missile launched by Nala's companion starfighter. Seizing the opportunity, the Vector's pilot retaliated with a precise laser strike, severely damaging the starfighter's propulsion systems.

With its engines disabled, the starfighter spiraled out of control, smashing into the northwestern wall and bouncing down to plow into deserted buildings.

But the Vector's pilot made a mistake, taking too long to admire his handiwork. In that moment Nalaflita struck, and the sound of the explosion deafened every Syblin within five hundred meters.

—

BELOW, INNOCENT CIVILIANS were caught in the raining fire. They scrambled this way and that, carrying their wounded to a miserable makeshift medcenter where healers of many species cared for them.

Sister Doctor Vespa, a delicate Rodian in her pink habit, was attempting triage, assisted by a flustered Woolif. "Dr. Woolif, bring me a helistat, quickly."

"Yes, Doctor," the chroma-wing said and flew off to fetch it. "We're out of multiplasma."

“I believe this will help,” KinShan said. She and three Sa’ad had carried a chest of medicines harvested from the underworld, brimming with various mushroom extracts. In addition, they carried lightshroom lanterns radiating in the spectrum her pale eyes could capture.

“What is this?” Sister Doctor Joyz Hig Ritto said.

“We have stores to share,” KinShan said.

“I thank thee, Sister Nightbird. You have always been a blessing.”

The clinic was filled with people with wounded or missing family.

“I hear there is a Jedi among us,” one whispered. “Is this true?”

“It is. He fights for us.”

The doctor was confused. “Why are we still dying, then? I have heard of Jedi. Were they myths?”

“More than myth. Less than magic. All of you—thousands of you—have let these villains control you. Allowed them to strip away your wealth. Take your children. For decades you have done this! But you are angry with Mace Windu for not having solved half a century of misery in days? Shame on you!”

“We are not warriors! They killed our warriors!”

“A warrior is not merely someone who has been trained to fight. It is someone who knows *why* they fight. Do you still believe that bowing your head will keep you safe?”

“But—”

“Do you?” KinShan said, pitiless. “When fire rains from the sky?”

“But they will kill us!”

Her pale eyes narrowed. “Not if you fight with courage. And cunning. Are you ready?”

“I am!” a youngster said.

“Hush,” the mother said. “Or you’ll go behind the gates.”

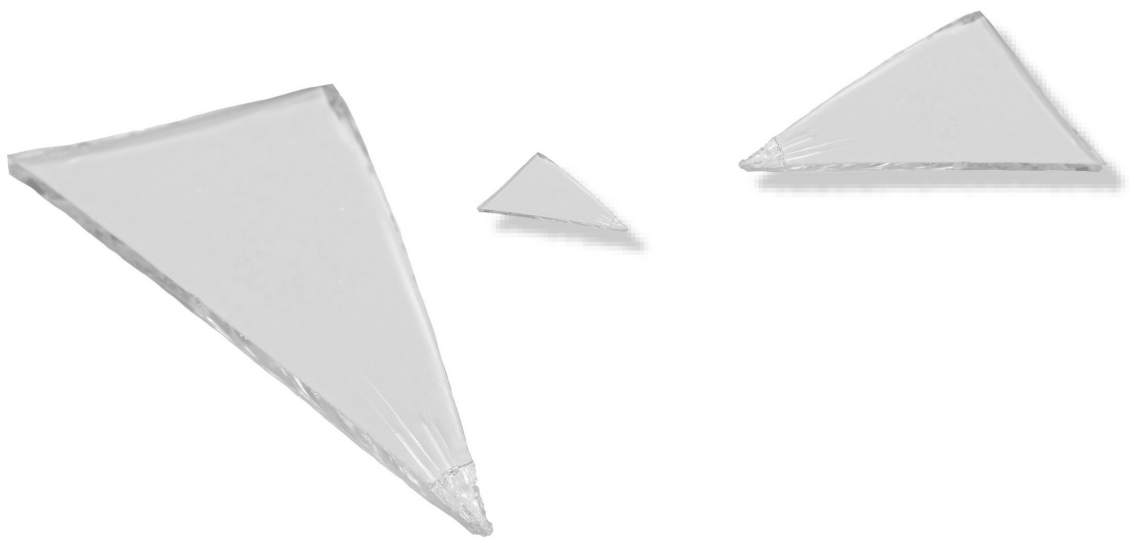
“I am not afraid,” her child replied.

“She doesn’t know what she’s saying,” the mother said.

“Yes, she does,” KinShan said. “We may die. Death comes to all. The warrior is not someone who trains for combat. A warrior is someone prepared

to die—or kill—for what they believe in. This is what Mace told me, and I believe him.

“This is freeing yourself. When your enemy is busy making a mistake, do *not* interrupt them. They fight each other. If the sides are unequal, one will win and be strong. But if they are equal, they will grind each other into meal. And then the city, and the planet, are ours.”



CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

FIRE AND FEAR

The streets were clotted with rubble as Chulok's forces and Sybil's forces sniped and battled. Energy weapons and hand-to-hand combat seethed amid the ruins. The Great Wheel was in chaos, and people were fleeing the northwest section. Only the wealthy in the northeast, protected by the Floating Palace's weapons, were safe.

The wealthy and corrupt huddled, watching the flames race through the city, hearing the blasterfire, hearing the screams, smelling the boiling blood.

Maya and her troops crawled through the wreckage. When they had the chance, they fired through the gaps. They fired at both Chulok's troops and Sybil's. The point, Mace Windu had said, was to *never* get caught, never be seen. To make any blow, any strike, appear to have come from one of the two major combatants.

Maya-14 and Maya-8 ran out of the shadows firing, leading a cluster of citizens who screamed at the tops of their voices to mask their terror.

One house service droid got her head blown clean off by a blaster bolt. Fortunately, that was not where her primary processor was located, and she continued running forward, headless, shooting until she was reduced to rubble.

By the Web, that was not the plan! All they could do was complete the attack and either capture everyone or leave no survivors. Anyone who *did* survive would hopefully think all the attackers had been hired by the opposition. If not, the consequences could be drastic. They hunkered down, afraid for a while that the rash action would expose them...but there was no retaliation.

The sniping continued for a time, and the rebels crept up and back, maneuvering through the rubble to find other vantage points from which they

could fire. This could work, Maya thought, but it was not satisfying her urge for blood.

She'd been told that droids did not feel such things, but she did. And she was satisfied for that to be true. It was working.

Snipe. Move. Ambush. Move. Plant improvised mines and booby traps. Pick up weapons from Chulok's dead and leave the corpses in Sybil's territory.

Give no room for the heat to die down. Anytime there was the slightest feeling that things were starting to subside and perhaps a peace talk might be in the offing...choreograph an atrocity. They knew Mace Windu, a Jedi, would disagree.

That was all right. This was not Mace Windu's home. This was not a Jedi matter. This was *their* world, and they had lost it to the worst scum of the galaxy. This was their chance to take it back. If one of them got hit, they dragged the corpse away. There were no bodies left behind, ever. No evidence of anything other than cruelty and barbarism on both parts. Some part of Maya, something deep in her droid heart, felt not merely satisfied but redeemed.

—

VIN-VIN'S SHOULDER WAS wounded. Without his reptilian muscle and armor, the blaster bolt would have ripped his arm out of its socket. "They've changed. Somehow they figured out that we're in the fight."

"Maybe a suspicion," Maya-12 said. "But the violence against us seems incidental rather than concentrated. They are uncertain."

They began to help people evacuate, fighting rearguard actions. Now that both sides were beginning to understand the civilians were rebelling, no longer helpless hostages, there was less aversion to hitting civilian targets.

—

THE SYBLIN DEFENDERS of the southern wall considered themselves Metagos's original inhabitants, whatever doubts Mace Windu might have harbored. All others were outsiders. Offworlders. And they would fight to the death for their homeworld.

The air was thick with stinging smoke and tension as the defenders, resembling large, armored grubs with sturdy exoskeletons, dug into the wall to fortify their positions.

Chulok's troops descended upon the defenders with relentless ferocity. The defenders emitted low, rumbling war cries as they readied for battle. The ground trembled beneath the approaching onslaught as the first wave of attackers, equipped with a collection of blasters, melee weapons, and explosive bolt projectors, charged forward across the ruins of the southern Maze.

The defending Syblins, despite their seemingly humble appearance, revealed surprising agility and coordination. They burrowed into the glassy soil, creating trenches and protective barriers to shield themselves from enemy fire. As the attackers closed in, the defenders emerged rapidly, launching membranous globes of digestive acid projectiles from specialized glands in their thoraxes. Syblins had secrets.

The battle unfolded in a tumbled dance of light and color, with the defenders strategically retreating and repositioning while Chulok's allies struggled to adapt to the unpredictable movements of their grublike adversaries.

The skirmish intensified as the Syblins employed natural camouflage, blending into the terrain to confound their foes. From the depths around the southern rim of the Great Wheel, the grubs emerged, using powerful jaws and razor-sharp limbs to repel the invaders. The ground became a shifting landscape of defensive tactics, with the defenders fighting fiercely to protect their home tunnels.

Despite the odds, the attackers continued their relentless assault, deploying energy and projectile weapons and formidable technology. The sound cannons were no longer effective: The Syblins had plugged their earholes and now communicated via pheromones expressed from their exoskeletons.

Explosions thundered through the air as the defenders valiantly held their ground, determined to safeguard their nest.

They would sell their lives dearly, and avenge their mother, at all costs.

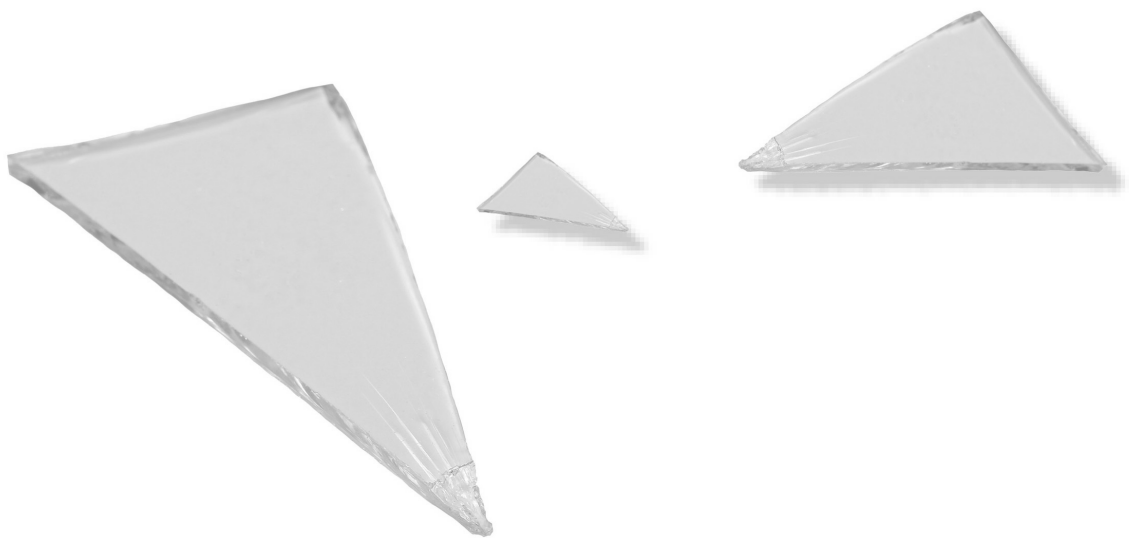
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FIRES RAGED, AND the fire services were totally overwhelmed, the citizens striving to evacuate and simultaneously save all they could. Adults of a dozen species panicked at the sight of helpless children trapped in the burning buildings. And the refugees abandoned their belongings and ran to help.

Fortunately, one retreating Hoojib, a furry quadruped from Arbura, detected distress signals from young of her species and alerted her companions. The word spread rapidly to others of their kind, who realized they could not save their own lives at the cost of the innocent.

Together, a knot of heroes breached the external walls of a flaming apartment building and smashed through into the conflagration. Within, they found a group of terrified Talz children huddled together. Time was of the essence as the structural integrity of the building weakened. One used his immense strength to batter a way through the debris, ignoring the pain from his burning fur.

He would heal if he could survive the initial damage. But if he could not save the children, nothing he did would heal his heart.



CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

RIM-RUNNER TRUCE

In Chulok's comm center, the thane scanned the patterns of attack and defense displayed on various holoscreens and came to a grim conclusion: It was time for them to change tactics.

Their allies in the outlying regions of the city babbled at them from their holos. The violence in New Xaxis was matched by violence on the outskirts. Chaos in the Glass Abyss was coordinated, they now knew. And spreading to other cities. They had indeed underestimated the Solver.

What a Third he would have made!

"The network is under attack," Chulok told Mago Deff, their Mirialan ally, through the holofeed. "Sybil's allies have attacked ours in New Xaxis. We believe this pattern is repeating across the planet."

"Agreed. We are under assault. What do we do?"

Chulok had to be very careful here. "This is the chance. Opportunity on the wings of danger. A generation ago, the chaos on the surface gave us a chance to seize power. Now we have the opportunity to consolidate. We will prevail."

"How?"

"Identify the nature of the problem. My sources suggest that the citizens are responsible. They are employing a sophisticated stratagem. And I believe that stratagem is the responsibility of a Jedi named Mace Windu."

"You know this Jedi?" Mago asked.

"He was, for a brief time, in my employ."

A pause. "And you did not detect him?"

From Karismat, the northernmost satellite district of New Xaxis, the gelatinous Scharsa the Hutt spoke, and the translator droid did its job. "I have heard of this Mace Windu," Scharsa said. The great criminal slug's jowls wobbled with concern, as if he regretted his tentative involvement with

Metagos. “Dangerous. If you cannot kill him, and swiftly, I will need to disengage from our negotiations. Too risky by far.”

“I said a *brief* time.”

“I see.” The silence was oppressive.

“I believe the best counterstrategy will be to crush the insurrection here and now. Metagos will be ours for all time!”

“Allow me to ask a critical question,” Mago said.

“Yes?”

“We are all taxed to the limit. If we were to send you support, we would weaken our own walls.”

“Temporarily, perhaps,” Chulok said. “But as soon as I prevail—”

“Yes, yes—*then* you will reach out and help us,” Scharsa said. The translator droid may have added the cynical tone, but Chulok doubted it was misplaced.

“Exactly.”

“Tell me, Chulok,” Mago said. “What would prevent you from waiting until our forces have been weakened enough for you to seize all power?”

Chulok repressed their flash of irritation. “Our word is our bond.”

“Excuse me, honored ones. But was not your word your bond in the matter of the recent transport?” Mago said with concern, as if her only interest was Chulok’s welfare. “And if we hadn’t noticed the lightening of the load, mightn’t that error have gone unnoticed?”

“Do you question my word?”

This response called for delicacy. “War is...what did you say?” The Hutt paused. “An ‘opportunity on the wings of danger.’ ”

“I see,” Chulok said. “Well. I should have expected you to have no vision. I assume that Scharsa the Hutt speaks for all of you?”

“You assume correctly,” Mago said.

Chulok kept their emotions controlled. “Then burn together in the light of my triumph. Those who change your minds may come crawling to me before the end of the cycle. After that...there will be no quarter.”

They cut communications.

WRM-2456 blanched. “What do we do, sirs?”

“The thing I wished to avoid. Call Rim-runner truce.”

Those words electrified the room. “Sirs! Rim-runner truce has never been broken,” the droid said.

And any who broke it would be a pariah among thieves.

Chulok said, “Nor will I break it now. Send out envoys and invoke the truce.”

—

THE SOUTHERN WALL got the news from their communications center quickly, and the rumors ran wild.

“What is this?” Syblin-4 asked.

“Madness!” Syblin-72 said.

“A request for a ceasefire. Truce. He swears by the Rim-runner’s oath,” Syblin-4 said.

“Indeed?”

“Rim-runner truce has never been broken,” he mused. Not entirely true. There was one known incident...and the oath breakers had found no safe harbor, anywhere, and by all accounts were still slowly dying in a sarlacc pit.

“Why would they be invoking it? They have the advantage, it seems,” Syblin-4 said.

“I can think of few reasons. Perhaps a situation we are unaware of?”

“There may be something happening that will shift the balance of power. Or a mutual threat. I wonder...Yes. I believe we can initiate contact.”

—

IN THE COMM room, Chulok was busy working on damage control with the Syblins. “Syblin...I don’t know your designation.”

There was a particularly awkward phase of Syblin development as the cilia of adolescence hardened into the protruding mouthful of razors that identified adults. When only half this transformation had occurred, the Syblins were notoriously mumble-mouthed, and sometimes even those of their own species

had difficulty distinguishing their words. Four was unfortunately right at that critical juncture, and while this conversation was of extreme importance, it was everything Chulok could do not to laugh at the clumsy hisses and clicking sounds that affected Syblin-4's speech.

"I am Four," the Syblin on the holoscreen said. "I am not here for small talk. You killed my mother. Make your business so I can wash the taste of this conversation from my mouth."

"My business with your mother need not be mine with you. She broke the peace first," Chulok said.

"That is debatable."

"But the reason it is debatable is that there were never plans in place for this. The refugees came into our world haphazardly. If you accept my proposal, I will promise a very different arrangement."

"And what is that?"

"No more overlapping territory. We divide New Xaxis down the middle, along the east-west axis."

Syblin-4 seemed to consider it. "And that can be protected with a death zone?"

"Across which designated traders may enter. Your mother had ambitions for more than half of our shared world. If you are less ambitious, this is an opportunity for peace to reign."

"What are you proposing?"

Chulok considered. Trust was their most important tool at this moment, but it was in scant supply between mortal enemies. This was a critical moment, and to their surprise, Chulok regretted the times in the past they had failed to keep their word. Sometimes truth actually worked, a mildly surprising realization. "My sources say that another force has been interfering with our struggle. First on one side and then on the other."

"Perhaps acting when one side is about to become dominant?"

"Yes. This means there can be no victory. Only extermination by an enemy who waits for us to exhaust ourselves."

Syblin-4 gave a nasty smile, cilia and knife teeth both protruding from the lipless mouth. "With the intent to get us to cripple each other. But if we

temporarily—”

“Join forces, such an alliance might last beyond this current emergency. You know I have plans for Metagos, to become part of a central web around the Outer Rim. A truce between us, if maintained, would be powerful evidence that our word can be trusted.”

“And how do you propose we establish trust?”

“Through action,” Chulok said. “You can see our plans in action. We make the first move: a ceasefire. If you chose to move on us at this moment, you could hurt us. Yes. And then we would retaliate, and we would be back where we began. We can lose it all, smash it all...or we can create a new balance. The old one lasted a generation.”

Lok spoke alone. His was the more tempered voice. “My father told me: Do not trust. Instead, *rely* upon people to do what they consider is in their best interests. It is up to you to decide what that is.”

“How do I know your interests?” Syblin-4 said.

“We intend to rule the sector,” Chu said. “This conversation is being transmitted *right now* to the guild. Every one of them heard my promise. And every one is watching to see if I keep my word. If I do, I win everything. *Metagos* wins everything. *You* win everything. If you wished to become the next queen, you could.”

Syblin-4 mused. “I am sure that others have begun the conversion. But I could take leadership before any of them complete it. Then they would be helpless.”

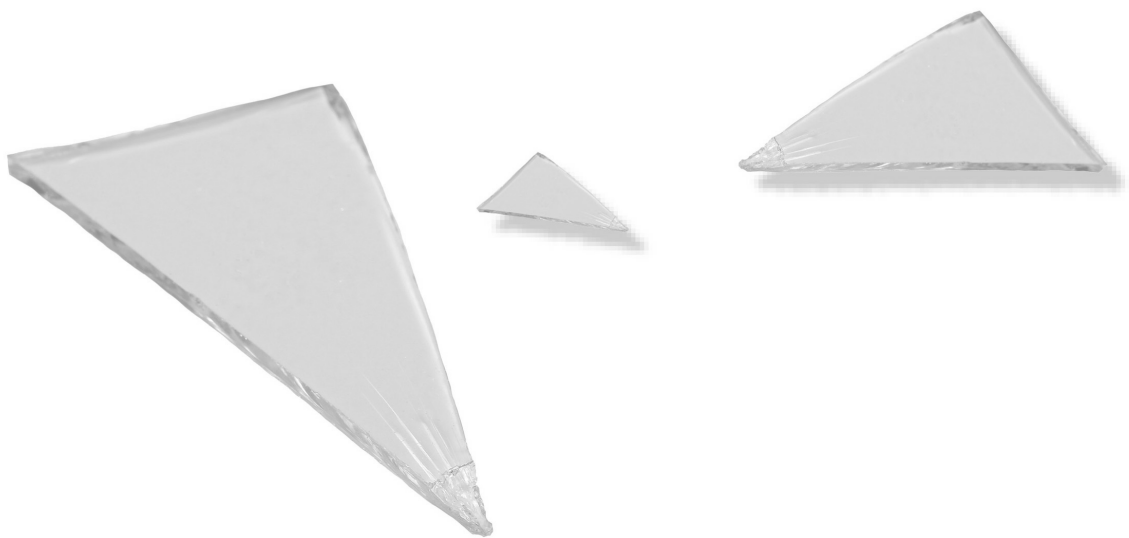
“We have been thieves and outcasts. This is the chance to show that *we* are the ones who can lead. We are the ones who see the truth, that it is the strength of alliance that creates power such as the galaxy has never known. Stand with me now. Prove me a liar...or begin the great consolidation. Together.”

“No trust,” Syblin-4 said.

“None. Shared interests.”

“You speak my language,” Syblin-4 said. “Let us share interests. Together, let us bring this planet under control. And let the entire galaxy see. And then let the Republic tremble. The Rim-runners are ascending.”

Before the gathered honoraries, the bargain was struck.



CHAPTER SIXTY

RED AND GREEN

The tides of war can change in a blink.

Under their uneasy truce, Chulok supervised as leaders from the two armies came together in their holographic communications chambers, sending maps and charts to be examined by all in interweaving rectangles of light and color, layers of frozen reality, moments of time and space that constantly fluxed. Chulok's two brains absorbed the data faster than Syblin-4 could possibly have dreamed. They would utilize but not flaunt that advantage.

Nalaflfita and General Slithis seemed uncomfortable to be in that room. By training and inclination, their tendency was to attack the enemy, not collaborate.

Chulok understood this very well, which was why Nala was limited to tactical decisions.

"We know why we are here," Slithis said. "Our leaders wish us to share information."

Syblin-32 said, "I don't see the reason for this, but will follow orders."

"Show them what we know about the patterns of attack. Where we have attacked."

A map sprang up, the gentle dish of the Great Wheel: wealth at the edges of the wheel and the northeast, grinding poverty more and more common as you approached the center Maze. Splashes of green symbolized attacks on Chulok's or the Syblins' forces. "Now use red for any confirmed attack by either of *our* forces," Syblin-4 said.

"Show them ours," Chulok said. The map populated with the relevant data. Again, attacks and defenses, this time from Chulok's perspective.

Syblin-4 spoke. "It is commanded that you tell the truth about all of our sorties."

This request produced grumbling from his brothers and sisters, but when they began to comply, additional attacks and defenses cropped up on the holofield. The grouching diminished.

Nala was not happy. “Commander,” his translator whispered. “We’re showing them our vulnerabilities.”

“Whoever attacked already knows,” Lok said as Chu studied the map. “Now, if there is new information...”

Chu nodded. “Computer: Filter.”

Chulok’s attacks on Sybil were removed. Sybil’s attacks on Chulok’s positions were removed.

A sprinkling of attacks remained.

Chulok considered. “If this is now accurate, we can see the problem. We have both been attacked by forces not within our control. Forces that played us against each other.”

“The citizens of New Xaxxis—under the direction, we believe, of the Jedi Mace Windu,” 4 said.

“Precisely,” Chulok said. “Now look at this cluster. What is its center?”

“The residential Maze.”

“Yes,” Chulok said. “The Upworlder Maze. Every attack had an infil and exfil. They attacked and retreated. And the shortest line for both would be—”

They drew lines between the dots. A center was clearly indicated.

Nala’s hands clamped on the arms of his chair, bending the metal. “Our little nursery of grubs was raided. I assumed it was Syblin soldiers, but now I wonder. Tell me, Four: Did you raid the grub farm?”

Four shook his head. “By the Web, I swear we had nothing to do with it.”

“Jedi son of a gundark,” Nala said, then sank back and muttered more under his breath.

“And we would never have discovered this without cooperation,” Chulok said. “I say to you: We need not love each other to hunt together. We merely need to share the carcass and anticipate greater spoils to come. Brothers. Sisters. Can we do this? Stand together and we win the city.”

“Win the city and we win the planet,” 32 said.

“Keep our word to each other, be open instead of secret about our hate, and we can eat from the same dish instead of spilling the meal. Do this, and the entire sector is ours. Can the galaxy stand against us?”

“No!” they all screamed, followed by piratical cheers.

“We make a good team,” Syblin-4 said. “Do not be false with us.”

Chulok laughed. “I will do *anything* to get what I desire. Even, if necessary, be an honest enemy.”

“An honest enemy,” 4 said. “Who would have thought?”

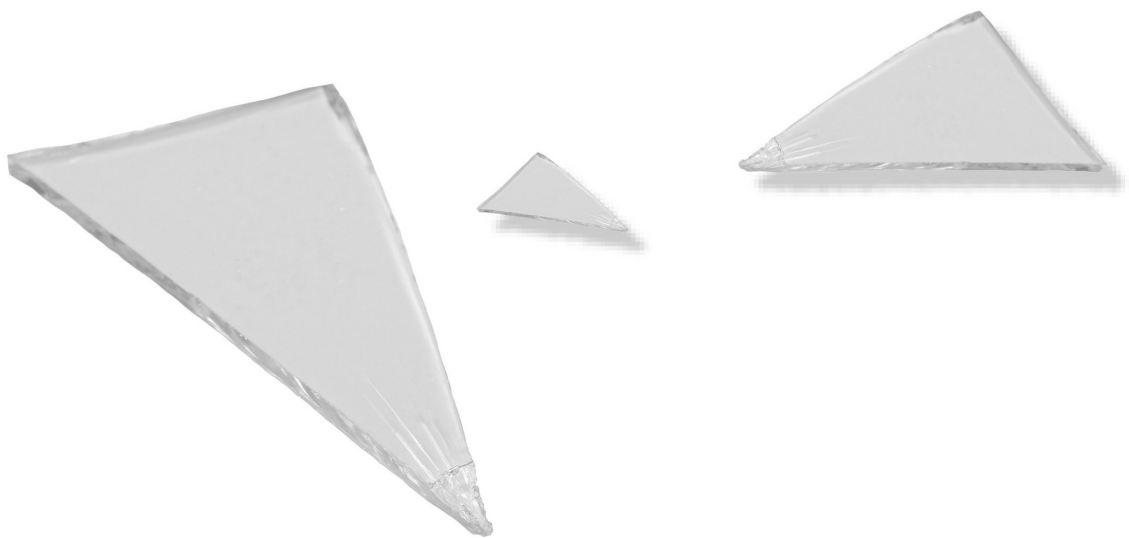
“We stand upon the shoulders of those who came before. Let us honor our ancestors.”

As the beings cheered and Syblin-4 was feted by brothers and sisters, Nala whispered to Chulok, “And after we have what we need?”

Chu and Lok smiled in frightful unison. “If you cannot predict that, you will never be a full commander, as fine a pilot as you are. That grub will never lead even at your level. He thinks small. He will follow me and go beyond his dreams. And his very existence will prove my good intentions to others.”

They paused, then continued, “The citizens are fools. The Jedi is a fool. The Hutts are fools. They have given me the tool I need to win everything. See to it that you keep my peace.”

“Yes, honored sirs,” Nala said.



CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

TWO WORDS

“Fall back!” Mace screamed to his allies as waves of aerial bombardment collapsed the shell of an abandoned nursery on level four. The situation had deteriorated so rapidly that he knew their deception had finally failed. It was one of the few times in his life that he preferred the sound of explosions: Whenever they died down, screams of terror and the moans of the wounded tore his heart.

He did the one thing he had been reluctant to do: communicate with Chulok directly through the thane’s comlink. Given to him after what could only be described as a proposal dinner, it hopefully might now save lives.

There came a barrage of static and beeping; then the holoinage stabilized. “What do you want, Jedi?”

“Leave these people be! They are simply fighting for their homes. You must understand that—you lost your own home and came here to find one.” His voice dropped to a soothing register. “Let us fight as champions. You for your side, me for these people. Winner take all.”

Chulok laughed. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? I would, too. But whether you or I live has nothing to do with the conflict at hand, Jedi.”

“A coward’s words.”

Chulok almost giggled. “You would enjoy me taking offense. Getting angry, swearing, and strutting as you attempted to taunt me into single combat. No. This blood is on *your* hands, Jedi, for all your pretended calm and peace of mind. Your mask slipped, and I see you. You talk peace but love killing. You just ‘accidentally’ built a career where, so sad, you are forced to end lives. Sob sob.

“Stuff that nonsense. And go back to those who believe the lies. This was not your fight.” Chulok’s pretense of calm vanished; what remained was homicidal rage. “It was *never* your fight. You came here putting your nose

where it did not belong, and like all Jedi, you want to make it about you. It is not. You will die. Hopefully by my Sanchi Kan staff. Triple Irons against lightsaber. It will be glorious but no contest. It won't be in some sort of ritual, though. Continue to interfere, and I will squash you like an insect and throw your body behind the gates. You will just be gone. No one will even know how you perished. Too bad. So sad. Or..."

"Or?" Mace asked.

Lok spoke. So reasonably. "You can leave now. Return to your hidden ship. The walk of shame will take but a minute. You'll have the rest of your life to drink enough to forget it. I assume Jedi drink?"

The other rebels looked at Mace, worried.

"I have one word for you, Chulok. But there are two of you. So it's two words. I suspect you might know what they are...but there are children listening."

"Children who will die for your pride."

"It's my intention to be sure they don't die for yours."

Mace turned off the holoimage.

A child looked up at him. "Master Windu...you will stay with us?"

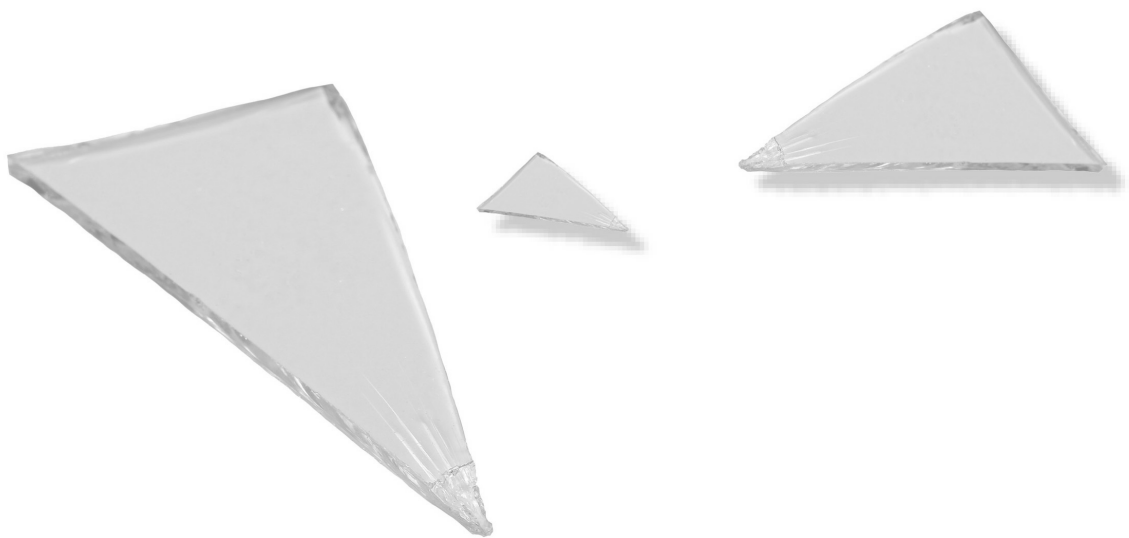
"I'm going nowhere."

KinShan seemed worried. "What do we do?"

"Two things," Mace said. "First, we fall back to level seven."

"Makes sense," she said. "And the other?"

"Our enemies fight with chaos and cruelty. They have necessitated the use of extreme measures." His expression was withdrawn and unreadable. "And so I propose something no sane person would consider."



CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

THE GATES

Behind level ten's titanic gates lay a horrible secret: creatures infested with living fungus and connected to the heart of the planet itself. Slaves and criminals (often political dissidents) had been sentenced to labor in the muck, too close to the dreaded gates. Many over the years were snatched, screaming against the bars and, so the stories went, infested with fungal parasites. Some were devoured. Others, perhaps, mutated and bred.

No one knew for sure...or wanted to.

Mace glowered. "Behind these gates are creatures who have collected there since time untold. No one has been through these gates and returned. No one even knows who built them."

"Before history began," KinShan said. "When my people first came and explored these depths, the gates were here."

"Who built them? Vin-Vin believes his folk did, thousands of years ago."

"It's possible."

"I ask you now: Can you control what lies beyond these gates?"

"No. We know they have been infested with live fungus. We believe that the fungus now controls them—it animates them like puppets.

"But we can protect ourselves from them."

"How?" he asked.

"There is a way. We must herd our people into the caves. We can seal the openings. Mother Web will help."

"What then? How would we force the Dwellers to return?"

"Chulok now knows that we oppose him and have enough power to be a threat. He will exterminate us if he has the chance, killing every being he considers disloyal or a risk and repopling the planet with immigrants. Give the signal to speed up evacuation of the city. Assign the northeast group to rearguard action. Bring them to the caves."

ABOVE, THE WESTERN, southern, and eastern quadrants of New Xaxis were being evacuated. Only the northeast was sitting tight. Having weathered assaults by the citizen militia groups, residents there chose to place their trust in Chulok and the fortress protecting them overhead.

Refugees by the thousands streamed through the tunnels and down overcrowded lifts into the depths. No tourists this time. They were herded into the western and southern cave systems, which were being protected by Sa'ad and militia members or sealed by adolescent Hillian silk.

The forces of Chulok and Sybil were not united as such, but both had turned their attention to the seventh level, hammering away at its defenses and fortifications.

The thrum of explosions shook the rock walls and ceiling as Mace and a crew of daredevils worked on the level ten gates. Raise them, and suddenly the nature of the war changed drastically. What lay behind the gates would spill into their world, and there were no plans Chulok could have made that would cope with such chaos.

Mace remembered what the Sa'ad had taught him of their beliefs: The core of a planet and the heart of a star had much in common. The planet itself was made from the bits of the star.

And even if it had become more complex with materials, minerals, and life-forms, they were the same. And as that star had become angry and scoured the surface, it had also affected the life-forms in its depths—the Depth Dwellers. It had corrupted them on the level of mycelial webs infesting their brains. Some called them mutants, thinking they were infested with parasites. The truth was infinitely stranger. They were no longer the animals that had been infested. They were now walking, crawling fungoids that only appeared to be living animals.

Not animals. Not plants, not even fungus. Something in between, something terrible.

Vin-Vin's people had understood the danger. Created the great gates. What they now intended was madness, but...

They were going to be crushed if he didn't do something. If he trusted KinShan, and the Hillians, and his instinct...if he trusted the Force or believed in the Web...

Then this was the best of a set of poor options. The only one that aligned with this planet's guardians and destiny.

Even if it seemed insane. He triggered his lightsaber and struck at the bars. They sparked and glowed a bit but did not melt. This was going to take time they didn't have.

There had to be another way. Set in the wall to the right of the gates was the winching mechanism. It was massive—larger than two human beings standing on each other's shoulders. But what he saw was that the gears and the giant chains affected a cantilever system.

A huge counterbalance controlled the gears. Those gears, in essence, moved only enough to move that counterbalance, which might have been rusty and gummed up but was still there. He figured that if he could get it moving, it would lift the gates.

But how would he do that? The ancient mechanism seemed to be comprehensible: Simple machines were the same all over the galaxy. But this mechanism seemed powered by the larger engine and triggered by a smaller one. Even that smaller engine needed to be jump-started. What power source they had originally used for that purpose, he did not know.

"How can you use such a machine?" KinShan asked. "We don't have power for it."

Mace paused for a moment, thinking, and then lifted his lightsaber. "The diatium power cell and the kyber crystal inside this lightsaber can help. The purpose of this crystal is to amplify the energy needed to manifest the saber blade. If I can connect the hilt directly to the machine, the energy might be enough to move the gates."

Mace disassembled his lightsaber hilt very carefully, as he often did when he was cleaning or adjusting it. The crystal within glowed as he splinted wires from the mechanism to the lightsaber and then checked every millimeter of the wiring.

A swift scan of the apparatus suggested where the power should be applied. He twisted the wires into position and then invested another moment checking the gears before he triggered the power. Hopefully, they weren't too gummed up to perform their function. How many centuries had they remained motionless?

Power began to flow from his lightsaber into the device. The output of a lightsaber dwarfed that of common construction tools. If he wasn't careful, Mace knew he could easily overwhelm the entire machine. He closed his eyes and focused, sensing the energy leaving the saber hilt and entering the machine. He could feel the ancient wires coming back to life after slumbering for so long. The energy built and built, until Mace knew the power was seconds away from edging out of his control. In that fraction of a second, Mace cut power to his lightsaber. And waited.

For long moments, nothing happened. He was afraid that nothing *could* happen, nothing *would* happen, and then...the device began to move.

And as it began to move, the chain grew tight. It was pulling against a block, and that block had not moved in millennia. It shuddered and smoked and then the gates went *clank* and began to rise. Mace backed away.

"I think that maybe we need to go," he said softly.

"I think you're right," KinShan said, motioning her people to leave. Swiftly.

—

WHEN HE RETURNED to the seventh-level cave, he saw that the Hillians had protected the refugees by webbing the mouth of the cave thoroughly with their fiber, leaving a hole large enough for one of them to fit through. He waited while KinShan crawled through and then followed.

Two of Mother Web's children sealed up the hole after them. Sounds charged from the corridor around them. Soldiers were coming. Machinery was coming. Things were about to get very ugly, very soon.

—

GENERAL SLITHIS HAD fought near the front of the line as his soldiers swept the tunnels and commandeered the lifts. He had studied the maps and knew that the western cave system was the most direct route to his goal: the northern system, where the Sa'ad nerve center was located. The western cave was for tourists.

While that maniac Nala guarded the airspace on the fourth level, he would win the ground game, he had no question. Today would see the end of the rebellion. He wished that he could then exterminate the Hillians, but Chulok had other plans. And as much as he hated to admit it, the thane was a serious force to be reckoned with. They actually might take the planet and then drive the Hutts from the Rim. After that...who knew?

The webbing blocking the exit from the tunnels was too tough to cut through, so his troops just blasted away the rock it was attached to. When the smoke and dust cleared, his were the first boots on the ground.

The tourist town, with all its mushrooms and colored stalagmites, was deserted. But the main Hillian cave, where the Sa'ad had presented tableaux for the wealthy and curious, was webbed thoroughly. He knew this was where he would find his prey, primed and ready for slaughter.

"Trapped, are you?" General Slithis's voice reverberated from the floating disk of his cam droid. "My third eye can see in your darkness, you clever little savages. Clustering here like the cowards you are saves us the trouble of rounding you up. I suppose the rest are in other—"

He stopped talking as another sound began to echo up from below. "What the—" He turned, his massively muscular body tensing for combat.

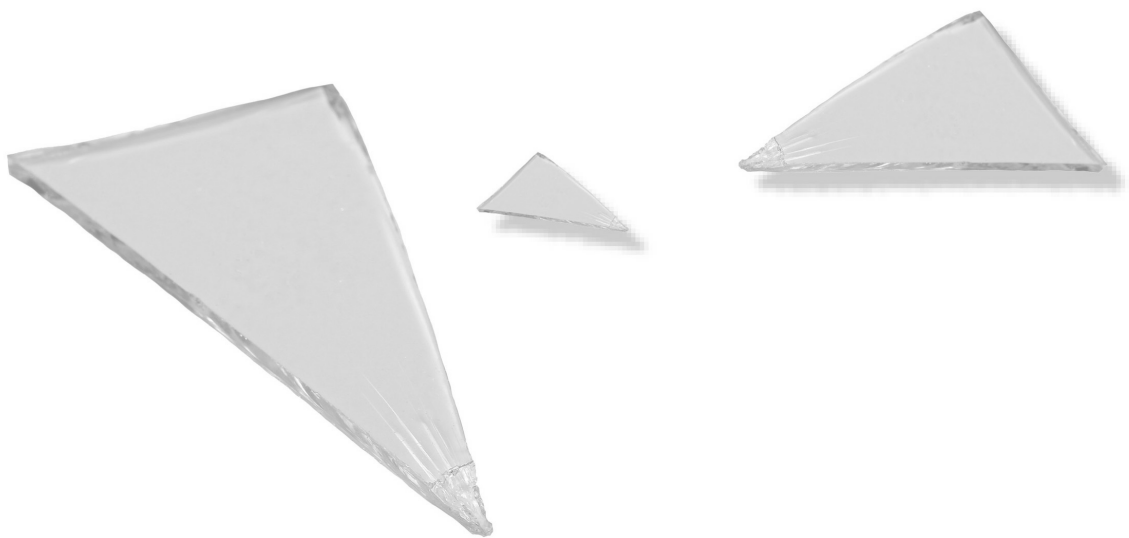
But what he never anticipated was the army advancing upon him, a procession of creatures large and small, their skin crawling with fungal webs.

The Dwellers in the Depths.

Soldiers are used to fear. Thrive on it, are empowered by it. But the presence of the uncanny can hit them hard, and all three of General Slithis's eyes went wide as the army of moving fungus lurched toward him, moaning low, arms and legs moving as if controlled by puppeteers.

Depth Dwellers.

They were masses of animated fungus that only pretended to be animal, and they were coming his way.



CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

THE BARRICADES RISE

General Slithis didn't know what to do other than what he'd always done. His soldiers were panicking.

"Stand and fight!" he bellowed at the troops. At first they did stand, but *only* that, as if in shock. One turned and ran, but his top sergeant, Abeeble Ajas, shot the deserter as he fled; he pitched face-first into the rocky floor and slid into a mushroom stalk, dead. The other soldiers finally turned and fought against the flood shambling toward them, terrifying creatures that continued to move even after they were directly shot, as if they were marionettes rather than living things. Not heir to the lusts and fears of flesh, not motivated by greed—instead what drove them was some force that Slithis could not imagine.

"They're not alive!" someone screamed.

The Depth Dwellers lurched past the cave where the Hillians and thousands of barricaded citizens huddled. And most disturbingly, it seemed that they paused a moment, bowing in the direction of the darkness as they passed the cave. What the hell was going on?

Slithis had heard stories, of course, but he had no idea that there were so many of these things down here. What the hell did they eat?

Or did he want to know?

Everything about this felt wrong. "Create the barricades!" Slithis screamed. Droids carrying defensive apparatuses in the rear scrambled to the fore, hastily erecting power fences, designed to slow suicide attacks.

These things were coming fast now from down in the deeper tunnels. And if Slithis wasn't careful, routes of retreat would be cut off.

But he was confident that they could create a safe space in the time available. He would then be able to formulate a strategy to fight back. The energy walls were assembled a piece at a time until a huge pentagram

surrounded his troops. Other forces had descended other tunnels, in other sectors, but this was the most important front—he was sure of it. And also certain that the other teams were experiencing similar issues elsewhere on this level.

Once armed, the fences crackled every time what his troops were calling Freaks touched them. A cascade of sparks arced into the air. The creatures didn't make a sound. They didn't scream. At close range, he saw that their faces and bare skin *writhed* with fungal nodes.

It was unnerving: How could you deal with something that apparently felt no pain? His troops felt pain and fear aplenty. Anything living did. But right now, all they could do was continue to build until the pentagram was fully powered up. At that point they sat back and fired from within it.

"It's working, sir!" one of the officers with the mercenary troops called. "The fence will hold!" The Freaks surrounded the electrified pentagram; they couldn't get through the wire, but they were still blocking his path of retreat.

"We'll recalibrate our weapons and blast our way back to the surface. And from there, we'll just pump pisha gas down into these tunnels until everything down here is dead." That toxic stuff, refined from the poisonous atmosphere of one of the moons of Felucia, was a favorite.

"But what about the Hillians? The worms?"

"Sometimes you have to kill a nest to save it," the general said. "There are nests under other underground caverns. We'll get eggs from there, or do something else to support ourselves. Once we have won this fight, we will be able to dictate our own terms. We'll create a planet where raiders and smugglers and Rim-runners from across the galaxy can gather. Silk was always too small-time anyway."

—

TO THE HORROR of Chulok's forces, the Depth Dwellers were indeed attacking all over level seven, with some finding their way up to six.

"Stand!" Slithis screamed. "Do not yield. We will defeat them!"

Chulok's troops had been prepared to kill Sa'ad and the citizens hunkering down with them. But the sight of endless shambling nightmares unnerved them to the point that most were firing almost randomly. Still, so thickly packed were the Dwellers that almost any shot hit flesh.

No...not flesh. Fungus that had simply taken the form of the flesh it had eaten. This was a nightmare.

Nightmare or no, after the initial shock had passed, the troops settled into the gentle business of butchery. By the end of all this, the caves would be knee-deep in the undead.

—

THE SOLDIERS THANKED whatever gods they served as the first wave of Depth Dwellers ebbed. To their relief, the greatest casualty proved to be their nerves. By some miracle, there had been relatively few losses.

"Set guards," General Slithis said. "We will regroup. Get reinforcements. And tomorrow we smash them."

"Tomorrow," the troops said, nodding. Yes, tomorrow all would be set right. And with that promise of future victory, Chulok's troops slept.

"They can't get to us," a guard muttered when Slithis made his rounds of the fence. "And we can't get to them. Tomorrow, we will return to the battle."

And he was correct: The unliving foe could not penetrate the stun wall. The Dwellers did not grimace, scream, or otherwise display pain, but shocks did seem to create a moment of confusion and degraded coordination. They would drop and flop, then stand to renew the attack.

"General, sir...that stun wall's power cells will last another eight hours. Then what?"

"Then we'll be up and fighting again," Slithis said. "The troops need rest."

—

CHULOK'S CRIMINAL ARMY slept...restlessly.

Finally close enough that the Hillians could mount a mass dream invasion, they suffered nightmares worse than any Mace had endured. Sergeant Ajas had tried to get a bit of shuteye, but woke sweating and screaming, “No!” He blinked the sleep from his eyes, embarrassed to realize that his comrades were staring at him.

One next to him actually kicked him, saying, “Dammit! Let us sleep!”

Ajas was embarrassed but also concerned. “We shouldn’t be down here...” he muttered.

And he didn’t try to sleep again that night. He noticed that many of the others seemed to have made the same decision.

—

MORNING, SUCH AS it was, finally came.

“Wake up, damn your eyes!” Ajas screamed. But his troops noted that he was unshaven and hollow-eyed.

“Sarge...” one said. “Did you sleep last night?”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead.”

Almost as if triggered by his comment, a gigantic fungus-wreathed tentacle, extruded from some creature among the Depth Dwellers, reached over the fence and snaked around the sergeant’s leg. The massive, scaly coil lifted him into the air with strength undreamed of and then pulled him into the mob of shambling horrors.

His screams were hideous.

“Shouldn’t we try to save him?” a soldier asked.

The screaming stopped abruptly.

“Let him sleep,” the other said.

During the night, the creatures outside the fences had reinforced themselves with horrors that had taken more time to crawl from level ten.

The exhausted, frightened troops fought back, barely controlled by their officers.

“Kriff this!” a soldier said. “I’m not dying for Chulok or those damn worms—”

“Stow it, soldier, or I’ll—” The officer’s rant was interrupted. Terminally. A second tentacle snaked out from amid the horde and clutched at him.

“Sarge!”

The officer screamed as he was raised high and then slammed brutally onto the crushed rock at their feet.

The creatures beyond the fence reacted aggressively as the soldiers fired in rolling waves. The fungus had formed into hundreds of shapes, some of them smaller than humans, others spiky and tall enough to brush the ceiling. Titans. And there seemed no end to them.

Panic spread rapidly, and the soldiers rolled out their heaviest weaponry. One giant creature fell onto the power fence, shorting it out, and the others scrambled over him to attack the fighting men.

—

IN THE HILLIAN cave, the Sa’ad and their guests clung to the thick strands of Hillian silk crosshatching and sealing the mouths of their caves. From safety, the carnage seemed almost surreal, and the children among them seemed hypnotized rather than repelled or terrified.

Three Depth Dwellers descended upon one of Chulok’s soldiers and vomited mycelium onto his face. The man thrashed and bucked...and then was still. Soon, they knew, he would rise and join the Dwellers.

“Rip my web!” young Whista Kel cursed. She might not have yet earned a Hillian, but her scream would pierce eardrums.

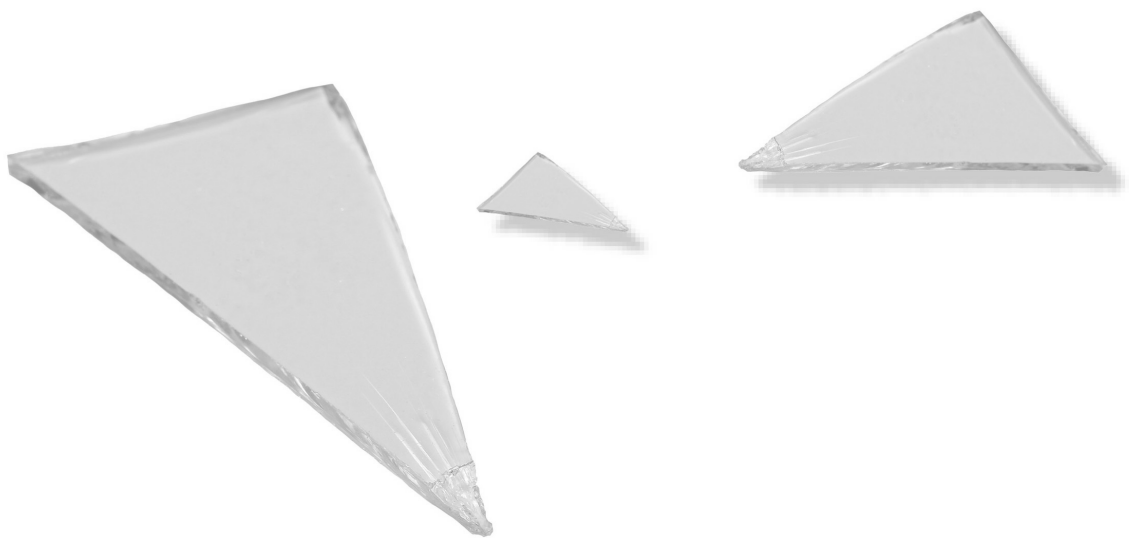
“Don’t look, Whista,” her mother said.

She couldn’t add, *Or you’ll go behind the gates*. What used to be behind the gates was now marauding through the caverns. It was entirely possible that “behind the gates” was the safest place one could be.

Not probable, perhaps. But possible.

Screams reverberated as the men and women of Chulok’s forces were grabbed, hauled into the shadows, and destroyed. Breaches in the fence were immediately attacked, and only concentrated blasterfire drove the creatures back. The stench of burning, rotted flesh was like inhaling embers.

But the troops held their positions, and as the morning stretched to afternoon, they were indeed swimming in blood.



CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

A RALLY CRY

Across New Xaxxis and its satellite suburbs, the former masters, terrified of what was happening within the cave system, were either fighting back or fleeing. From space, the exodus could be viewed as swarms of blazing insects deserting their hive.

KinShan's people communicated with other knots of Sa'ad across the planet through the mycelial web as well as holochannels.

In the depths of the sealed caves, Hillian adolescents had been digging tunnels to the other shelter caves. Refugees by the thousands found food and water and were reunited with their families.

The mercenary troops found their communications disrupted by concentrated bursts of electrical static from the depths of the planet. But what seemed like random patterns were actually coordinated. The Sa'ad themselves knew how to condense their communications and shoot them through the brief pauses as efficiently as any compressed starship-to-starship comms.

Like timing shots through the gaps in a moving lattice.

—

RAISING HIS LIGHTSABER, Mace addressed Metagos as holocams broadcast across the planet.

"Listen to me, brave citizens of New Xaxxis!" he called. "I am Mace Windu. Metagos is rising. We are breaking our enemies with terror from the depths. But we must fight as well. You have always had the ability to be free. They kept you in bondage with fear. I will bleed with you, die with you if necessary. But I tell you that if you will find your courage now...you can win!"

Then the static generated by the vast fungal mat, perhaps the largest life-form in the entire galaxy, again came to life, blocking communication.

“How long?” Mace asked KinShan.

The Sa’ad princess looked to Mother Web. “Are we ready?”

In a language Mace did not understand, he felt her answer yes.

His next communication went to whatever survivors remained in the ruins of Sybil’s enclave.

Syblin-X, whom he had spared once, long ago, was swift to answer.

The insectoid bowed respectfully. “What would you have us do?”

“Your mother put you in the middle of a war. I would not do that. Chulok said that if you remained out of their way, they would not harm you. I think they spoke the truth.”

“You are saying we can trust them?” one Syblin cried. “They killed our mother!”

Mace sighed. How to say this to a grieving child? “She and they played a dangerous game. She should not have brought you into it, but for all that, she loved you in her way.”

Syblin-X stepped forward. “We have a chance to start anew today. And this is what I say we do: We *protect* Metagos. Mother was afraid of losing power. She needed to reduce the number of potential challengers for her throne. She *broke* us. It is time to heal. Those who listen to me might not only survive but also change this world forever!”

—

HE WAS BARELY off the call before the next emergency materialized: Chulok had managed to lower fighter ships down the main lifts, and they were harrying the eastern resistance.

He had to trust their allies. He was relieved to see images sent in holopackets along the web: The enemy ships fired on refugees, chasing them...but then ran into Hillian webs, splitting and bursting into flames. He hoped that damn Nala was among them, but doubted it. He’d need all his skill to defeat him.

And it might take all his strength not to enjoy it.

THOUSANDS OF REFUGEES flooded into the depths, down stairs, lifts, tunnels, and cargo ramps. All sought escape from the chaos above. They raced down to the seventh level, where they had been told that there would be food, safety, and protection, and the Sa'ad attempted to deliver, welcoming the newcomers as best they could. Still, the sound of energy bolts from the soldiers who hunted the crowds made it more difficult to be hospitable.

Beside watching the tunnels that led from the top to the bottom, the rebels helped refugees into the cargo lifts in the industrial sections at the edge of the inner maze, descending to the tunnels on levels seven and eight.

Mace saw that the area was more honeycombed with tunnels than he had suspected. They were everywhere. The rebels on level four were protecting civilians and ushering them into the tunnels as rapidly as that could be safely arranged.

Those who were unafraid to stay and fight for their homes were the heroes he needed. Those who felt like they had no chance to win against Chulok or Sybil's children refused to join their cause, and he struggled not to judge them.

Anyone can be broken, he remembered. Anyone can fear.

The trick was not allowing fear to paralyze you. Turn it into anger. Or pure energy.

The fear on the faces of those fleeing from the upper limits was heartbreaking. A hundred different species. Families. Children carrying eggs containing unborn brothers and sisters. This was the cost of a world that had been run by criminals, and Mace would have collapsed had he not focused all his energy on the central problem: *How are we going to win?*

MACE AND KINSHAN had kissed and separated. They were the clear leaders, and there was no way to control so much carnage without temporarily parting ways.

The mine cars shuttled the warriors from one cave system to another as rapidly as possible. *Take advantage of them now*, KinShan told herself. *Eventually, Chulok or Slithis or Nalaflita will realize what we're doing and destroy the tracks.*

She spread her arms and spoke with new strength. "We always knew this day was coming. We knew that, and so we sold some of our silk to smugglers in exchange for weapons.

"We can fight if you will join us. You can protect your families. I cannot pretend that all of you will live. But everyone dies at some point. The real question is: What are you willing to die for?

"The battle rips our beloved planet to shards. But the strong have always known that the price of freedom is blood...and that price is paid in advance."

The people cheered raucously. These folk were with her. "Those who seek freedom are watching *us*. To see if we really have the courage to take our fate in our hands. If we do...perhaps they can win theirs as well.

"If you can understand the value of that, then you can be enough. We can do this, I swear to you."

A Colicoid stepped forward, instantly recognizable from his robust exoskeleton, elongated face, and multifaceted eyes. "Why should we follow you? You Sa'ad are no warriors."

"We have a Jedi," she said, and while some were impressed, one hawked and spit into the dirt.

"We know of them and their glowing swords. Chulok killed one of your precious mystics!"

"No!" she said fiercely. "His name was Qui-Gon Jinn, and he escaped Chulok's trap and sent his friend to help us."

"Where is this Jedi?"

"He is in the west, guarding our village and Hillians. I am here, and if you follow me, we can win. I fight for my home, and if you will fight for yours,

we will win. But if you force me to prove myself to you, I promise it will come at a cost.

“It’s your move.” She uncoiled the whip at her waist and snapped it, shattering a crystal wedged into the wall. The people gasped. The Colicoid gazed at her for long seconds, as if trying to make up his mind.

Then a second insectoid came and stood beside him. And another. Triplets, perhaps. If they expected KinShan to flinch or step back, they were disappointed. She gazed at them by the glow of her lightshroom. Then one of the brothers put his hand on the middle one’s shoulders and said, “I believe that this is a good woman. I believe this is the moment we’ve been looking for.

“My name is Seffel Lisa, and I will follow you if you can look me in the eye and tell me that you will stand with us no matter what. That if we start to lose, you will not flee.”

“I have nowhere to flee,” she said, and the simple truth in that statement made all the difference.

She instructed her people to guide the new recruits to defensive positions, while she contacted Mace via comlink in between the bursts of static that were crippling communications.

“We have allies in the east,” she said.

“That’s what we need. We could also use a new strategy,” Mace said.

“We have an advantage,” KinShan said. “In the underground, mushrooms put out light in both the visible and the nonvisible spectrums. If Chulok’s forces are dependent upon that light and we can turn it off, we can have a moment of advantage.”

“The Web can coordinate such an effort?”

“It can and will.”

—

AS THE BATTLE between Chulok’s troops and the Depth Dwellers raged, the Sa’ad had pulled thousands of packed civilians back to the inner caves.

Their warriors were hiding between mushroom stalks, behind rocks, in the tourist section of the western cave. As they heard the sound of soldiers flooding down from above, the grind of the lifts, the pattering of feet, the stealthy noises of energy bolts being readied and chemical grenades being cooked, they steadied and readied themselves.

“Hold,” Mace said. The militia around him was nervous. They wanted to fire now, but Mace knew that if they did, they would give away their positions.

“Hold!” he said again as the flood of enemy soldiers came closer. Much closer and he’d be able to make them out through telescopic sights. Mace put himself front and center: There was no way he would ask others to accept risk he was not willing to assume himself.

“Hold...” Then he yelled, “*Now!*”

Within an instant, he felt a tingling, a tickling, as if something was flowing through his feet. By the Force! He had never dreamed that those cud chewers would have—or be able to access—power such as this.

Then suddenly all of the light was extinguished.

Cries of fear, cries of anguish and surprise as suddenly the Sa’ad who had been creeping around the edges began to focus their fire. They could see and their targets could not, except for those who perhaps had some sort of night-vision goggles or scopes. It was dark and Mace himself could not see. But he could stretch out his senses and feel what he needed to do.

His mastery of the Force substituted for eyes. Suddenly he was among them, slipping between the bolts, a figure no one saw until it was too late. He trusted his feelings at every moment, and those feelings were never wrong. Flashes of light came in the darkness as Mace extended his Force sense, found an enemy, and triggered his lightsaber for just the moment necessary to strike him down.

Darkness. Then burning light and a scream. And then darkness. And then light. Every flash, a stroke. Every stroke, a kill.

So swift were his triggerings that those struggling to find him could see no motion, only frozen moments of sparking death.

Mace Windu delivered justice where there had been no justice. He let flow the anger and the pain and the fear and all of the emotions that had been inside for so long but been blocked by his concern for himself. Now it was all right there. He was Mace Windu, Jedi Master, and he owned the dark.

CHULOK'S FORCES HAD retreated, and KinShan had returned. And for an hour, Mace was able to move among the troops with KinShan to evaluate the mental and physical condition of the men and women at her command.

Morale was high. Laughter and backslapping. These were people who had never known war, who did not understand its ebb and flow, its cycles of advance and retreat.

He did not have the heart to deny them even a moment of this new, hard-won confidence. KinShan stole glances at him from time to time, and he knew that she was thinking the same thing: *How do we keep the people's mood high without giving them unrealistic expectations about everything that remains to be done?*

He knew something would happen, and within the hour, it began. The first arc of rockets from the darkness caught them by surprise, and the mushroom forest flared with explosions. Flames shot up the sides of the walls. The brave citizens began to fall backward. He saw now that it would not help to have the mycelial core cut the mushroom lights again. This time the enemy had their own lights—and they also had equipment for seeing in the darkness.

They had rockets, and now they understood that the formerly passive Sa'ad were fearsome warriors. They were treating his allies with the seriousness they deserved. Mace called, "Fall back! Fall back!"

And they fell back to the next level while maintaining enough covering fire from protected positions to be able to pick off those who advanced too rapidly. Insufficient care meant death. Their tactics were not bad. They were surprisingly organized for people who had not fought a war in generations.

He began to realize that the mercenaries may not have loved their master, but they were men and women of war. Those still alive were embracing the

chaos. He had to do something, and soon, or the Sa'ad momentum would fail. Aggression and numbers would carry the mercenaries forward until there was no place to hide.

At that point they would slaughter the Hillians. The thought of those spiritual, powerful beings ripped open and ravaged by blasterfire and rockets nauseated him.

However powerful they were, their power was not entirely on this level of reality. "Hold them," he said to Chala-Non. "Buy me half an hour."

Mace spent twenty of those minutes sprinting and scrambling to the northern caves, where Mother Web was surrounded by her young. She seemed unconcerned, chewing placidly at her fungal cud when he reached her. Why and how she could remain as calm as this in the midst of chaos was something of a mystery to him.

He said to her, "You are connected to all life on Metagos."

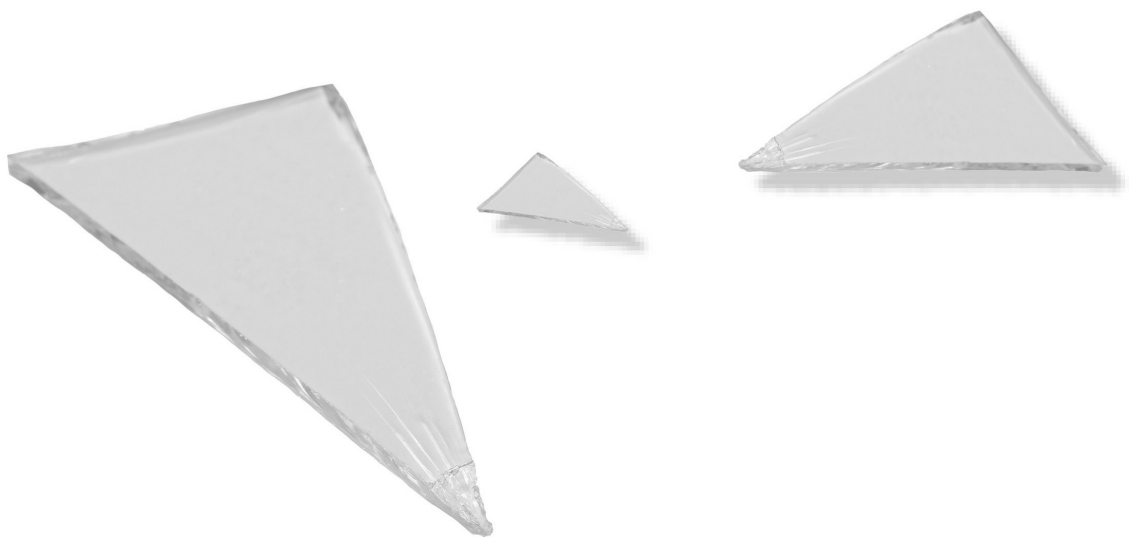
Yes.

"Even the Depth Dwellers."

Yes.

"Can you communicate with them?" Mace looked at the powerful Hillian expectantly.

I see the question behind the question. Mother Web paused. *It can be done.*



CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

DEATH DREAMS

Chulok's troops had established a rhythm: Send droids out to plow the bodies of the dead to the sides. Build a new line of fence twenty meters out. Disassemble the leading edge of the previous fence, then reassemble it with the new bearings. In that way, the thousand soldiers behind the fence crept forward like some simple, mindless organism, slowly expanding their reach in the cavern.

After their initial shock, the troops had begun to regain their mood. The creatures that were hungry for them crawled chittering over a mountain of shattered, twitching bodies. From time to time, a tentacle reached over the fence, but they blasted it and the creature retreated.

Again there was darkness. They did not have enough lights to keep the entire cave lit. But they could see the shifting, staggering hordes waiting just beyond the fences. They would kill all of them...after some rest. They were exhausted; they had not had restful sleep in two days.

They did not realize it, but they were nearing the end of their physical and emotional reserves.

—

GENERAL SLITHIS CREATED a flying squad of drones and pilots to blast his way back to the lifts. He had a mind to head up to level six to supervise the operation there, and his troops watched him leave with cynical eyes.

Before he left, the hollow-eyed general told Sergeant Kiera Mantooth to rest. She was of a nomadic people from the Outer Rim, mammalian with reptile eyes, and a remorseless killing machine. But even machines needed rest.

Mantooth would take one of the first sleep rotations. She took her bedroll out of her backpack and touched the button that inflated it. She curled up, put

in her earplugs, and closed her eyes. The soldiers around her were continuing the fight. She would rest for four hours, then get up and continue killing. There seemed no end to these horrors, but that had to be an illusion.

Didn't it?

The Hillians and their Sa'ad allies had made a terrible mistake: Mantooth was no mere gangster, nor was she an effete and decadent person of wealth. She and her troops were killers. They enjoyed what they did and were paid well for it.

And she could control her mind, force the nightmares to retreat. She *would* sleep this time. Yes, she would.

—

SHE DREAMED, AND in that dream she was in a troopship heading to Cerea. As it skirted the atmosphere and began to come in for a landing, a bolt from beneath hit the vessel. She was sucked screaming into the sky.

She woke panting. It was just a dream, thank goodness. Mantooth checked her sleeve chrono and saw that she'd been unconscious for only an hour. She felt exhausted. More sleep. She could do this...

The dream had indeed reminded her of a terrible time.

Yes, that had been a slaughter. But she had survived, and that was all that mattered.

Comforted by that thought, she went back to sleep and found herself clearing brush in the jungle on some far-off world she did not recognize. The jungle seemed a living thing, like this new adversary they were fighting in addition to...who? Traitors of some kind. In the end, it didn't really matter.

The jungle—the plants and every insect and crawling thing—not only was alive but also seemed determined to resist them. They fought back with their teeth, tearing and biting at her, and the pain was like nothing she had ever experienced.

She woke up screaming...again.

"Sorry, are you all right?" The soldier next to her looked very concerned, and also as if *he* had not slept in a week. Apparently, nightmares were as

communicable as head colds.

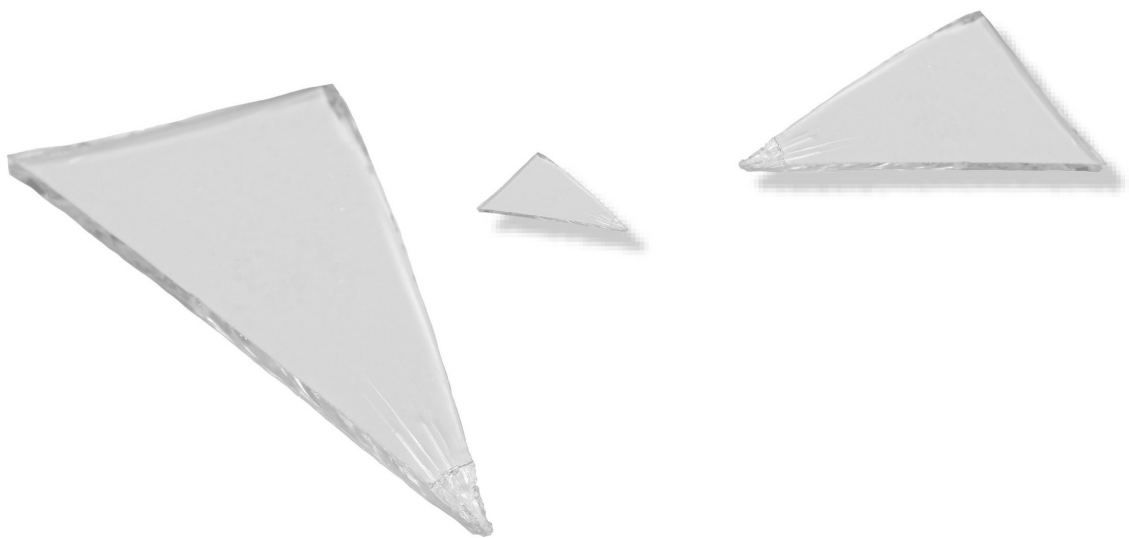
She panted and got up. “I don’t need to sleep right now. I need to fight. Why don’t you take my bedroll?”

“All right,” Private Spinwack said. “If you insist.” He lay down to sleep. Or try to.

—

PRIVATE SPINWACK SLEPT. In that sleep, he dreamed that they were in a lift heading down into the depths of Metagos, and the lift kept going down. And down. Deeper and deeper into the bowels of the planet as the air became hotter and hotter and began to burn his flesh. He woke up screaming, and hearing the screams and moans of the others.

Two nights without sleep. His body felt like a bag of splintered bones. All he wanted was rest, and at that moment, death itself felt like a better option.



CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

DAWN ON LEVEL SEVEN

In all quadrants of the Glass Abyss, from level three all the way to level seven, the battles continued. “Get the children in!” Mace howled. “Now the old ones. The rest of you...if you would be free, this is the time to fight!”

On the seventh level, all allies and innocents were herded into caves and protected by Mace, the Sa’ad warriors, and the Hillian webs.

As could have been expected, with the coming of dawn came the next attack. Even though they were hundreds of meters below the surface and day and night were artificial distinctions, the rhythms of combat were tied to the rhythms of diurnal bodies that had evolved within the waxing and waning of daylight.

In the end, the “dawn,” artificial as it was, still mattered. The crackle of the energy fences had been constant through the false night. When they were turned off, the silence was disturbing: The moans of the Depth Dwellers was a low, constant rumble.

In and around this came the sounds of soldiers behind them, firing into the mass of the fungoids. As soon as the fences were down, the attack began in earnest. Their weapons sizzled through the flesh of the Dwellers, and for a time the defenders had to feel as if their efforts were paying off beautifully.

Then something that they did not expect happened: The Sa’ad, guardians of the Hillians, began to fire back from the shadows. To the shock and horror of the mercenaries, the Sa’ad and their allies moved among the undead unmolested. Impossible!

Sergeant Ajas was angry and frightened at the same time. “What in the hell is going on? Those things kill *us*—why won’t they kill *them*? They must be controlling them. But how?”

THINGS WERE GOING exactly as Mace Windu had hoped. The Hillians had given him something he had not expected when he asked Mother Web if she could control the Dwellers.

For a time, Mother Web had said. They may be lost to the fungus, but they are still part of the Web.

He was astonished at these Hillians—at their wisdom and understanding, and how capable of helping they were. He realized, not for the first time, that the only reason they had been passive was because *they enjoyed the humans*. They enjoyed KinShan and her clan, who sang to them and danced for them. And the Hillians responded with silk.

Theirs had been a story of existential loneliness.

Who knew how long these things had lived down in the caverns? Certainly since long before KinShan's people had come. Something that had existed before they or anyone that they dreamed of had been born had returned to save them.

And when he asked the Hillians why—why would anyone build gates to hold back such horrors that could still be raised in an emergency—Mother Web had looked at him with her wise, sad eyes and, translated through KinShan, had simply said, "*How many times?*"

He got that now. How many times had this happened? How many times had new people come down into the caverns? How many times had the sun scoured the surface with radiation and forced people into the caves?

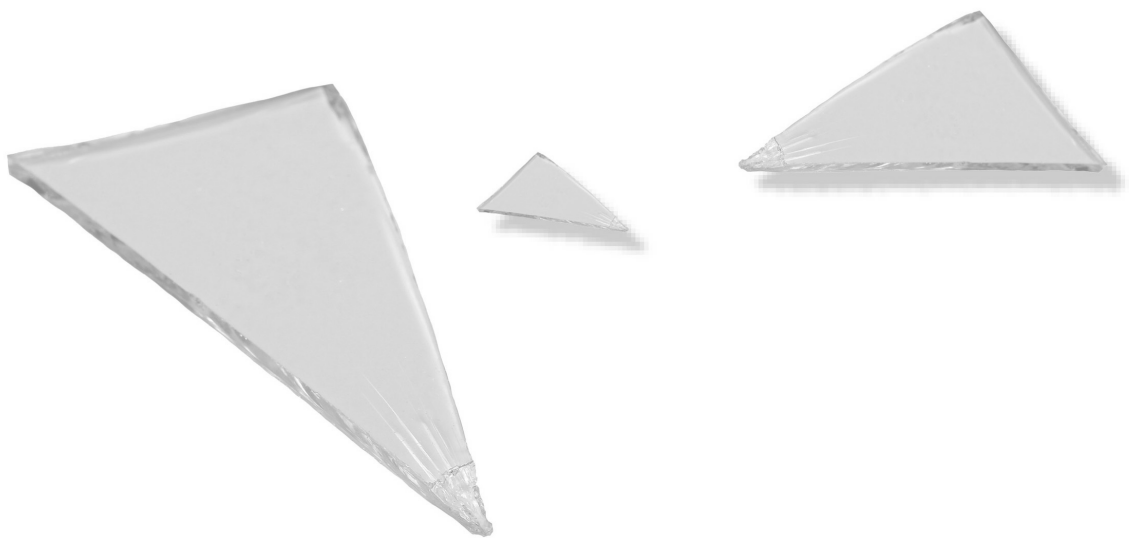
How many times had they then abused the people who dug the tenth-level mud to secure the only protection against a poison sun?

Mace was pulled back to the moment by a blaster bolt aimed at his head. His precognitive sense through the Force worked better than ever, and his arms moved without conscious thought, finding the perfect angle to send that bolt back to the soldier who had pulled the trigger.

The creature next to him howled, moaned, turned its head to look at him. It lifted its head back just a little bit to sniff the air and then, as if Mace were not there at all, continued to press forward. The sizzling bolts of energy struck, but they were protecting him with their own bodies.

Tentacled things had crawled out of the unknown darkness of those caves. A titan, its head scraping the cave's ceiling, pushed its way through the massive crush and pulled a stalactite from the cavern's roof, swinging it like a club. When Mace looked carefully at the thing, he realized it wasn't a single being: It was composed of a dozen smaller creatures, as if they were partially digested.

His mind spun. This...these things...were not really intended for sane minds to comprehend. But then he remembered something Yoda had once said: "*Wait not for the allies you wish. Fight you must, with the allies you have.*"



CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

FUNGOID

The fight had splintered through the tunnels. Soldiers were hunting the Sa'ad and their allies through the smaller corridors in and around the mushroom houses.

KinShan held her familiar weapon at the ready: her whip composed of Hillian silk stronger than durasteel, with fibers thin enough that each was like the blade of a knife. She led a group through the tunnels just east of the tourist caverns. Enemy combatants had been spotted making their way toward one of the nurseries. When they came to a place where one tunnel crossed with another, she raised her hand in a clenched fist.

Wait for my signal.

There was someone waiting for them up ahead. Two shots sounded. She wiggled as close to the corner as possible, unfurling her whip.

Not only could she see in places that Mace Windu and other surface dwellers could not, but her hearing functioned together with her sight to create what was almost a third sense: the ability to see what could not be seen.

She could *feel* her enemy around the corner, feel his blood pump, hear his unspoken voice, even hear his heartbeat if she became very silent. And she heard the scream as her whip struck around the corner and hit someone who thought he was beyond reach.

The screamer stumbled out into the open. The fibers had cut into his neck, and his eyes had bugged wide. A rifle fell from his hands. He tugged at his throat, trying to get the whip free, to no avail. When she snapped the whip, his neck snapped like kindling.

KinShan motioned those behind her forward, and they moved to the next platform.

MACE WINDU WAS a whirling avatar of death for his enemies and an inspiration, an angel, for his allies. He felt himself both part of the Force and a dancer in the Web. Now that he understood it was not just another name for the energy that created and bound the universe together, he could use it as if he had been born here. The Web connected the entire planet. Metagos was *intelligent*. And the fungoids, the Depth Dwellers, were its immune system, its antibodies and phagocytes. A last line of defense, perhaps.

The Hillians were what they were because they were connected to that, and human beings were not. The Sa'ad had always understood that they did not control the Hillians, nor did the Hillians control them. Both were controlled by the planet itself. The ancient rhythms of its star both nurtured and—every hundred generations or so—sterilized. Scoured the surface, driving people below, turning humans into things that needed to come closer and closer to the blazing core of the planet, where they received the same radiation more slowly.

Sunfall. “Sunfall” indeed. A name that could easily have evolved in response to the last time their star had death-kissed Metagos.

If the Hillians and the Hutts and the Syblins were all in some way related, then perhaps it was the mutagenics of this planet that created the differentiation. Or perhaps it was the galactic “web” that had carried life from one planet to the next across the galaxy. He glimpsed all this with one part of his mind as the other rained death upon his enemies while he spun and chopped and kicked and threw.

One soldier after another found their own bolt blasted back into their face. He left behind him a swath of death that made the undead things at his side blink their undead eyes.

He was finally and fully aligned with the rhythms of this planet, of the way this planet expressed the Force. He had become death, and in becoming death he was part of the life cycle of Metagos. Part of its immune system, part of the beating core of it. In that place, he found the part of him that had

always known the truth: He needed to walk his chosen path. He was at the heart of this thing called life.

This thing called the galaxy.

This thing called love.

—

NOT A SINGLE one of Chulok's troops had slept, while the innocent citizens and the militia had been blessed with deep, healing slumber.

The mercenaries had tossed and moaned through another long night. When they thought they could sleep, they'd curled up in the shadows or behind a stalagmite or within a mushroom...and had been sucked screaming into nightmares. By the middle of the second night, there was not a single person still trying to sleep. They were red-eyed and on the edge of panic, the smell of crackling flesh on the power fences no longer amusing to them.

All they could do was hope that there was something out there that they could kill. If they could, perhaps the nightmares would dissolve, and one night they'd be able to sleep again.

—

WHEN THEY BROKE the fences open on the third day, the soldiers who emerged were desperate. In three days, not one had slept. The sight of their enemies among the shambling horrors, not being killed by them, was almost enough to break them. The soldiers, of whatever species, glared at one another, mumbling under their breath with a general and growing despair. *I didn't come here to die. I don't want to die. Not like this! Not like this!*

In the way of rough people everywhere, they had discounted and mocked what seemed weak and passive, but now they saw that the Sa'ad were flexible durasteel.

They had totally underestimated the gentle creatures. Down in these depths, *they* were the prey.

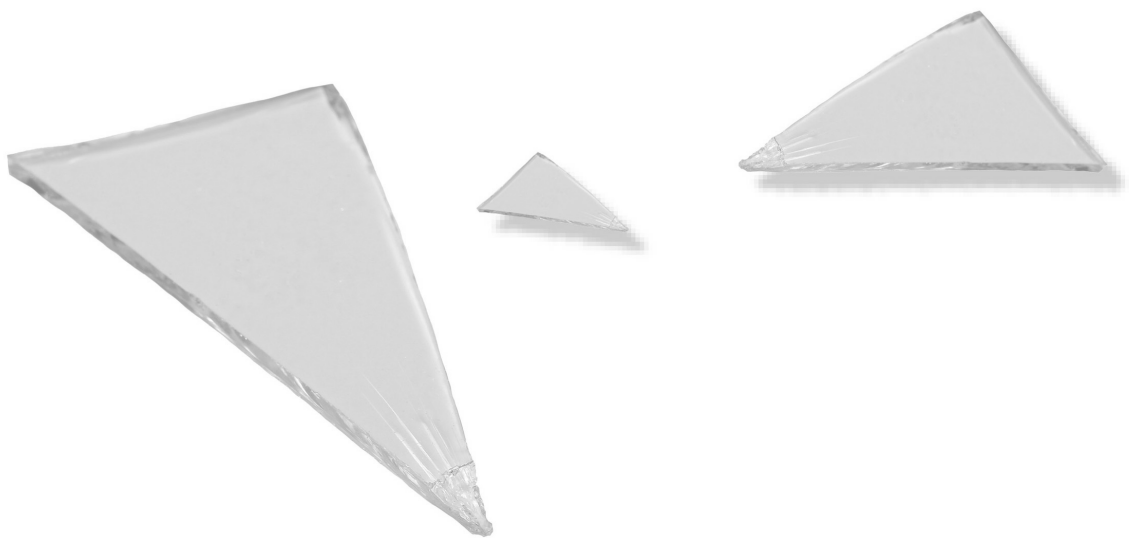
Chulok's troops had never understood what they were facing, had never understood what was going on, and now it might be too late. A knot of them screamed "Retreat!" as they managed to break through a ring of shamblers under the fire of the sniping Sa'ad.

The mercenaries fled down a side tunnel seeking escape...but those tunnels were blocked with Hillian silk. The younger, still-mobile creatures had spun webs up one side and down the other so that the soldiers were stuck and helpless.

Sergeant Mantooth tried to pull herself free. Even the flurry of mortal fear did nothing to pry her, although she strained until she dislocated her shoulder. Whimpering now, she tried to stretch her hand to reach her blaster. She was able by massive exertion to brush her fingers against the butt, but not to encircle it.

The unliving shuffled toward her, their vast pale eyes weeping milk. The things seemed to be unfazed by the stickiness of the strands. She screamed and tried one last time to reach her blaster. When one approached with its vast mouth and broken teeth and huge white drooling eyes fixed upon her, she broke and she screamed and she hurt.

And like every other comrade within sight, she died.



CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

THE WARNING

Maya-12 and her sisters set up a crossfire to try to protect a group of children as they were fleeing into the underground. Maya-8 had suffered a bolt to the shoulder and one to the gut, where she had good armoring.

“Are you all right?”

“Well, I *never*,” Maya-8 said, fingering the hole in her tummy. Wires sparked within. Her sister Maya-14 busied herself tinkering and fixing.

“They need you,” Maya-12 said. “So the two of you stay here. I think it’s time.”

Maya-14 stopped twisting wires. “Must you? There might be another way.”

“If you can think of one, tell me.” No answer.

The three sisters bent their heads together. Maya-12 said, “We were three of twenty, and we’re all that remain. I have never had family, save for you. If I survive, we will celebrate. But if this is our last moment together...thank you.”

And treasuring those last words, she was gone.

Before she left her troops entirely, she sought out the one called Thanna Tan. She was one of the few members of Chulok’s forces who had turned against Chulok. Something to do with Mace Windu, bless him. And now Maya-12 had a mission for her. An attempt to save lives. She suspected it would be in vain, but she knew that Mace would want her to try.

—

THE FORMER CORPORAL Thanna Tan thought she would probably die doing this, but then she’d have been dead days ago if not for the Jedi Mace Windu.

She had done so many terrible things in the service of terrible people, and if these actions were her final ones, she could die at peace.

Again, and for the last time, she wore her red uniform. That and being recognized by some of the guards ringing the Crystal Empire got her through. The speeder was outfitted with speakers once used to broadcast music in the heart of the Maze. Music for dancing, something that had reminded good people of life and joy, of family and belonging.

Appropriate. “People of the Crystal Empire,” she called. “We have received warning of an imminent rebel attack. No other information is available, other than the fact that it will be severe. You are advised to leave your homes and flee to level three. Please believe this message. We are attempting to save your lives. Please exit your homes and evacuate to level three...”

This was all that Maya-12 had told her. She could not imagine the rebel forces outgunning the clustered troops and firepower. Maya had told her to make the broadcast three times and then scurry to safety, but she could not.

The people of the Crystal Empire were wealthy, corrupt, spoiled. But Chulok was a corruptive force beyond imagining. The entire Glass Abyss had become a hell; all its upper citizens were demons or supping with demons. She could only hope that the good ones might hear her, might lose some faith in Chulok’s ability to defend them.

It was a scant hope, but she clung to it. If nothing else, it was a way she might save her own soul. To repay a good man for his moment of mercy, more mercy than she had deserved.

“People of the Crystal Empire,” she called. “We have received warning...”

—

TWO FULL DAYS of fighting had reduced much of the Great Wheel to rubble, but her allies had not buckled.

Maya-12 crept through the tumbled walls until she reached the eastern edge of New Xaxis and then began to climb. Her appearance shifted so that

she was camouflaged to look like the rock. Someone would have to look directly at her to see even a ripple as she climbed up and up.

Below her, she could hear screams and the sizzle of energy weapons and the thud of impact tools like Vin-Vin's skull splitter. It was not enough. The rebels would be slaughtered—this she could see. To the degree that her unwitting betrayal of Sa'ad and Hillians had benefited Chulok or any of his allies, she hoped she had no soul for sin to sear.

If the destruction of his grub farm had enraged Nala to even greater heights of homicidal fury, this was additional weight upon her.

Guilt clouded her logic circuits, she was certain. If she could not right this situation, she saw no reason to continue existence.

She was just a droid, after all. Not human, although she had been primarily designed to serve them. She was not living at all. She didn't even have emotions, not real ones. This had been said to her many times.

Music drifted up from below. Strange. She had not heard it until this moment. Was it from a bar, or was it from some unit of Chulok's troops as they marched into battle against the innocent civilians?

She peered down on the Floating Palace now, directly onto the gun emplacements ringing the edge. Protection for the grifters and thieves in the Crystal Empire.

Many times in the past, she had thought that if she'd had bile to rise, it would have risen in response to one injustice or abomination or another. Ironical that now she did have bile. But it wasn't hers. It was from the bellies of adolescent Hillians, the substance used to sever their silk strands.

As she neared the top at last, her gut was filled with enzyme. That was what she had asked Mother Web down at level ten: Would she please give Maya-12 the enzymes that weakened Hillian webs and caused them to deteriorate? That precious fluid that was corrosive to nothing except their own silk?

She had never been privy to their deep secrets and was glad of it. That bastard Nala might have stripped the information and betrayed it.

Too much destruction, too much risk. What she was about to do was a last resort, a tactic designed by the human, Mace Windu, but even he seemed

reluctant to order something so destructive.

As a last resort, he had said.

She discharged enzyme all over the strands of web and began to climb to reach the next of the six cables. She was there within minutes and vomited again. Mother Web had given her what she needed, and had approved. The reservoir inside her had been full. She had all that she needed...she hoped. She climbed to a third one and looked back at the first cable. It was beginning to smoke.

—

THE ENTIRE GREAT Wheel was now coming under control, and Chulok felt vast and deep satisfaction. General Slithis reported that he was almost in position to destroy the rebels on level seven in a pincer between his own ground troops and Nalaflita's airships. Things were finally going well. Soon they would crush the Sa'ad, squeezing them until they gave up the damn Jedi.

And then...oh yes, and then there would be a sight that would stir the stars. Chulok would dismember Mace Windu, piece by piece, until he begged for release. And they would broadcast Mace's whimpers to the entire Rim, and regretfully refuse.

Debts such as they owed the Jedi must be repaid.

What a day that would be.

Chulok supervised the last of the attacks on the Maze. Once they and their Syblin allies had understood that the damn citizens were under the command of Mace Windu and attacking both sides, victory had only been a matter of time and revised strategy. The rebels were doomed, plucky or not.

It had been a long and hard road for Chu and Lok. Each of them knew that. But it hadn't been until they found each other that their destiny revealed itself.

They were more than merely two individuals conjoined. They were a single soul that the uncaring universe had separated at birth. Fate had brought them back together again. It had been a great, great injustice, but it would be remedied.

The kriffing Jedi would die. He had rejected the greatest gift Chulok had to offer, thrown it away as if it were nothing. And that would not be tolerated.

But first, the completion. Their allies were herding the rebels together in the southwest corner of the Great Wheel. They would now rain fire upon it, killing them all.

There would be some property damage, but in the long term, lives would be saved.

The sooner these people understood that there was no alternative to submission, the fewer would die. And they knew that in the Crystal Mansions, there were many who dreamed of deposing them.

This would end *that*.

“Bring the six batteries to bear on the center of the grid.”

“Done, sir.”

“Proceed.”

—

IN THE FLAMING ruins of the Maze, Vin-Vin Sunfall and his raiders had done all they could, fought all they could, and knew the end was coming. His leg was smashed, but he could still fight. Still, there was no one to battle. The enemy had pulled back.

His troops cheered, but a terrible premonition swept through him. Pulling back was not surrender. It was simply getting their own forces out of the way so that some more massive weapon could be brought to bear.

Vin-Vin feared the rebellion would not survive such a direct attack. The galaxy was indeed a cruel master: He had found his courage just in time to die. It was the bitterest sort of humor imaginable.

—

“AND—” CHULOK SAID, and paused. They struggled to regain their thoughts. Something about showing no mercy, perhaps. About rewards for the most brutal kill or capture, or the loot that would be heaped upon their troops when

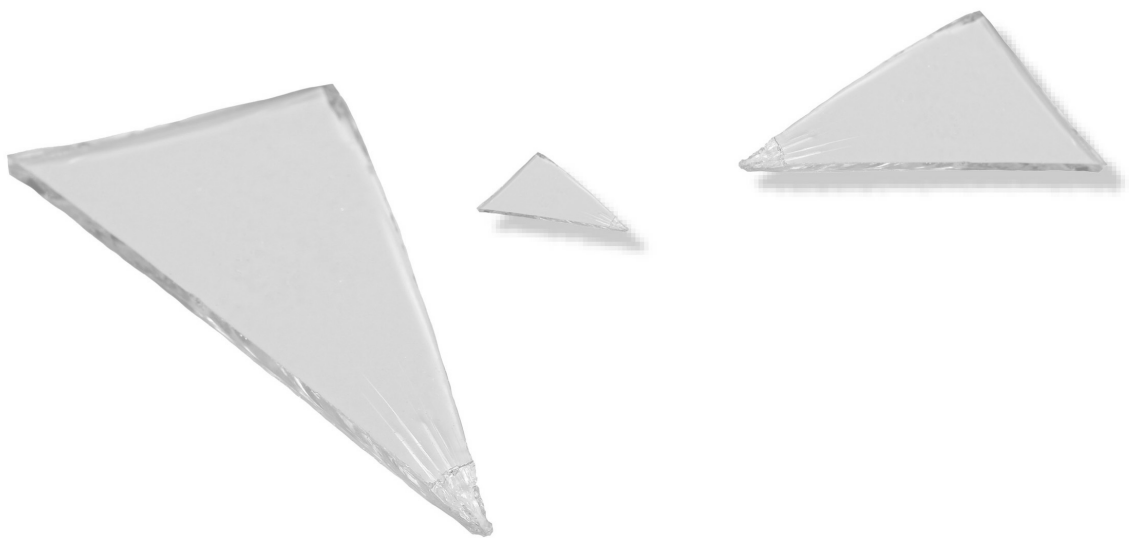
they marched through the streets of New Xaxxis with Sa'ad heads prominently displayed on pikes.

Now they remembered what had distracted them: a judder in the floor. Recoil from the batteries at the edge of the Floating Palace, perhaps. Or even a shoulder rocket hitting a shield. Pitiful rebels, they'd never had a—

Suddenly, the floor *flexed* as if it were more a wave than a solid. Crystal walls began to crack and splinter, and the thane fought for balance.

Chulok felt something they had not experienced in many years:

Fear.



CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

THE FALL

“People of the Crystal Empire—” Former Corporal Thanna Tan paused. Looking up, she saw the Floating Palace tilt, then saw the smoke and yelled, pointing up at it. This was Maya-12’s work. Thanna laughed and laughed—such a delicious joke it was.

One cable snapped, and the huge disk supporting the palace trembled. When the second one snapped, it tilted sideways. By the time the third one snapped, the palace was hanging and people were screaming. Hundreds of guards and tons of equipment were sliding off.

Now the people who had crouched behind their curtains, pointing at the strange woman who begged them to leave their protection, flooded from their houses. Too late, they pointed up, screaming and shouting, understanding in that moment that they were not safe. That they were not under the protection of the Floating Palace. They were simply...under the palace.

Pressure on the remaining strands grew more severe, so that the enzymes had assistance finishing their work. The strands were approximately three times stronger than the pressure they were under, but by the time two of those strands popped, the rock to which the remaining strands were fastened began to crumble.

Thanna Tan knew it was too late to run. Instead, she turned her face up and opened her arms. “Forgive me,” she whispered to the countless slaves she had beaten in the muck. “Please. I’ve done what I could.”

—

MAYA-12 WAS EXHAUSTED now, her remaining power reserves ebbing away. Her fingers would no longer grip the rock, and she fell, tumbling through the air until she struck the same spot where, just days before, Mace had thrust her off the platform.

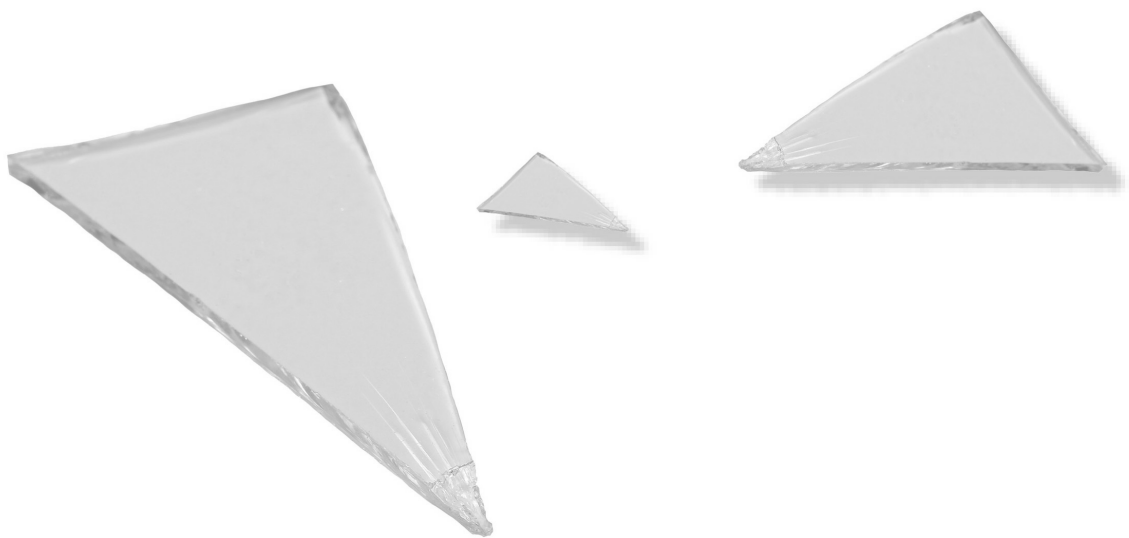
The Floating Palace guards were clinging to whatever they could grab, trying not to slide off the side. Other people were tumbling screaming into the Glass Abyss. If they knew who she was or what she'd been doing, they gave no sign. They were simply too terrified to care. When the last of the cables gave way, it was the anchor points that broke, not the cables. As the disk plunged to the ground below, she found that fact a savage satisfaction.

The silk cables never broke under their load, Mother Web. They never broke.

The result was calamitous. A hundred kilotons of rock, crystal, and metal plummeted down. The great disk flipped half over as it fell through the ground and then finally hit edge-first in the midst of the Crystal Empire.

Showers of glassy shards flew. As everything plunged down into the Glass Abyss, screams sounded—but they didn't last long, whiffed out like candle flames in a gale. The entire cavern shook from the impact of the palace. The explosions of countless machines, the loudest and most shattering sounds any of them had ever heard, rang. Dust and flame roared up and boiled across the cavern; if it had not been evacuated, thousands would have died from the dust alone.

And then there was silence.



CHAPTER SEVENTY

“I AM A DOCTOR!”

The tides of battle had shifted again and again, to the point where individual pockets of defenders no longer knew if they were winning or losing.

Mace was formulating his next command when the cave system began to shake as if a colossal gong had struck a stupendous bell. Rocks and dust fell in billowing clouds as the ceiling cracked. A few stalactites fell, crushing or impaling the mercenaries beneath them.

Then it settled again. When it stopped shaking, everyone who had hit the ground rose unsteadily to their feet.

“What in the hell just happened? Did someone drop a bomb on us?” one of the Sa’ad asked.

Mace didn’t answer but he had his suspicion. Maya, thank the Force, had succeeded.

He knew the loss of life would be terrible. Mace hated war. It was just his curse to be so damn good at it.

FOR LONG MINUTES after the caves shook, there was no blasterfire, no attacks. Confused yelling and frantic whispers came from all sides. The darkness was lit only by a few glowing mushrooms.

“What has hap—” The soldier next to Mace in the rubble raised his head but did not live to finish his words. A blaster bolt from the darkness shattered his skull.

Panic, followed by two more blaster bolts and then a call from the darkness: “Follow plan C. Modify with a Bevin twist.”

“What the hell?” a man on his other side whispered.

“Who is the commander of the troops?” KinShan asked. “Who has us pinned down?”

“General Slithis,” Mace said.

“Where is Chulok?”

“Hopefully, chewing rock. Right now, Slithis is the real danger. The general is just a mercenary. But he is personally conducting the assault in real time. I don’t know what he might tell his forces, but he can see better than we can.”

“Are you wounded, sir?” Woolif appeared at his side.

Mace hadn’t noticed that his arm was bleeding.

The little doctor busied himself salving and stitching. “This is indeed a problem, sir. I knew him on Zygerria, and his plan for escape was brilliant, let me tell you. He ran rings around the slave catchers. You may need to surrender.”

“He was enslaved on Zygerria?” Mace remembered hearing that. “Do you know how he escaped?”

“They killed their rightful master and stole away on a supply ship.”

Legal master perhaps, Mace thought. But now was not the time for debate.

And Slithis had a brother? Nils Slithis, perhaps? The one who had been killed two days before the great feast in the Crystal Empire?

Mace squinted, struggling to clarify an elusive thought. Then it came to him. “The brother. What kind of soldier was he?”

“A pilot, I believe,” Woolif answered. “He commanded a squadron...”

Mace didn’t hear the rest, his mind fixated: a pilot.

Who had died the same day he, Mace, had been attacked by fighter craft in the tunnels.

A pilot whose craft had suddenly exploded, just at the moment he was drawing a bead on Mace.

What was it that he’d heard—that Republic doctors had been forced to remove an explosive tracer from Anakin’s body?

By the Force! Mace’s head was spinning.

Could the entire ambush in the tunnels have been a test of some kind? Could Chulok have set it up to measure his worth? And when he passed...

was it possible that they had a way to kill the commander, and were ruthless enough to do it?

Would they do such a thing, kill one of their own loyal officers, if the test had been of his worthiness to be a Third? To join them so as to ascend to godhood, according to Slithis's wife?

Suddenly, an amazing possibility presented itself.

No wonder Chulok had changed the subject at the dinner table! What a foolish risk they had taken, bringing Mace and General Slithis together at that table, knowing where the conversation might lead. Risk taker. Gambler. Chulok was mad.

Commander Nils Slithis had been enslaved on Zygerria and, like Anakin, had a tracker implanted somewhere in his body. Chulok had known this, and they possessed or obtained the destruct code. Then they had used it ruthlessly to save Mace Windu's life.

Boom.

This led automatically to the next question: What if the general had one as well? *That* would explain why Chulok permitted an officer so ambitious and aggressive to have so much power. Chulok knew that, at any moment, the push of a button would kill their usurper.

"Woolif..." he said carefully. "Woolif. Do you still have copies of medical files from your time on Zygerria?"

In a few minutes, he had the answer. "Yes, sir, I treated many there, both the masters and the enslaved."

"Do you have records for Naz Slithis?"

The chroma-wing paused, then said, "Yes, all his records are intact."

Mace could have kissed the little cyborg. "I need you to access the security code for his implant."

"For what purpose?"

"I need you to trigger the detonator."

"Sir!" Woolif protested. "I am a doctor! I am sworn to protect life!"

Mace had no time for this. "And the greatest good for the greatest number. You are not a machine, you are a living being. And people you say you love and care for are going to die if a criminal is not stopped."

“But, sir—”

“Woolif. Does a doctor cut out diseased tissue? Kill viruses and bacteria?”

“But, sir—” It was clear that the little creature was distressed. “I...perhaps am too literal. Inflexible. But how can I serve life, and facilitate taking it?”

“Was a detonation signal sent from the authorities?”

“Why, yes, but they were out of range—”

“Then all you are doing is facilitating a rightful, lawful order, as well as protecting innocent people from a monster. Do you wish to preserve your feelings at the cost of our lives?”

In the dim light, Woolif fluttered his wings desperately. And finally, he yielded.

“Yes, sir,” Woolif said. “I have it. But I beg you to find another way if you can.”

Mace considered. It was true that in the heat of war, it was possible to be too vicious. If this distressed little creature could remind him of his responsibility to be merciful if possible, he would.

“All right,” he said. “You can access his communication channels?”

“Yes, sir. There is a medical emergency channel.”

“Open it, please.”

After a moment, Woolif nodded. “It is open.”

“General Slithis,” Mace said. “This is Mace Windu of the Sa’ad resistance. I speak for the Jedi Council.”

A speaker hidden within Woolif’s cyborg body vibrated in response. “Jedi. I had my eye on you from the beginning. I tried to warn Chulok. Now I’ll bring them your head.”

“They’re probably dead. And you will be as well if you don’t listen.”

“You are bluffing.”

“No. You will remember that the enslaved people on Zygerria had trackers implanted. You may remember that they also had detonators. We have the trigger for your detonator, and unless you and your troops surrender, I will set it off.”

A pause. When Slithis came back on the line, his voice sounded strained. “You are bluffing. How do you know I’ve not already removed it?”

“Then I will push the button to be sure.”

Another pause. When he spoke again, it sounded as if he was grinding his teeth. “I am willing to surrender. What assurances do I have that my troops and I—”

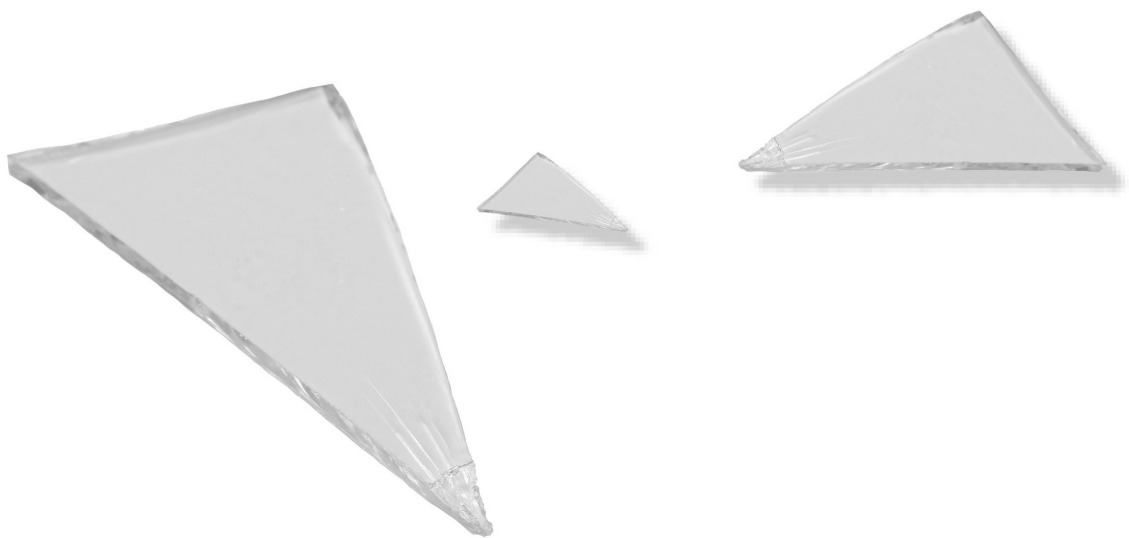
Suddenly a short, sharp explosion reverberated in the caves, followed by a scream of dismay from the mercenaries.

“What the hell happened?” Mace said, alarmed.

“Stress analysis of his voice suggested two things. One, that he was lying about surrendering.”

“The other?”

“That he was attempting to remove the tracker himself. With a knife perhaps. Apparently he failed.”



CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

NALAFLITA

It took less than an hour to dismantle Slithis's remaining troops and ride mine cars to the eastern caverns.

By the time they exited a side tunnel and found their allies, an HH-87 Starhopper was racing through the caverns, dodging stalactites and blasting the crystal walls, raining death on the Sa'ad and their allies.

"What is the situation?" Mace asked Chala-Non as they crouched behind a massive crystal obelisk. Not as towering as the ones peppering the Great Wheel, it offered enough shelter that they could take a breath.

"There were four ships. We lost ten people taking out three of them. There are only eight of us left, and this one is better than all the rest combined."

Mace's arrival had been duly noted.

His radio crackled. "Is that you, Windu? Now you'll find out Jedi superstition is no match for a starfighter!" It was Nala.

Mace fired again and again, but Nala banked and wove too effectively. The Gigoran had skills, no doubt.

This required something else. Nala wanted to kill him, personally and publicly. Mace could use that.

—

MACE BORROWED KINSHAN'S whip, and that of another Sa'ad. Then, taking a deep breath, he stepped out into the open. His Force sensitivity was back; he would be able to tell if Nala charged his cannons to kill from a distance.

He need say nothing. Nala would want to do this at close range. A lone Jedi armed with two whips would be seen as no threat to a starship. His was a primal challenge.

"Master Windu!" a Sa'ad boy screamed.

"Stand firm," Mace replied.

He had the feel of the whips now, and even though the starfighter performed dazzling maneuvers, Mace's coordination was stunning, each arm performing totally different motions. His left moved in a circle, the right in a figure eight, constantly reversing, sliding between lateral and horizontal motion. More incredibly, each arm's loop intersected with the other without tangling. Timing ran to the tenth of a second. No machine could have done better.

How Nala had gotten the full-sized Starhopper down into the caves and tunnels, Mace had no idea. Perhaps disassembled, carried down the main lift, and reassembled? Perhaps it was a vessel specifically modified so that it could be folded and unfolded to pass through tight spaces.

However it had happened, the Starhopper was destroying the remaining eastern rebels just when they thought that they had won.

"He's coming back around!"

Mace stood. He said into his comlink, "I never much liked Slithis, but in comparison with you, you steaming pile of bantha droppings, he was a paragon. Come and get me, you son of a sarlacc."

He had found his rhythm now, and the whips were blurring so fast that they were like propellers threatening to raise him from the ground.

The Sa'ad gawked. They had never seen anything quite like Mace Windu. Nala hovered, watching him, and the fluxes and patterns rotating through the field of blurred air were hypnotic.

The whips looked sometimes like smoke and sometimes like a troubled ocean. Faster and faster he spun them until he seemed to be in a shell composed of whirling strands. The whips howled.

Nala spun around and came back at him, wagging his wings in mockery as he did.

Mace felt the place within him that *wanted* to kill. He would not, would never, give it ascendance over his ethics and morals, but that flame was alive within him.

Life in his right hand. Death in his left.

Vaapad.

This was who he was. His entire being and life path, from leaving Haruun Kal to ascending through the ranks of the Jedi—every battle and sacrifice, every joy and pain—had brought him to this moment.

Fate had brought them face-to-face, and if Nala did not feel the same, then Mace knew the outcome was already determined. Mace swung the whips as if they were dual lightsabers, deflecting bolts. He moved just slightly, twisting to the left or right without moving his feet, so that the first of Nala's bolts sizzled past him. The next blasts instead struck the whirling dome of twin silk whips, as resistant to blasterfire as zillo beast hide was to the power of a lightsaber.

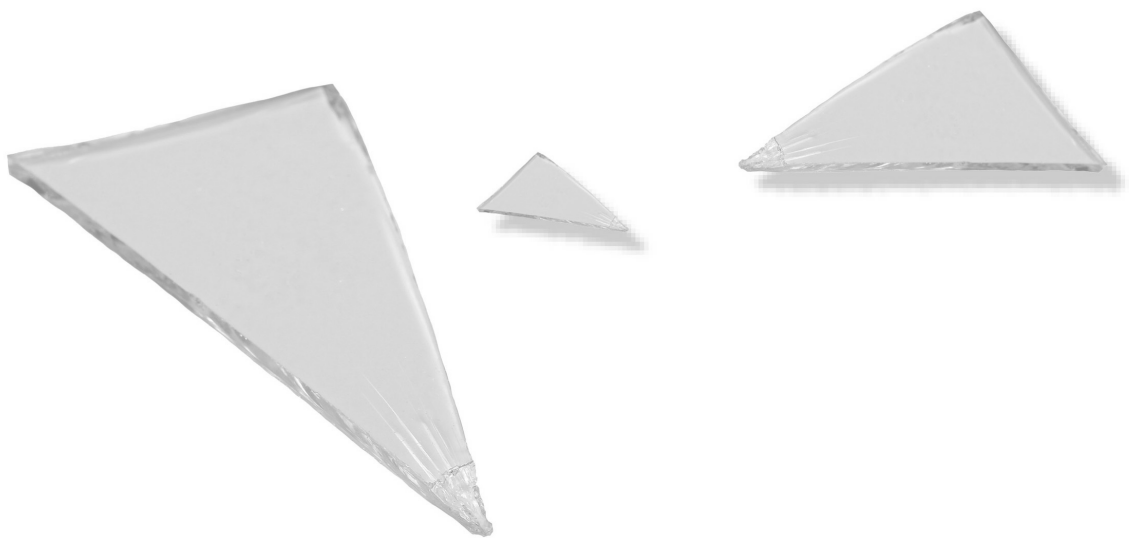
It was impossible, of course, but it seemed almost as if Nala's ship flew *through* Mace Windu and the tornado of whipping silk. Mace didn't seem to dodge; they all saw that. Nala's ship went right at him. The moment there should have been a collision, there wasn't.

Nala was just on the other side of that blur.

His ship started to wheel around for another run...and then the left wing fell off. It tumbled and spun completely out of control, bounced across the rocky floor like a child's toy, and smashed into the wall.

And exploded. Spiraled down into a sinkhole and then exploded again.

And if Mace smiled as he watched the flames churn, well...no one's perfect.



CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

AFTERMATH

By the time Mace and KinShan returned, the tourist cavern was relatively quiet—no explosions or blasts, just moaning and an awful tearing sound as things crouched in shadow ripped unresisting bodies into chunks.

The webbing sealing their hidey-hole would have resisted his lightsaber like durasteel. He could have cut through it in time, of course, but the Hillians spit stomach acid on it, and it dissolved.

In their thousands, the surviving citizens of New Xaxis began to emerge. The same scene would have been repeated all over the levels of the Glass Abyss, and with the criminal leader of all Metagos now dead, probably that scene was being repeated planetwide.

Blinking and wondering, they emerged into a slaughterhouse. The tourist cavern was filled with the Depth Dwellers. The troops were dead, torn and burned bodies heaped at the base of mushrooms that only now were beginning to glow again.

Their strange allies, the Dwellers from the Depths, just...stared at them.

Mace was baffled. "What...what is this?"

Slowly, painfully perhaps, Mother Web and two other mature Hillian spider-worms humped out of the cave.

And as they appeared, the horrors from beyond the gates, the immune system of this wondrous and mysterious planet, bowed to the worms.

—

JOB DONE, THE infested megafauna as well as the human-sized dreaming undead genuflected to the spider-worms and returned to the darkness. The Sa'ad began to clean up the corpses as the spider-worms returned to their accustomed caverns, where they would placidly chew the mycelial cud that linked the entire planet together.

As the Dwellers returned to the depths, Mace noted that where they were wounded, the torn flesh displayed not only muscle but also complex mycelial matting.

“Who was in control? Who was leading who?” Mace asked.

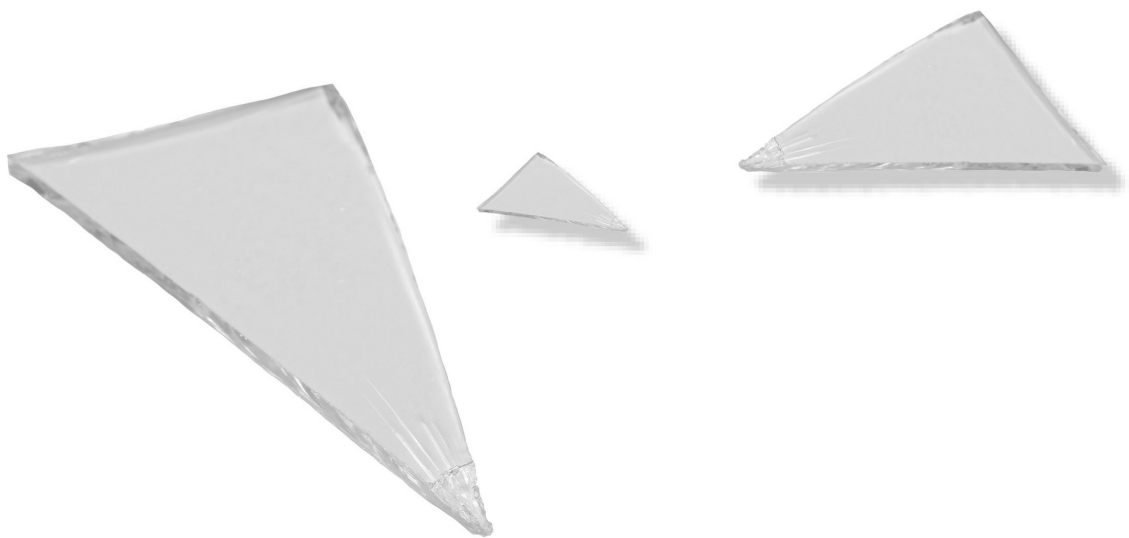
Mother Web invited him to place his hands on her side. *Life leads. Family follows. Mace Windu. Travel in peace. Wherever you go, the Web connects us.*

“You say Web. I think you mean the Force.”

Was that a smile? Certainly it was the closest that Mace had seen. It would do.

May the Web be with you.

Mace grinned. “Many paths to a single truth.”



CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

DANCE

On level four, New Xaxxis's Great Wheel was burning. Clouds of smoke wreathed the ceiling so that the air was almost unbreathably foul...but the fires were being extinguished. The citizens were taking back their world. Across Metagos, the rebellion was spreading, organized by electronic and mycelial communication.

"We know how to deal with fire," KinShan said. "I hear speeders dropping extinguisher foam."

"Good."

She smiled in vast satisfaction. "We're taking back our world. One cave at a time. Will you stay and fight?"

"You don't need me now," he said. "You know the way."

"Yes," she said. "And so. What remains for us?"

"Your people?"

"No. Us. You and me." She seemed wistful.

He felt it as well. Deep in his bones. In another world..."We have duty, KinShan. Both of us. You to your people. Me to the Council."

"And we would be different people were that not true."

Mace nodded. "People who could not, even for a little while, have walked the Sa'ad path together."

"I would not have missed it."

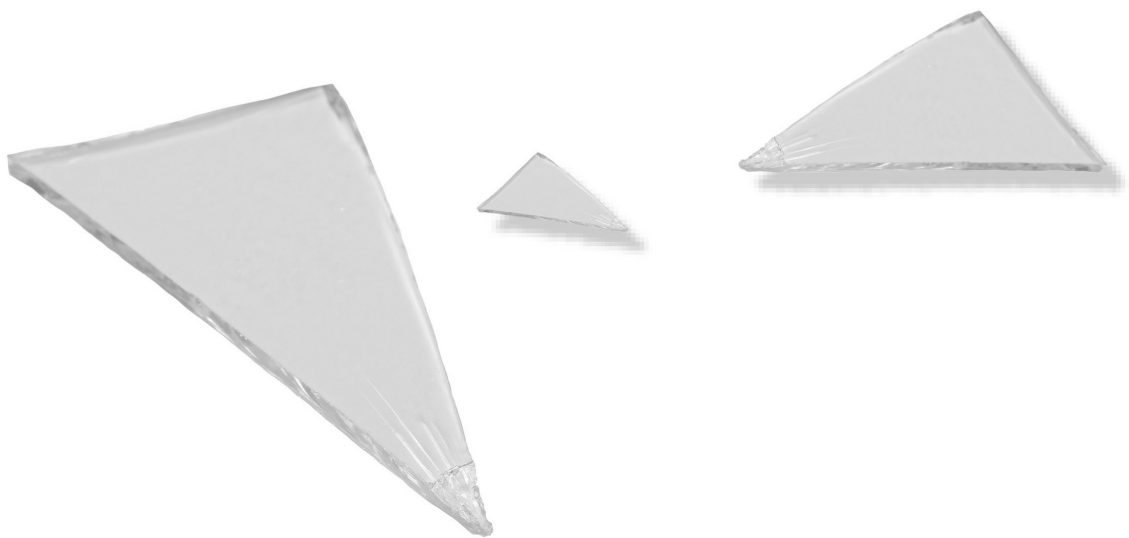
"Neither would I. Perhaps you would come with me as I reclaim my ship?"

"I would be honored," she said.

"Had I not the duties I have...had life brought me another path...There is no one in the galaxy I would rather walk at my side."

She kissed him lightly, a promise. "Deeds, not words. You must return to your own fight. But a bit of you is Sa'ad now. And at night, we dance."

Rockets and sparklers exploded in the city beyond them, and they held each other as tightly as two beings can without becoming one.



CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

CHEF'S SURPRISE

The militias searched the crushed remains of the Floating Palace and the Crystal Empire, seeking survivors. KinShan and Vin-Vin seemed to have ascended to leadership without effort. Mace thought the city in the best possible hands.

One surprising discovery was Maya-12. She had a crushed leg, but legs could be repaired. She leaned against Vin-Vin as if he were the only thing connecting her to the world. It made sense, he thought. Comrades in arms shared a special bond.

“Any sign of Chulok?” Mace asked Vin-Vin.

“Not yet. It will take *weeksss* to dig through all of *thisss*. No hurry. Found a lot of their people dead, though. Recognize this?” He extended a little black box.

Mace took it gingerly. The inscription read ANN LORD. “Why did you think I’d want it?”

“There was one person found alive in the palace. He asked about someone who fit your description.”

“Ru Annlord. A chef. But why would he remember me?”

“He said you were the only one who saw his skill. That he knew you were special, and he wanted you to have this.”

“What is it?”

“Recipes, I think.”

Mace felt something heavy and sour in his gut. Masters can recognize masters. Ru Annlord had served the wrong creature and lost everything but his life. Mace had never had any real culinary aspirations, but, well...

Everyone needs a hobby.

Three resistance fighters escorted a certain pyramidal protocol droid toward them, forever balancing on his tip, as if about to tumble over.

“We found this one,” the tallest of them, a human female, said. “I think he’s a Worm.”

The protocol droid was battered but functional.

“The name,” the droid said, “is Doubleyew-are-em-two-four-five-six. I...I don’t know what happened, Thane Windu. I assume it is appropriate for me to call you this?”

Thane? Was that a promotion or an insult? “Yes. We’ve set up a secondary communications room in the northwest sector. The Wheelhouse bar. You can be disassembled now, or help us.”

He decided quickly. “No disassembly necessary,” WRM-2456 sniffed. “I am more than willing to support my new masters.”

Astonishingly, the rim rail was still operating. Mace, KinShan, Vin-Vin, and Maya-12 took WRM-2456 around to the northwest sector. They crossed the same bridge where, a lifetime ago it seemed, Mace Windu had first proved himself. The Wheelhouse was still standing, although it was bracketed on both sides by ruins. Within, the people had gathered various communications apparatuses and were trying to assemble them into a functioning whole. WRM-2456 immediately got to work aligning the various equipment until it sparked to life.

“The broadcast is ready, Thane Windu.”

Mace chuckled. “You’ll serve anyone, won’t you?”

“My loyalty is to the power, not the person.”

Mace nodded: a perfectly reasonable answer. “See that you do nothing to disturb the Web...or I will return.”

“Yes, Thane Windu.”

Mace considered correcting him, but he decided that if this particular droid respected only power, it might be safest to simply accept the honorific.

To KinShan, he said, “We’re ready.”

Suddenly, the air was flooded with holo-windows, images from around the planet and across the Outer Rim. Beings of a hundred species on a thousand worlds, all connected in the virtual moment.

“The pedestal is yours. Speak,” Mace said to his love.

“This...is KinShan Nightbird, of the Sa’ad, in New Xaxxis. On Metagos. As all of you must know, we have won back our planet. We have defeated the darkness and emerged into the light.

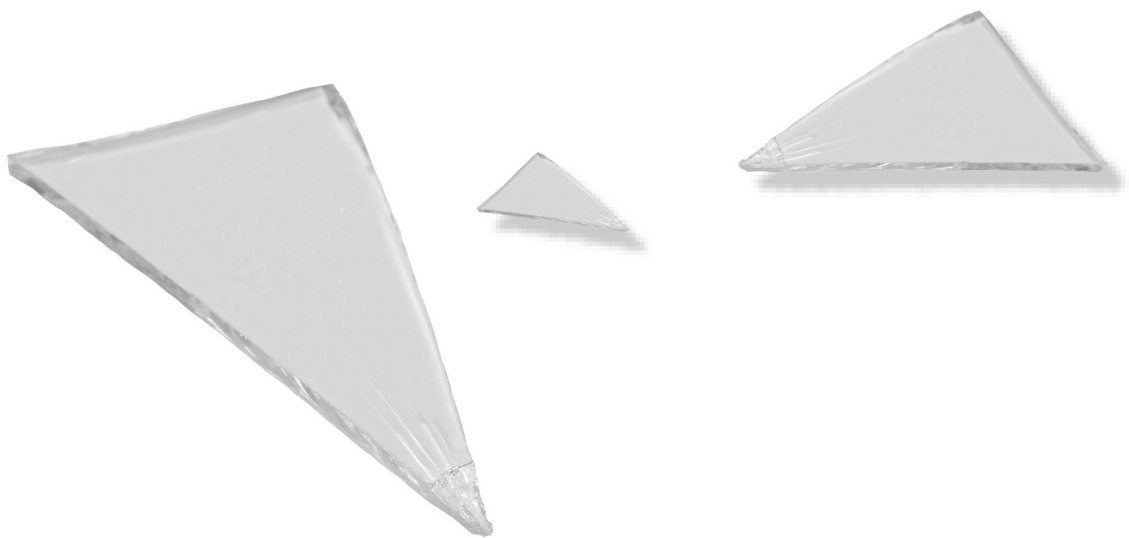
“No longer will the good citizens of Metagos be suppressed by the criminals who took advantage of a great tragedy to seize power.”

Mace noticed one of the images wink off and searched his mind to remember who it had been. In a moment he had it: Scharsa the Hutt. That gangster-spawn may have survived the rebellion, but he was canny enough to know it was time to leave.

“No longer will our world host the scum of the galaxy. We are home to any who bring light here. Who wish to work, to give, to create new lives. We are starting over. The criminals who infected our planet also poisoned so many of our children.”

On one screen, a cluster of Syblins watched, rapt.

“They are all our children. And they are no longer consigned to a criminal existence. No longer shadows in the Maze. They will be welcomed into our homes and shown their path to full citizenship. Metagos is for the living...”



CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

NEW BEGINNINGS

The Wheelhouse was not just a political center. It had once been a center of social life and needed to be again. That night was a celebration.

The crushed building next door had been cleared into a vacant lot, and merchants of many kinds were selling their wares unafraid of Chulok's "tax collectors." At one booth labeled MAYA SISTERS, a pair of Sa'ad children were selling silken cloth. In business with her siblings, no doubt: Hadn't Maya-12 said she wanted such a career?

Vin-Vin had talked the Xaxxis Axis bandleader into playing, and their music filled the night. Food supply lines were being reestablished, but Mace saw that these people with modest means shared what they had, often more than did the wealthy.

And the formerly powerful had their own concerns. The Crystal Empire lay in ruin, but the survivors seemed almost pitifully grateful to their rescuers. Perhaps that gratitude was mere ruse, and it was certainly possible that given an opportunity they would again attempt to seize the reins of power. But Mace doubted they could be successful. Not now. Not since the citizens of Metagos finally understood what waited behind the gates.

Mace enjoyed a drink. Herbal, not fermented, but still relaxing enough for him to feel waves of stress rolling off his shoulders.

The Maya sisters danced with the band, for their own pleasure rather than the entertainment of the audience. He was glad that they had survived, and this time, they sang. Their voices were fine instruments, and Maya-8 seemed to have an inexhaustible library of music from all across the galaxy. There was no song she could not sing, no culture the three of them could not honor with their harmonies.

Vin-Vin came to sit at the table with him for the first time, drinking from a foamy glass. And coming to sit next to him, too, was Marzi. Her eyes were

bright, her smile wide and happy. She'd come a long way since the day three of Chulok's men had braced her on the bridge. Her three children still tugged at her, but one of them was also tugging at Vin-Vin.

Life goes on, Mace thought.

"Sso, Jedi," Vin-Vin Sunfall said. "Where go you now?"

"Back to Coruscant. And you? When you said your people have been here from the beginning, I did not know your full name. Now I do. And yes: I think your people were here the last time 'the sun fell.' "

Vin-Vin nodded.

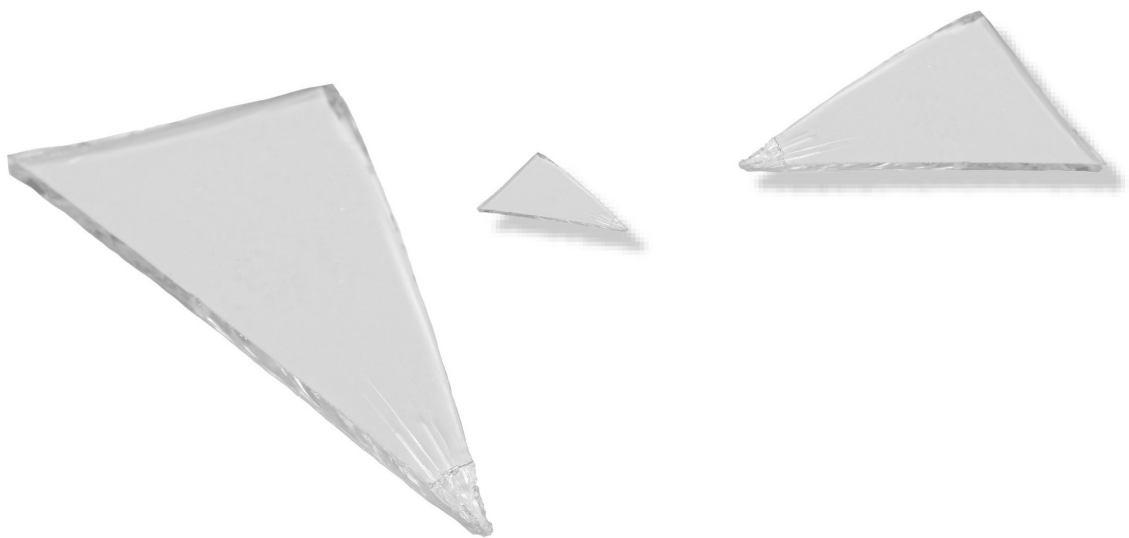
"You have power now. You and Maya."

"I don't want power," the reptilian said. "But I can use it to help, and I will. *Electionsss* in...a year *perhapsss*? Would it be *posssible* for the Galactic *Sssenate* to *sssend* a *represssentative* to *oversssee* those *electionsss*?"

"I think that can be arranged." Mace smiled. "Will you be a candidate?"

"No, I'm *jussst* a *sssimple* man. But if I have any *sssay* in the matter... Maya will."

Hero of the rebellion, Mace thought, watching the sisters celebrate. And if the rules and laws of this strange planet allowed droids to run for office, he could think of no better outcome.



CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

RECKONING BENEATH THE TRIPLE MOON

“Your sun is calming,” Mace said as he and KinShan crossed the glassy sands under the triple moons. So different now than just days before, when he had crossed the same stretch of glassy sand. He had not known this world, nor helped craft its fate. Then he had been a stranger. Now, well... now, he was not alone.

“How do you know?”

“The winds,” he said. “It’s hours from dawn, but if the sun were still as violent, the moons would reflect a different light.”

“So it has been spun. So it must be true.” She bumped her hip against him playfully. “Metagos must seem very small and backward to you.”

He could see by the light of the moons, but KinShan carried a lightshroom to illuminate her way. Its invisible radiance seemed just barely visible to him now. As if it had changed. Or he.

“The light you carry,” he said. “It shows you your footpath and the surrounding territory, yes?”

“Yes, why?”

His heart ached. “You have never seen the stars, have you? The moons.”

“No,” she said. “The radiance from the mushrooms does not reach so far.”

She felt more distant from him in that moment. Smaller. He stepped briskly into the gap. “Then let me be your eyes. The sky is filled with stars, more than there are mushrooms on Metagos.”

“No!”

“Yes. And our scientists say that they are connected—by various physical powers, and by the Force. The entire galaxy. And other galaxies we see and those we do not. All connected...a gigantic Web, connecting all.”

“Could that be true?”

“It is true. And you know spheres, of course.”

“Of course.” Her tread was lighter now, and the smile had returned to her lips.

“Every point on the sphere is the center of the surface. And in that way, every point in the galaxy, every planet, and every beating heart is the center of the world.”

“Metagos is the center?”

His heart was full. “From a certain point of view, yes.”

“Tell me of the stars. What do they look like?”

“A million tiny blazing mushrooms.”

“And the moons?”

“Disks, reflecting poisoned light.” He paused. “One is in Metagos’s shadow. The others...reflect a fraction of your star’s light, and probably less of the radiation.”

KinShan smiled. “You make a fine Sa’ad.”

They laughed together, a good and clean sound.

—

DAWN WAS TWO hours away, but the wind had picked up enough to drive glassy sand into the air. The sandstorm howled at them, and both travelers covered their faces with cloth mesh to protect them and allow breathing.

“All of this will calm in time,” Mace said. “Radiation will have sterilized the soil. But you can probably renew it with fertilizers.”

“This has all happened before,” she said. “I suspect Metagos will take care of itself. The larger life must hide in caves during the storms, then emerge to hunt. Some of the plants survived, and when things calm, they will grow. Look.”

It was a young vine, green and narrow and only two hands in length, but it glowed to Mace’s eye. If she could see it, it must radiate in the invisible spectrum as well.

“Strong enough to survive the storm,” Mace said.

“Our scientists say that when the storms subside, what survives will blossom. And that those who eat those plants will inherit their resistance. And carnivores who eat those herbivores will gain theirs.”

Mace nodded. “The circle of life.”

“Some legends say that is how our ancestors found this planet, thousands of years ago. They saw the flare subside and came to investigate. There was a cycle.”

“In all things.”

“Life was scoured. And the strongest survived. They thrived. We colonized, and in the depths we found the Hillians and the other creatures. Vin-Vin’s ancestors must have sealed the infested into the depths, but that history is lost to us.”

“Why did Hillians, creatures of such power, allow themselves to be controlled?”

“Mace—”

He could have smacked his own head. “You’re right. It was never that. They enjoyed the company.”

“Yes.”

“And then things changed.”

“They always do.” KinShan paused. “The rulers became wealthy and greedy, and those who resisted were sent below.”

“Until the next flare, when they were overthrown, and their own cruelty came back to bite them.” He paused, orienting himself by the stars, then continued walking. “Your people were here before. How many cycles?”

“How long is time?”

He heard a sound.

“Oh my, oh my. So much to be done...” It was a familiar voice.

He could have laughed. Those domes and cubical shapes emerging from the shadows up ahead were the ghost town he had passed on the way in. And that voice had to be the hapless droid still trying to serve its master.

He felt the ripple in the Force an instant before his ears detected the low and savage snarling in the sand-clouded air.

Mace drew his lightsaber. KinShan drew her whip.

“I’d say, ‘Stay behind me,’ but you are a Sa’ad.”

“I’d say the same...but you are a Jedi.”

There were twelve of them this time. The same armored creatures he had faced before, but he suspected these were younger. They certainly moved more swiftly.

The action came faster than he had anticipated. Back-to-back with lightsaber and silken whip, Mace and KinShan ripped their way through the enemy. KinShan lost her lantern, and in the next moment, as she was blinded, one of the beasts raked her leg.

She screamed and stumbled back against the wall of a deserted house.

Mace took position in front of her and took up a stance of Vaapad that was specific to protecting others. It did not allow a tremendous amount of sideways movement, because the assumption was that the protected party might not be able to move with you. It focused attention down to the most important thing: killing what was in front of you. It demanded the ability to back against a wall so that one dimension of potential attack was blocked.

But as the snarling beasts surrounded them, he could feel that it wouldn’t be enough. Perhaps—

“Jedi!” Chulok called. Two voices, twined as one.

Mace wheeled to face his nemesis, astonishment and despair rising in his heart. The creature had not merely survived but also managed to track them.

Truly, Chu and Lok looked like beings who had suffered the weight of a planet falling upon them. Blood smeared their faces, and a flap of skin fell almost fully over Chu’s left eye.

But there was no mistaking the sheer, blazing rage on both their faces. Before Mace could evolve a strategy to deal with the new threat, the two-headed, four-armed demon leapt among the armored demi-slugs, slinging a three-sectioned staff to horrific effect. The creatures split their attention, no longer predators but prey as—to the great surprise of Mace and KinShan—Chulok fought *with* them, silently, until the armored slugs fled. The three faced one another.

“Why did you help us?”

“The honor of killing you must be ours,” Chulok said. “Ours alone.”

"You could have been our Third!" Lok screamed. "We could have been gods. Instead, you chose the rebels. You could have had it all."

"Go," Mace said. "I will not follow. I have other tasks to complete. You can have your lives. On another world."

"You. You destroyed everything," Chu said. "But we will end you. The Jedi Killer will end you."

"You're no Jedi Killer. Qui-Gon survived."

That startled Chu. "You lie. You came to avenge him."

"Jedi don't traffic in revenge. Or lies."

"My people saved him," KinShan panted. "And he saved us, by sending Mace."

"We kill you both."

"Get in the dome," Mace said, never taking his gaze from Chulok. She understood instantly that Chulok wouldn't be able to crawl through the narrow tunnel or easily smash through the glass walls. She would be out of reach, and Mace could concentrate on the task at hand.

She told him, "You are of the Web."

"You dance in my heart," he replied, and he briefly gripped at the silken necklace she had given him while healing. If he survived this, he might never take it off.

Chulok sneered. "We kill you both."

We. Mace noted this. The two, at this moment, were not one.

"You'll try," he said and winked at KinShan. She bit her lip, holding back emotion, and backed into the dome.

And so it began, as Mace Windu had always known it inevitably would. Mace with his lightsaber, Chulok with their Sanchi Kan, the Triple Irons. Two against one, with the one hobbled by the need to protect a wounded friend.

The creature was dazzlingly fast and powerful, and the Sanchi Kan, with attributes of both a flexible and a rigid weapon, was unlike anything Mace had faced before: a new problem to be solved.

And solve it he must, or KinShan would die.

There was little time for thought. Indeed, in the whirlwind of combat, there was no time at all. There was just...being.

Inner legs and outer legs. Inner and outer arms. Chulok had movement potentials Mace had never faced, although he had indeed dealt with multiple arms and legs. The blows were coming from different angles, at different speeds, and toward different targets, two brains working as one to baffle and blind him.

But if Chulok had two brains to advise them, Mace Windu had more. He had every Jedi who had ever lived, their living spirits now joined with the Force. It gave him a gift no creature such as Chulok could ever have:

Mace Windu stepped *outside his body*. He was able to watch himself fight. At the level of ferocity Chulok employed, conscious thought was simply not an option. It was not his ordinary combat mind protecting him, it was the training itself, the spirits of all the Jedi who had trained and cared for him, who had trusted him with the Temple secrets.

From childhood he had walked this path, and it was wider and deeper than his soul. Chu and Lok had only each other, and while that was a terrifying force, some part of Mace Windu could step outside it and see.

Dejarik.

This was the endgame. And the outcome was not under his direct control, because his opponent, fueled by rage and betrayal and rejection, with unique physical, mental, and spiritual aspects, could not be predicted.

He hurt Chulok, but their flexible zillo beast armor gave them sufficient protection from lightsaber thrusts and strikes that Mace could not land a decisive blow. Chulok's Triple Irons grazed Mace's head and hammered his ribs. From weapons to fist blows to grappling, in every range, Chulok was superior...but Mace was hurting them, too, as no one ever had.

"You are not Qui-Gon."

"You betrayed his trust, striking from darkness. You would have feared to face him fairly."

Chulok glared. "I fear no one. And nothing." A lie, and Mace could feel it. This was a parody of their former confident self. "It is you who will feel fear...in fact...ah...you feel it now. You now know you cannot defeat me.

Cannot defeat my Sanchi Kan. I make you a proposition. Rim-runner's oath." Chulok paused, and Mace somehow knew what they were going to say.

"Fight me without your lightsaber. I will fight you without the Sanchi Kan. Strength to strength, and skill to skill. Do this...and even if I kill you, I will allow your woman to survive."

Mace sensed he could not beat this being, but there was no quit in him. He would fight on, even to the last breath.

If Chulok killed Mace and KinShan, they would escape and rebuild their army. It was entirely possible that such a being would dominate the sector. And with an entire planet as their base, they could and would replace the Hutts as criminal overlords. Suddenly, Mace understood clearly why this was Jedi business. This sly, complex, and powerful creature was the kind of charismatic leader who could crystallize a thousand separate groups into a sudden threat.

This was a battle for the heart and soul of the galaxy itself.

"Agreed," Mace said. "Rim-runner's oath?"

"You have my oath," Chulok said, "but what is the word of a Jedi worth?"

"More than you can afford," Mace said. They backed away from each other. Chulok placed their staff on the ground behind them. Mace, never taking his eyes off his opponent, took his lightsaber and ironshroom staff and did the same.

Then with a scream, Chulok charged.

It would have been suicide to meet that charge directly: The creature was three times his weight, and momentum alone would have crushed him. No typical throwing move utilizing Chulok's momentum would work, either: The advantages of four feet and two centers of balance were too great.

No. This game was evasion and escape.

Mace lured them back and back, staying just a hairbreadth out of reach and trying to get to Chulok's legs. Their knees? Too far.

Back and back, Mace retreating, taking damage from those long, long arms.

Chulok turned, scooped, and whipped a fist-sized crystal behind him. One of their heads had kept an eye on the hut's tunnel and registered the moment

when KinShan poked her head out to see what was happening. She had too much sense to speak or otherwise distract Mace, but Chulok had seen. The chunk of glass flew with frightening accuracy and power. She ducked back into the tunnel only an instant before the crystal smashed into the doorway and thunked to the ground.

It would have killed her.

A Jedi's word is absolute, and he had given it freely to Chulok.

But now that Chulok had broken theirs, Mace was free.

"You lied," Mace said. "You broke the Rim-runner's oath."

"I did not," Chulok said, and grinned. "I said that if you fought me and died, I would not harm her. You haven't died yet."

Oh, that was lovely. Chulok circled him. And the moment Mace had awaited finally came. He was between the thane and the hut. And he reached down and picked up the ironshroom staff.

"Not my lightsaber," he said. "So technically I'm not breaking my word, either."

There was a glimmer of something in Chulok's eye, and it wasn't pleasure.

A staff is possibly the most powerful non-energy weapon possible. And Mace was a master. For the first time, Chulok seemed a little stiff, and Mace knew why: They were worried about what Mace might do to them, and in that fear, their focus shifted from external to internal. And that meant less focus, less awareness, reality being sampled fewer times per second. Mace's focus, on the other hand, remained external, noting everything about environment and motion and intent.

The result was that in the duel against a four-armed, four-legged creature, Mace entered a state of waking dream. Chulok struck him on the left cheek, but Mace rolled with it, grasped the striking hand, and brought the point of his right elbow directly into the flesh and bone just below the knuckles.

Pain exploded on Chulok's faces, and they staggered back, shaking that hand in an attempt to get feeling back into it.

Mace made the mistake of letting his satisfaction diminish his focus just long enough for Chulok to spring and leap backward, performing a double shoulder roll that put their outstretched right hand in reach of the Triple Irons.

And they stood, four lips stretched into a gleeful expression.

“Now, Jedi. Hear the sound of your bones breaking.” And they juggled the Sanchi Kan, spinning it over their head and around their waist so fast that it looked almost like a dust devil.

And then the attack.

The equation had changed. This was a battle Chulok had prepared for—Triple Irons against staff—and it was decidedly in their favor.

When two beings fight to the death with weapons, it is always brutal and exhausting. When one of those beings has four arms and four legs, the equation becomes even more complicated...

For both of them. Because it meant that not only did Chulok have twice the weaponry, but they had twice the vulnerable targets as well.

Mace reentered that state of waking dream—a kind of combative Chan-Dree. And in that dream, some deep part of him recognized a pattern in Chulok’s movement. Such complexity there was in all of the attacks, but concealed within that complexity was...

Yes! Three times the creature had focused strikes on the upper right quadrant, then fainted and tried for the lower left knee. The lower left quadrant. The apparent weakness Mace had displayed in the palace fight so long ago. Chulok *had* noticed!

And Mace realized that he had unconsciously dragged that leg, just a little. Now he let his left foot supinate, rolling outward an extra centimeter as if the stabilizing knee and ankle were weakening.

He felt Chulok’s intent, felt that the savage blow aimed at his right shoulder was a feint, and whipped his left leg up so that for a moment he stood balanced on the right. Chulok’s blow whipped under his knee, the commitment unbalancing the creature for a fraction of a second, and in that moment, Mace had a clear shot, the first really clear shot, at Lok’s left knee...and took it.

The feel of solid contact, and the roar of surprise and dismay from both heads, triggered a primal snarl of satisfaction. Mace knew, for the first time, that he could win.

Chu and Lok, for the first time, ceased moving in perfect coordination. Neither wished to feel the sting of that staff. Again and again, Mace moved through the patterns of attack like KinShan's data packets shooting through the pattern static of the Web. *Fingers, elbows. Knees. Insteps.*

Chulok was growing frustrated. Was that the beginning of a limp? Mace had smashed the ironshroom staff on Lok's right instep three times, and the last time, he thought he'd felt something give.

Was that a—

No. It was another feint. Chulok jabbed high, drawing a roof block...

And Chu dropped the end of the Sanchi Kan and smashed the hardened edge of his right hand down precisely in the middle of the blocking staff.

Whether he suspected this was the very hollowed spot that had held the lightsaber or it had been a lucky stroke, the staff shattered...

Into two parts. Instantly, without hesitation, Mace's combat mind sorted through a dozen realities and found the one that fit the scenario.

Vaapad double stick.

The advantage of seeing pattern rather than weapon is that it confers the ability to shift to new tools, or even to no tools at all. And while the disadvantages of the shorter tools were clear to Mace, he also made a realization that offered instant and decisive opportunity.

If he risked the inner storm and moved inside the arc of the Triple Irons, he actually had the advantage.

He took those glancing blows to get inside, where for the first time, Chulok truly felt his wrath. As with the whips against Nalaflita, each arm flashed through separate patterns, so that no moment of the interaction was repeated.

Stalemate. And a glorious one. As the corner of his eye caught the first light of dawn, he saw the answer: He didn't have to beat Chulok. All he had to do was keep them fighting in the open. Due to the radiation storms, the surface was death. Windu and KinShan were willing to die to stop this monster.

The unthinkable, outside any rules of dejarik.

Chancellor sacrifice.

Mace slid a step back, just out of range. "It hurts you, doesn't it? The wind of the sun."

"And you, Jedi."

"There is a difference between us, one that something like you could never understand."

"And what is that?"

"I am willing to die for what I believe. Are you?"

Was Mace really willing to die to kill them? Chulok chanced a look at the tunnel leading to KinShan's shelter. The easy confidence that had flowed to them so easily, for so long, evaporated.

"You speak nonsense. All fight for life."

"Some of us fight for more than life. It is in having values more important than yourself that you discover who you really are."

"We are Chulok!" they screamed. "We are one!" But the voices were discordant.

"We shall see."

And again they engaged. The smell of desperation, the desire to strike harder, faster, actually inhibited Chulok. Mace focused on striking Lok whenever possible, and the Rodian knew it. And feared. And the fear broke his neural connection with Chu. No longer were they simply the killing machine with four arms and four legs, joined by a bridge of knotted flesh.

Now they were two beings trying to fight as one, starting to stumble, their confidence suddenly waning.

The sun was above the horizon. The wind sang with death. Mace felt his skin tingle. The radiation was attacking his cells.

So, Mace thought, *this is my dying place*. A good one. To die here, on this planet, would free its people. Millions of them. This...was a good death.

Without fear for KinShan or even for his own life, Mace Windu was not a Jedi using a weapon and skill set.

He was Vaapad itself. The dance of life and death. And although Chulok could hurt him, Mace had only to slide back and back, never engaging fully...then slide forward if Chulok sought to retreat.

“Oh my. Please, masters, stop this. My master will return soon, and I’m sure—”

Enraged, Chulok wasted a moment battering the droid savagely with his Triple Irons. The hapless mechanical flew and smashed against a wall, sagging. “Oh my. This is terrible. How will I do my work?”

Chulok panted. And Mace noticed that the two bodies were no longer breathing in sync. “You...you have earned a draw, Jedi,” Chu said.

“No!” Lok shrieked. “Here. Now. It ends.”

Mace dripped blood. His body felt hollowed out, his muscles flaming with exhaustion. But Jedi training *began* when exhaustion set in. A ten-klick run before practice was standard fare. Fear, a growing sense of hopelessness, and a raging desire to flee were no strangers to any Jedi. Mace had begun there, in childhood, by mastering his fear of being alone in the world. And letting his younger self choose a family that would see who and what he was and love him and honor him for it. That family now protected the galaxy. This was who he was, the path he had chosen. And if these were the final moments of his life, he could not have asked for a more important moment, or action...or companion.

Chu was now focused entirely on Lok. “You are obsessed.”

“I am clear. Some say that is the same thing. Come. Die with me.”

“This one...” Chu said, “is not worth dying for.”

“He must not win!” Spittle flew from Lok’s knife-slit of a mouth. “He took everything!”

“We have life. We can flee. Start over.”

“No!” Lok said.

“Jedi!” Chu said. “Take your draw.”

“Think again,” Mace said. “There is no draw, no quarter, with such as you.”

“You have killed us,” Chu said to Lok.

“No,” Mace said. “That’s *my* job.”

Now his two opponents no longer had perfect coordination. And now Mace realized that they weren’t moving in random, unpredictable manners.

He saw the pattern, repeated twice. Desperation and fatigue. And Mace began his stroke before his eyes saw an opening, then moved as the line was revealed. His right-hand stick finally pierced Chulok's defense, smashing through Lok's teeth into his mouth. Mace *twisted* the stick violently, and in the moment that Chu and Lok struggled to pull it out of the Rodian's throat, Mace took five steps, dived, and came up with his lightsaber, the violet blade blazing among the dancing dust clouds.

But as he spun, at the ready, it was already over.

Lok was down, gagging. The stick had been removed, but Mace had thrust the jagged end, not the smooth, and Lok's mouth fountained blood.

He staggered and fell. Chu sank to his knees, rough fingers pulling at the thick bridge of flesh at his shoulder. "Get up," he said, almost childishly. "Get up..."

Lok looked at his partner with eyes that no longer saw things of this world. He reached out his hand, and Chu gripped it, tightly, as if hoping enough pressure might keep Lok from sliding into his own personal abyss.

And then Lok was dead.

Chu rose as if every joint were rusted. He glanced at Mace with an expression of such venom that if looks could have killed, his would have maimed.

"It is over," he said, hulking shoulders quaking. "Kill me. Or don't. It's all the same." Chu pulled a knife from his belt and began sawing through the flesh bridge, shuddering with the pain but not stopping.

"Wait," Mace said, a strange sort of pity filling his heart. With his lightsaber, he seared his way through the muscle and bone of that extruded connection. Chu never flinched or pulled away. As the stench of burned flesh filled the air, his nose didn't wrinkle.

When Mace finished, the sun was a finger above the horizon, the poisoned wind whipping about all of them.

And then, with no concern at all for what Mace might do or not do, Chu turned, stumbling away into the sandstorm and the wind, and was gone.

Mace was weak, wounded, and barely managed to slam his hand against the wall of the glass dome within which KinShan had sheltered.

He crawled inside and immediately collapsed into her arms.

He said, "I guess that's it for me, too. I can make it to the ship. From there I'll comm your people to come and get you."

"I'm afraid I haven't been completely truthful with you."

"How?"

"You feel sick, yes?"

"Yes. Do I have long?"

KinShan smiled. "Death is not instantaneous. And before the skin dies, using Glassbane will stop the damage."

That was the moment when it hit him fully. He had tucked away all his fear of death—everything except the need to complete his mission and protect KinShan. The weakness he'd felt before was not the onset of death but the relief that it was over and she was safe. It had been overwhelming joy, not despair.

And he realized that had been an unfamiliar emotion to him before Metagos.

He began to laugh, full-throated and free. As if he had never truly laughed before, and perhaps that was true. Even the poisoned wind tasted...sweet. Life was sweet.

The Force, which embraced all, embraced him back. All was right in the galaxy.

She dug into a pouch at her waist and brought out a packet. Mace broke it open and touched the white salve within. "You know," he said. "I never asked you directly. What is Glassbane? I mean, exactly. Some form of mushroom muck?"

KinShan laughed. "Glassbane is fossilized Dweller droppings. They eat mycelium, and...well, level ten is their toilet."

His eyes widened with surprise. "Fungus feces? Really? That's what all the rich people were smearing on their faces?"

"Sometimes you are quick, Mace Windu. Other times, you miss what is right in front of you." She kissed him. "You need to get to your ship. I'm sure the Jedi scientists can analyze this and find something else that will help heal you."

HIS SHIP, HIDDEN in the crevasse, was intact. The winds howled above them.

“Come,” he said. “Sit with me. Breathe with me, one last time.”

“Wait,” she said. She unknotted the silken cord from around his neck and then kissed him thoroughly. She took a knife, dipped it in a narrow flask, then began to cut.

“What was that?” Mace asked.

“A cord cutting.”

“Isn’t that like a...divorce?”

“Exactly like.”

“Don’t you have to be *married* to get a divorce?”

Her smile was mischievous. “How else could you command my people, but as my consort?”

He was stunned into silence. For once, he could think of nothing to say.

“Farewell, Mace Windu. For a time, you had my heart.”

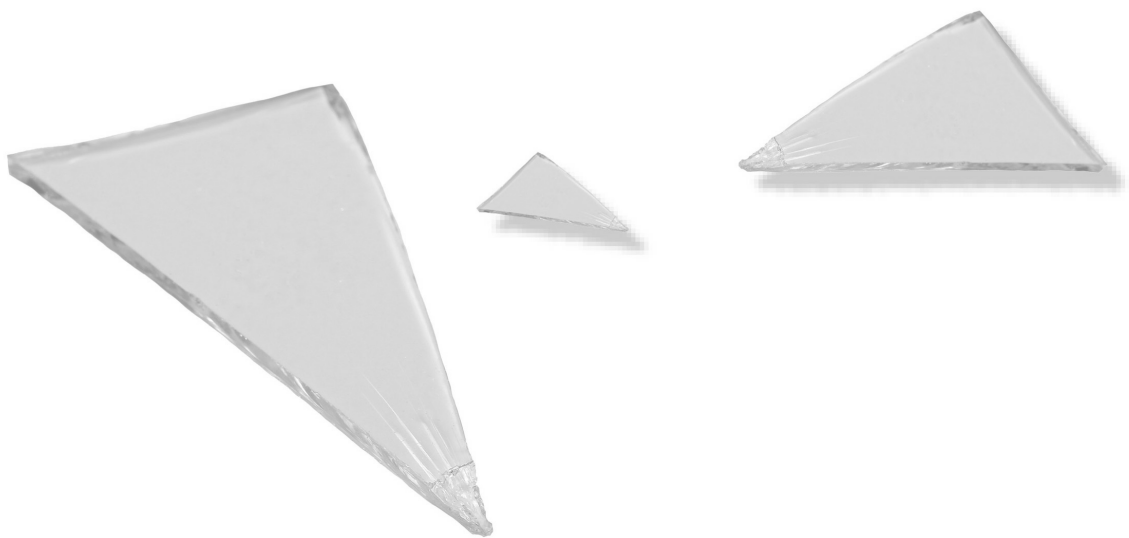
“And for a time, I was happy in a way I’ve never known.”

Her milky eyes sparkled. “They say that the term *glass abyss* speaks not only of the depths of this planet but also of the nature of love, the joining of hearts. Powerful. Beautiful. But fragile.”

“Gone in an instant.”

“In an instant. But if your travels bring you back...come be with the Nightbird.”

“Who will dance in my heart, always.”



CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

A FAREWELL

Metagos's morning sun stirred the glassy sands.

KinShan Nightbird sat in the copilot's seat, looking out the window as he cruised slowly, taking his time. Mace wondered how her eyes must see the landscape so differently from his.

"Look," she said. Down below them in the ghost town, the poor broken droid was crawling in a circle. Endlessly. Until the end of time.

"We can't leave him like that," Mace said. "And I can't take him to Coruscant. Is it possible that..."

"I think Vin-Vin and Maya could find a place for him," she said, and they touched down and scurried to carry the broken droid into the small cargo bay.

"Come with me," Mace said. "I know Quezel's friends, and they will care for you."

"They know my master?"

"They are of his city," KinShan said. "You will be of service."

The droid made a contented purring sound and settled back, happy at last.

—

FROM THERE TO the mouth of the mountain was only a minute, even though he traveled as slowly as possible. She disembarked, and the ship ascended.

But before she had turned away, once again the regal and distant icon, he had seen something sparkling on her cheek, like a crystal teardrop.

—

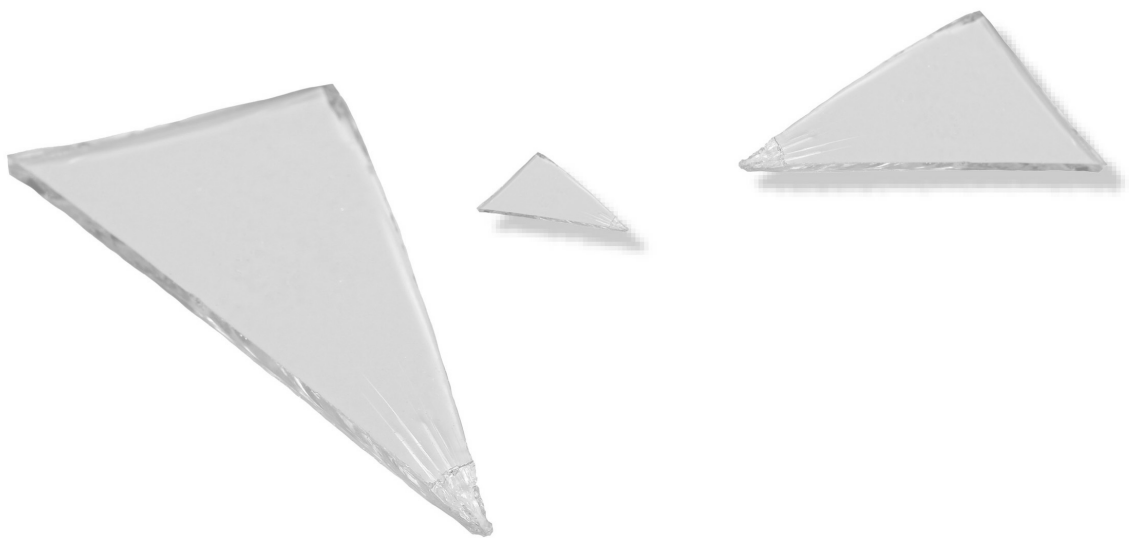
THE HYPERSPACE TUNNEL swallowed him. As Mace traversed its electric lengths on the way back to the Jedi homeworld of Coruscant, he opened Qui-Gon's second message.

“If you are seeing this, my old friend, then you have completed the mission. I knew I could trust you. I also suspect that my vision of your travails was accurate in another way. We Jedi know people. When we meet new ones, sometimes we can feel that they have a special connection with someone we already know. In this case, it was a sense that you and KinShan shared a destiny. I saw, perhaps more than even Master Yoda, the price you have paid in life to become who you are. *What* you are. Master Yoda may be the most powerful of us, but you are the purest warrior.”

“I don’t know about that,” Mace murmured.

“You flayed yourself of human emotion. All Jedi must sacrifice, but you may have taken that further than any. And when I met KinShan, and she healed my body...I suspected that she was the one who could heal your heart. Return to Coruscant. To the fray. But return renewed, fighting not for an abstract concept but so that all beings have the peace to discover what you have found. If I was, indeed, as perceptive as I hope. You were my friend. Perhaps my greatest friend. And I hope that in my little subterfuge, I have been yours as well. Goodbye, Mace. And...be well.”

Mace chuckled. “You cunning bastard. Just like dejarik. Always five steps ahead.”



CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

HOME COMING

Coruscant

Before he landed, he fingered the crystalline trinket KinShan had handed back to him, the token Qui-Gon had originally given him to introduce himself to the Sa'ad.

He understood now. The refracting walls of the crystal created images of a crystal within a crystal within a crystal, symbolizing the recurring nature of reality and the fragile but powerful forces of life and honor...and love.

Mace knew that he had been transformed. And in that transformation, he had become better prepared for the battle to come.

A gift from the best friend he'd ever had...and the only woman he had ever loved.

Only one thing remained: to speak with Yoda.

THE LITTLE JEDI Master welcomed Mace in, and immediately he felt the corruption of Metagos slipping from his shoulders like an old shawl. "You return. My heart is glad."

Yoda's living space was a modest and hidden dwelling with few decorations. One exception was a sand sculpture of a star system he recognized as Hysalria. Mace had not seen it before, but it was provocative. Yoda was a bit slippery about his early days, but rumor had it that one of his early instructors was N'Kata Del Gormo, said to have been a Hysalrian.

Yoda noted his interest. "Just a toy, that is," he said, waving his hand, and the sand melted into the form of an Alderaanian rose, identifiable because it had thumblike protrusions rather than thorns. "Share food with me, you will."

"Gladly."

“Strange the things your kind eats. Complete your mission, did you?”

“Yes.”

“Of course. Or return, you would not. I sense that you have seen things you will not speak to the archives.”

“Yes. But if you permit, I would like to speak them to you.”

“Friends, we are. Speak, you may.”

“There is a balance to all things. To the Force...what these people called the Web.”

“Different names they are for the same thing.”

“And there are other balances. Within and without us. I made a choice as a child. To find the balance within me that would make me a Jedi. And I’ve never regretted it.”

“Yes. This is something so few of us ever find. Follow the dreams of childhood, we must. But to free ourselves of those duties and then choose them again is what we must do as adults, or children we cannot lead.”

“We cannot look them in the eye and swear that this path was and is freely chosen. We must be free to walk away or cannot be sure we chose freely.”

“Understand, you do.”

“And you, Master Yoda...did you ever give yourself the right to walk away?”

“Never. And every day. The sum of our choices, we are. The Jedi path...no harder, longer path exists. The best of us can free ourselves of all rules but still follow our hearts to the Force.”

“Only the best of us.”

“And the most unruly.” The little Jedi Master poured tea.

“Unruly?”

“Chaotic, you were. Discipline, you needed. Frustrating, you are.”

“Frustrating? Me?”

Yoda chuckled. “Never have I met one so full who is so empty. Or so empty who is so full. Ah, well. When eight hundred years old you are, such things will confuse you as well.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’d had words with Qui-Gon.”

Yoda paused, then said, “Who would do such a thing?”

And together, they drank tea and laughed as the night cooled the day.

EPILOGUE

Metagos

KinShan Nightbird taught the young ones—the Sa’ad and their new cousins, Syblin grubs from the fourth level—about Mace. With their mother gone, the Syblins had a chance to choose their own fates...

And they had chosen to join with their distant relations. They were now part of the Web of family.

As was the Jedi Mace Windu. His story was theirs, just as her heart was his.

Not all threads are easily severed. A Syblin child said, “Tell us the story again.”

A young Sa’ad beside her added, “Yes! It is...” She searched for the right term. “It’s sync.”

KinShan tried not to flinch. Along with his song, with which he’d bonded to the Hillian with the white and silver rings, Mace had also taught her some new galactic slang terms. She’d pretended more disapproval than she felt.

“The story,” KinShan said.

Mother Web said, *Tell them. As I weave.*

“Once there was a wounded world, a land of crystalline wonder. A land balanced on the edge of disaster. But Spinners never despaired, knowing that all existence is connected through the Web. And that one day, a warrior would come, the fiercest in the galaxy. Drawn by duty, but bound by love.”

“For you!”

“For us.”

And for you, my child. Do not steal from your own heart.

“For me.”

KinShan smiled, filled with a strange contentment, as Mother Web wove. Mace Windu, a thread from another, wider Web, knotted with her. Their lives linked, always.

And no one had noticed that of the hundred threads she had entwined into the necklace she had given Mace Windu, a dozen remained uncut. This was just a little gift to her own heart, a hope that somehow, in some way, the Web would be kind and her love might one day return.

But if he did not...what a time they had had.

What a wonderful, *wonderful* time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank Diane Reagan for a wonderful refresher on dream magic, and Mushtaq Ali Shah for the formal introduction to lucid arts. Special thanks should be given to my dear friend Peter O'Donnell, creator of the Modesty Blaise novels and comic strips, whose fans will recognize his influence here.

There are beloved snippets of other genre classics as well. As George Lucas was influenced by Akira Kurosawa's *Hidden Fortress*, cinephiles might well notice the influence of his *Yojimbo* as well as the amazing Kenji Misumi's *Sword of Vengeance*. Fans of Asian cinema might also wonder if I have seen John Woo's *Hard Boiled*. Rest assured I have, and I hope you have as well.

For Cliff Stewart, Dr. John LaTourette, Richard Bustillo, Hawkins Cheung, Dawn Callan, and Harley "Swift Deer" Reagan.

True teachers never die; they merely become one with the Force.

And a very special thanks to my soulmate, the amazing and talented Tananarive Due, and my beloved sister, Joyce. And to my niece, Sharlene, and her delightful children, Maya and Vincent, who let me borrow their names. I give thanks for them every day, and tomorrow will be no exception.

So much love for all of you. Always.

Steven Barnes
Upland, California

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEVEN BARNES is the *New York Times* bestselling author of more than thirty novels of science fiction, horror, and suspense. The Image, Endeavour, and CableACE Award-winning author also writes for television, including *The Twilight Zone*, *Stargate SG-1*, *Andromeda*, and an Emmy Award-winning episode of *The Outer Limits*.

He has also taught at the University of California–Los Angeles and Seattle University, and lectured at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. With his wife, British Fantasy Award-winning author Tananarive Due, he has created online courses in afrofuturism, Black horror, and screenwriting. He was born in Los Angeles, California, and has lived in that area all his life, except for a decade in the Northwest and three years in Atlanta, Georgia. Barnes and Due live with their son, Jason.

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

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