

CHAPTER 3

MALGUS SURVEYED THE RUIN. The shell of the drop ship still smoked and burned in places. Bits of blackened metal dotted the hall. Walls and columns had been reduced to piles of jagged rubble. Cracks veined the walls and ceiling. Light from the day's dying sun traced dust-filled lines from roof to floor. Bodies, many of them Sith, but more of them Jedi and Republic military, lay strewn about the floor, amid the rubble. A few groans sounded here and there. The Mandalorian stood in the Temple's shattered entrance. She held her helmet under her arm and the sun glinted on her long hair. Her eyes moved across the destruction, the hard line of her mouth showing no emotion. She must have felt Malgus's eyes on her. She met his gaze and nodded. He returned the gesture, one warrior acknowledging another. She pulled her helmet back on, turned, ignited her jetpack, and lifted off into Coruscant's sky. The Empire would see to her payment.

Of the fifty Sith warriors who had assaulted the Temple, perhaps a score remained on their feet. Malgus was displeased but not surprised to see Lord Adraas among the living. They, too, shared a look across the ruin, but no mutual gesture acknowledged their kinship as warriors. Neither credited the other with anything.

With the battle over, the remaining Sith warriors assembled near

the drop ship and raised their fists in a salute to Malgus, shouting a victory cry amid their fallen foes. For a moment, Adraas stood among them and did nothing, merely stared at Malgus, then he, too, reluctantly joined the salute. Malgus let his tardiness pass.

For now.

Malgus acknowledged the salute with a nod.

“You are servants of the Empire,” he said. “And of the Force.”

They shouted once more in response.

Malgus kicked the hilt of Zallow’s weapon out of his way, deactivated his own lightsaber, stepped over Zallow’s body, and strode among the rubble, among the fires, among the dead, until he reached Eleena. He felt the eyes of his warriors on him, the eyes of Adraas, felt the change in sentiment come over them. He did not care.

He knelt and cradled Eleena in his arms. She remained warm, breathing. The puckered blaster wounds Zallow had given her looked like black mouths in the skin of her shoulder and chest. She appeared to have no broken bones.

“Eleena. Open your eyes. Eleena.”

Her eyes fluttered open. “Veradun,” she whispered.

Hearing her pronounce his name before other Sith surprised him, and his hand closed into a fist so tight it made his knuckles ache. She must never—never—behave familiarly with him in front of other Sith.

She must have sensed his anger for she blanched, cowered, staring at his closed fist, her eyes wide.

That she understood her transgression diffused his anger. He unrolled his fist and extended his hand.

“Can you stand?”

“Yes. Thank you, Master.”

He lifted her roughly to her feet, heedless of her wounds. She winced with pain and leaned on him. He allowed it. Her breath came in pained gasps.

“Summon a medical team from *Steadfast*,” he ordered Adraas.

Adraas’s eyes narrowed. No doubt he thought the task beneath him.

“You heard Darth Malgus,” Adraas said to a nearby Sith warrior. “Summon a medical team.”

“No,” Malgus said. “You do it, Adraas.”

Adraas stared at him for a moment, anger in his eyes, before he pulled a curtain over his irritation and turned his face expressionless. “As you wish, Darth Malgus.”

From outside, explosions like thunder sounded, the steady drum-beat of intense bombardment. Angral’s fleet had begun its attack on Coruscant.

“I signaled to Darth Angral that the Temple was secure,” Adraas said, the faintest hint of defiance in his tone. “You seemed . . . preoccupied with other things at the time.”

Adraas’s gaze fell on Eleena, then returned to Malgus.

Malgus glared at Adraas, one fist clenched, and fought down the flash of anger. He would not allow Adraas’s borderline insubordination to diminish the rush he felt at his victory.

“I will forgive your arrogation of power this once, but do not overstep again,” Malgus said. “Now remove yourself from my sight.”

Adraas colored with rage, his mouth a thin line of anger, but he dared not say another word. He gave a half bow and stalked off.

Malgus made his grip on Eleena gentler as they turned to look outside. The ruined entrance of the Temple, widened by the drop ship crashing through it, opened onto clear sky. Together, he and Eleena watched Imperial bombers streak out of the orange-and-red clouds and light Coruscant aflame.

“Go see it, Master,” Eleena whispered to him. “It is your victory. I am fine. Go.”

She was not fine and he knew it. But he also knew that he had to see.

He left her and walked the hall until he reached the shattered entranceway. The statues of the Jedi that had lined the processional lay toppled, broken at his feet. He looked out on the culmination of his life.

Imperial ships swarmed the air. Bombs fell like rain and exploded into showers of red and orange and black. Gouts of smoke poured into the sky. The few native speeders that remained in the air were pursued by Imperial fighters and shot down. Hundreds of fires filled Malgus’s field of vision. A skyrise burned, a pillar of flame reaching for the heavens. Secondary explosions sent deep vibrations moaning through

the ground. Malgus occasionally caught the sounds of distant, panicked screaming. A handful of Republic fighters got airborne but they were quickly swarmed by Imperial fighters and blown from the sky.

He opened a communications channel to *Darkness*, Angral's command cruiser.

"Darth Angral, you have heard that the Jedi Temple is secure?"

The sound of a busy bridge served as background noise to Angral's response. "I have. You have done well, Darth Malgus. How many warriors died in the assault?"

"Adraas did not tell you?"

Angral did not answer, merely waited for Malgus to answer the original question.

"Perhaps thirty," Malgus said at last.

"Excellent. I will send a transport to pick up you and your men."

"I would rather you wait."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I wish to see Coruscant burn."

"I understand, old friend. I will ensure the bombers spare the Temple. For now."

The channel closed and Malgus sat down cross-legged in the doorway of the Temple. Soon, several of the Sith warriors took station around him. Together, they bore witness to fire.

IN LESS THAN HALF A STANDARD HOUR, an Imperial medical transport cut through the smoke and flame and other Imperial ships that filled the sky to set down in a cloud of dust on the large processional outside the Jedi Temple. The two pilots, visible through the transparisteel of the cockpit, saluted Malgus.

A belly door slid open and two men in the gray-and-blue of the Imperial Medical Corps hustled down the ramp. Both carried cases of supplies and instruments and both had the soft physiques of men who—despite their warrior training—had not seen hard work in some time. Bipedal medical droids, their polished silver bodies reflecting the fires burning in the cityscape, walked behind them, each pulling a treatment cart with a tri-level gurney behind it.

Malgus rose and approached them. The doctors' eyes widened at his appearance—his scarred mien alarmed most—and they gave crisp salutes.

"There are several wounded within," Malgus said. "The Twi'lek female is my servant. Care for her as you would me."

"An alien, my lord?" asked the older of the two men, his jowls dotted with a day's growth of gray beard. "As I'm sure you know, Imperial medical facilities in-theater are restricted—"

Malgus took a step toward him and the doctor's mouth snapped shut.

"Care for her as you would me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord," the doctor said, and the medical team hurried past.

More explosions rocked the urban landscape. A bomb struck a power station, and an enormous flare of plasma jetted half a kilometer into the sky. A flight of ISF interceptors, notable for their bent wings, streaked over the Temple. The Sith around him cheered.

Eleena emerged from the Temple, her mouth tight with pain. The doctor trailed after her, worry creasing his brow.

"Please, mistress," the doctor said, eyeing Malgus with terror. "Please."

Eleena's eyes widened as she took in the scale of the bombardment, the destruction. Malgus stepped before her.

"Go with the doctors," he said. "There's an Imperial medical ship, *Steadfast*, in orbit with the rest of the cruiser fleet. Await me there. I will come when I am finished here."

"I do not require care, Master."

"Do as I command," he said, though his voice was not harsh.

She swallowed, smiled, and nodded.

"Thank you, my lord," the doctor said to Malgus. "Come, mistress." He took Eleena gently by the arm and escorted her aboard the transport while bombs fell and the Republic died.

After the medical team had triaged and loaded the wounded, the Sith loaded their own dead aboard. The bodies would be taken to Dromund Kaas or Korriban for proper rites. Malgus wished Adraas had been among them.

After the transport lifted off, Adraas, masked once more, came to Malgus's side.

“What of the Jedi bodies?” Adraas asked.

Malgus considered. The Jedi had fought well, especially Zallow. They misunderstood the Force, but he nevertheless wished to treat them honorably. “Make the Temple their tomb. Bring the whole thing down.”

“I will request a bomber to—”

Malgus shook his head and turned on Adraas. They stood about the same height, and Adraas did not quail before Malgus’s appearance.

“No,” Malgus said. “There are more than enough explosives still on the drop ship. Use them.”

“This is an order . . . my lord?”

Malgus held his calm with difficulty. “Sith should destroy the Jedi Temple, not Imperial pilots. Do you disagree, Adraas?”

Adraas seemed not to have considered this. Malgus was not surprised. Adraas, too, misunderstood the Force, and he had little sense of honor. Still, he did as he was told.

“It will be done, my lord.”

Presently, the charges were set and Malgus held a remote detonator in his hand. He eyed the Temple one last time, its towers, the stacked tiers of the central structure, the toppled statues, the great entryway made into a rough and jagged sneer by the passage of the drop ship. The rest of his Sith forces stood gathered around him.

“Should we remove to a safe distance?” Adraas asked.

Malgus regarded him with contempt. “This is a safe distance.”

“We are twenty meters away from the entrance,” Adraas said.

Staring into Adraas’s face, Malgus activated the detonator. A series of low booms sounded, starting deep within the Temple and drawing closer as the charges exploded in sequence and undermined the Temple’s foundation.

A strong gust of dust and loose debris blew out of the entrance. The explosions on the upper levels began, grew louder, fiercer. Stone cracked. Large chunks fell from the Temple’s façade and crashed to the ground. Flames were visible through the entrance. A whole series of explosions followed in rapid succession, the sound of the snapping spine of the Jedi Order.

The huge edifice, a symbol of the Jedi for centuries, began to fall in

on itself. The towers collapsed in its wake, the huge spires crumbling as if in slowed motion. A jet of fire and bits of rock moving faster than the speed of sound exploded out of the now-collapsing entrance.

Instead of taking cover, Malgus fell into the Force, raised both of his hands, palms outward, and formed a transparent wall of power before himself and his warriors. His fellow Sith joined him, mirroring his gesture, mirroring his power. Rocks and debris pelted into the shared barrier, the speeding shrapnel of ruin. The jet of flame struck it and parted around it, water to a stone.

The Temple continued its slow demise, falling inward, shrinking into a shapeless mound of rubble and ruin. And then it was over.

A thick cloud of dust hung like a funeral shroud over the mountain of shattered stone and steel that had been the Jedi Temple. There could have been Jedi survivors in the Temple's lower levels. Malgus did not care. They were either crushed or trapped forever.

"And so falls the Republic," Malgus said.

The Sith around him cheered.

NO ONE AMONG the Republic delegation to Alderaan spoke until they had cleared the hall. No one seemed to know what to say. Aryn struggled to keep their collective emotional turmoil at bay. Like her, they were bouncing randomly among grief, rage, and disappointment. Even Dar'nala was struggling to stay centered, though she appeared outwardly calm.

Dar'nala finally broke the silence, her tone, at least, all business.

"We need to reach Master Zym as soon as possible. I need his counsel."

"How can we be sure he is alive?" Satele asked. "If Coruscant is fallen . . ."

As one the delegation faltered. Syo and Aryn shared a look of shock. It had not occurred to Aryn that Master Zym, too, might have been lost.

"I would have felt it if he were . . . dead," Dar'nala said, nodding as if to assure herself. "Arrange a secure communications link, Satele."

"Yes, Master Dar'nala."

“No one is to leave here,” Dar’nala said to all of them. Aryn saw that the Master’s eyes were bloodshot. “When word of the attack reaches the public, the press will want comment. We are to give none until we have settled on our course. I will speak for this delegation for now. Agreed?”

All nodded, even Senator Am-ris.

“This will ultimately be a decision for the Republic to make, Senator,” Dar’nala said. “The Jedi will advise, of course.”

Am-ris slouched when he spoke, weighed down by events. “I will discuss matters with the acting head of the Senate,” he said.

“The Senate may not exist as of today,” Dar’nala said. “You may have to act in its stead. Your advisers here can assist you. We will support you and whatever decision is ultimately made.”

Worry lines creased Am-ris’s forehead. He swallowed, nodded.

They walked through the empty corridors, despondent. The High Council building had been vacated for the negotiations. Even the Alderaanian guards typically stationed within the structure had been relegated to posts outside. Though the windows looked out on courtyards of manicured grass and shrubs, gently flowing fountains, and elegant sculptures, Aryn nevertheless felt as if they were walking through a tomb. Something had died within the building.

Her thoughts churned. All of them seemed to be on the edge of saying something, yet no one said anything. Aryn finally gave voice to what she imagined all of them must be thinking.

“We cannot let this aggression stand, Master.”

Satele and Syo gave small nods of agreement. Dar’nala stared straight out a window at the Alderaanian countryside.

“I fear we will have no choice. The Chancellor is dead—”

“Dead?” Aryn asked.

“We saw it happen,” Satele said, nodding, her voice tight. “He said an Imperial fleet attacked Coruscant. It seems the attack focused on the Senate and the Jedi Temple.”

“I doubt they stopped there,” Am-ris said.

“There were Padawans in the Temple,” Syo said.

Satele continued. “We have no idea of the numbers of the Imperial forces or what other damage they may have wrought.”

“We cannot surrender Coruscant,” Aryn said.

The statement appalled everyone into silence.

“I agree,” Dar’nala said at last. “It should not come to that.”

“*Should* not?” Syo asked.

Aryn could scarcely believe what she was hearing. The Jedi had been duped, had failed in their charge to protect the Republic. Master Zym should have foreseen the Sith plan. She stared out the windows as they walked, barely seeing the Alderaanian landscape, the nearby river.

She had fought Imperial forces on Alderaan, had beaten them into retreat. She wanted nothing more than to fight them again now.

Dar’nala’s voice brought her back to the present. “How did you know the Sith had attacked Coruscant before we exited the negotiation room, Aryn?”

“I didn’t,” Aryn admitted. “Not with certainty. I only knew that . . .” She tried and failed to keep the emotion from her voice. “Master Zallow had been killed. And when I saw the look in the eyes of the Sith . . .”

Syo moved a step closer to her, as if he would protect her from her grief.

“Master Zallow is dead, then,” Dar’nala said, stiffening. Her words sounded tight, the grief leaking through her control. “You are certain?”

Aryn nodded but said nothing more, simply built a wall of her will to hold back tears. Syo seemed to want to offer her comfort, but instead he did nothing.

“We all mourn him, Aryn,” Dar’nala said. “And the others lost today.”

Aryn could not keep the anger from her voice. “Yet you would have us return to negotiate with those who did this.”

Dar’nala stopped in her tracks, turned to face Aryn. Aryn knew she had overstepped. Dar’nala’s voice remained level, but the heat in her eyes could have set Aryn afire.

“There are billions of people on Coruscant. Children. Their lives depend upon us acting judiciously, not rashly. Your emotions are controlling your tongue. Do not let them control your thinking.”

“She is right, Aryn,” Senator Am-ris said and put a hand on Aryn’s shoulder. “We must think of the good of the Republic.”

Aryn knew both of them were right, but it did not matter. She would get justice for Master Zallow, one way or another.

“Forgive me, Master,” she said. “Senator.”

“I understand,” Dar’nala said, and the group started walking again. “I understand all too well.”

ZEERID TRIED and failed to sleep in his chair for a few hours while *Fatman* pelted through the blue tunnel of hyperspace. Instead, he worried over his next job. More, he worried about the job after that, and the one after that. He worried about his daughter, about how she’d get the care she needed when he—he saw it as inevitable now—died on one of his jobs. The hole he lived in seemed to be getting deeper all the time, and he got no closer to digging his way out.

The instrumentation beeped a signal to indicate the end of the jump. He de-tinted the cockpit canopy as the ship came out of hyperspace and blue gave way to black.

The ball of *Vulta’s* star burned in the distance. *Vulta* was visible through the canopy, its day side shining like a green-and-blue jewel against the dark of space.

Arriving in *Vulta’s* system made him feel immediately lighter. The part of him that kept work at bay reasserted itself. The thought of seeing *Arra* always did that for him.

He engaged the engines and *Fatman* sped through the empty space between him and his daughter. When he neared the planet, he turned the ship over to the autopilot and waited for planetary control to ping him.

While waiting, he called up a news channel on the HoloNet. His small in-cockpit vidscreen showed images of the peace negotiations on Alderaan. He’d forgotten about them. Since mustering out, the war between the Empire and the Republic had become little more than background noise to him. He knew *Havoc Squadron* had accounted well for itself on Alderaan, but not much more.

Footage of the Sith delegation entering the council building filled the screen, commentary, then footage of the Jedi delegation doing the same. He thought he saw a familiar face among the Jedi.

“Freeze picture and magnify right.”

The vidscreen did as he'd ordered, and there she was—Aryn Leneer. She still wore her long, sandy hair loose, still had the same green eyes, the same hunched posture, as if she were bracing herself against a storm.

Which she was, Zeerid supposed, given the keenness with which she felt the emotions of those around her.

He hadn't seen her in years. They had become friends during the months they'd served together on Balmorra. He'd come to know that she could fly pretty well and fight *very* well. He respected that. And because he fought pretty well and flew still better, he thought she had respected him. She never drank with Zeerid and the commandos, but she always hit the cantina with them. Just watching them.

Zeerid had assumed she came along because she liked the emotional temperature of the commandos when they drank—relief and joy at having survived another mission. She always had an openness to her face, an expression in her eyes that said she *understood*. Her openness had drawn drunk soldiers like sweet flies to nectar honey. They'd wanted to look in her eyes and confess something. Zeerid imagined it must have been exhausting for her. And yet she'd always been there for them. Every time.

The vid cut to a shot of Coruscant and a commentator said, "Until today, when an attack . . ."

The ship's comm unit chimed receipt of a signal and Zeerid killed the vid. Expecting planetary control, he reached for it but stopped halfway when he realized it was the encrypted subspace channel he used with The Exchange.

He considered ignoring the hail. Speaking to Oren so near to Vulta would soil his reunion with Arra. He did not want business on his mind when he saw his daughter.

The steady, red blink of the hail continued.

He relented, cursed, and hit the button to open the channel, hit it so hard that he cracked the plastoid. He tensed for what he would hear.

"What?" he barked.

For a moment Oren said nothing, then, "If voice analysis didn't show it to be you speaking, I might have assumed I'd hailed someone else."

"I have something else on my mind right now."

“Oh?” Oren paused, as if awaiting a more thorough explanation. Zeerid offered none, so Oren continued: “As I alluded to before, I have something urgent. Delivery requires someone with extraordinary piloting skills. Someone like you, Z-man.”

“I just finished a job, Oren. I need time—”

“This job will wipe your slate clean.”

Zeerid sat up in his chair, not sure he’d heard correctly. “Say again?”

“You heard me.”

Zeerid had heard him; he just couldn’t believe it. Mere hours ago, he imagined he could never get clear of The Exchange. Now Oren was offering him just that. He tried to keep his voice steady.

“This just a drop?”

“It is a drop.”

“What’s the cargo?” He tried not to choke on the next word. “Spice?”

“Yes.”

“Where is it going?”

He figured it had to be heading to some seriously hot hole of a planet for Oren to have offered to clear his debt.

“Coruscant.” Oren pronounced the name reluctantly, as if he expected Zeerid to balk.

“That’s it?”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“I did. You said ‘Coruscant.’ So what’s the catch?”

“The catch?”

“Coruscant ain’t exactly a hot LZ. It’s a vacation compared with what I’m used to. So what’s the catch?”

“You haven’t caught the holo?”

“I’ve been in hyperspace.”

“Of course.” Oren chuckled. “The Empire attacked Coruscant.”

Zeerid leaned in close, once more not sure he had heard correctly. Oren’s simple statement and the flat tone in which he delivered it did not seem to have the wherewithal to carry the import of the words Zeerid thought he’d heard.

“Repeat? There were peace negotiations taking place on Alderaan. I just saw them on the holo. What do you mean by ‘attacked?’”

“I mean *attacked*. An Imperial fleet is in orbit around the planet. Imperial forces occupy Coruscant. No one knows much else because the Empire is jamming communications out of Coruscant.”

Zeerid’s thoughts still could not quite wrap around the idea. How could the Empire have attacked any of the Core Worlds, much less the capital?

“How could they have gotten past the defense grid? It doesn’t make sense.”

“I neither know nor care about the particulars, Z-man. Though I gather it was a surprise attack that occurred right in the midst of the peace negotiations. If nothing else, one can appreciate the Empire’s boldness. You fought against the Empire, didn’t you, Z-man?”

Zeerid nodded. He had traded shots with Imperial forces many times, originally as a commando in the Republic army, then as . . . whatever he was now. For a moment, he flashed on the ridiculous notion that he should re-up with the army. He chided himself for stupidity.

“You can get the rest from the holo,” Oren said. “Meanwhile, start planning for this drop.”

The drop. Right.

“You want me to fly a ship full of spice into a freshly conquered world occupied by the Empire? You said they locked down comm traffic. They’ll have orbital traffic to a minimum, too. I can’t sneak through that, even flying dark. They’ll blow me out of space.”

“You’ll find a way.”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

“I have faith you’ll figure something out.”

“At the least we should wait until matters settle. The Empire will probably allow regular commercial ship traffic to resume in a week or so. At that point—”

“That will not work.”

“It’s got to work.”

“No. The cargo needs to move immediately.”

Zeerid was starting to like things less and less. His sense of smell picked up something turning to rot. “Why?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“I do if I’m hauling it. Which I haven’t even decided yet.”

Oren fell silent for a moment. Then, “This is engspice.”

Zeerid blew out a sigh. No wonder the job would wipe his slate clean. Chem-engineered spice was not only especially addictive, it also altered users’ brain chemistry such that only more of the same “brand” of engspice could satisfy their need. Mere spice would not do. Dealers called engspice “the leash,” because it gave them a monopoly over their users. They could charge a premium, and did.

“We have a buyer on Coruscant whose supply is running low. He needs this order to get to Coruscant quickly, Empire or no Empire. You know why.”

Zeerid did know why. “Because if the users can’t get their brand of engspice, they’ll go through withdrawal. And if they get through that . . .”

“They break their addiction to the brand and our buyer loses his market. His concern over this is great, understandably.”

“Which means The Exchange got to name its price.”

“Which works well for you, Z-man. Don’t sound so contemptuous.”

Zeerid chewed the corner of his lip. He felt a bit nauseated. On the one hand, he could be free with just this run. On the other hand, he’d seen an engspice den on Balmorra once, while serving in the army. Not pretty.

“No,” Zeerid said. For strength, he stared through the cockpit canopy at Vulta, where his daughter lived, and shook his head. “I can’t do it. Spice is bad enough. Engspice is too much. I’ll earn my way out of this some other way.”

Oren’s voice turned hard. “No, you won’t. You can die trying to make this drop, or you can die not making this drop. You understand my meaning?”

Zeerid ground his teeth. “Yes. I understand it.”

“I’m glad. Look at it this way. If you make the drop, you’re even with The Exchange. Maybe you even walk away, huh? If you don’t make the drop, you’re dead and who cares?”

Oren chuckled at his own cleverness, and Zeerid wished for nothing more than to choke the bastard.

“Then I need more,” Zeerid said. If he was going to get dirty, he wanted enough credits in hand to buy a shower for his conscience.

“Not just a clean slate. I want two hundred thousand credits on top of wiping out the debt, and I want a hundred of it paid before I land on Vulta, which means you’ve got a quarter of an hour.”

“Z-man . . .”

“This is non-negotiable.”

“You need some play money, huh?”

“Something like that.”

“Very well. Done. The first one hundred will hit your account before you touch down.”

Zeerid bit his lip in anger. He should have asked for more. “When do I go?”

“The cargo is en route to Vulta now. And when I say it’s time to go, you move your tail.”

“Fine.” Zeerid drew a deep breath. “You done talking, Oren?”

“I’m done.”

“Then I’ve got one more thing.”

“What is it?”

“The more I come to know you, the more I want to shoot you in the face. Just so you heard it from me at least once. Two hundred thousand or no two hundred thousand.”

“This is why I like you, Z-man,” Oren said. “Put your ship down as *Red Dwarf* and follow the docking instructions. I will contact you when the cargo is ready.”

“You loading *Fatman*, or am I flying something else?”

“I don’t know yet. Probably we’ll load *Fatman* in the usual way—a modified maintenance droid. You’ll know when I know.”

“If it ain’t *Fatman*, make kriffing sure it’s something else fast.”

“I will be in touch.”

“Fine,” Zeerid said, though it wasn’t fine. He closed the channel, sat back in his chair, and stared out into space.

DAR’NALA DISMISSED ARYN AND SYO, presumably so she, Satele, and Senator Am-ris could take private counsel with Master Zym. With nothing to do and nothing more to say, Aryn returned to her chambers to . . .

To what?

She did not know what to do. She felt as if she should be doing something, but she had no idea what. So she ate without tasting, paced the floor, and meditated, trying to keep the pain at bay by staying busy.

When that did not work, she checked the HoloNet for news. Unsurprisingly, the reports were filled with breathless speculation about the Imperial attack on Coruscant and what it meant for the peace negotiations. She could not bear the sound of the newscasters, so she muted the vidscreen.

There was no footage of Coruscant post-attack so Aryn assumed the Empire must have jammed communications. Instead, the footage showed old images of the Republic's capital. Millions of speeders, swoops, and aircars moved in organized lines above the landscape of duracrete and transparisteel. Thousands of pedestrians strode the autowalks and plazas.

The image changed to a view of the Jedi Temple taken from an airborne recorder. Aryn could not take her eyes from the image, the towers, the tiered layers of the structure. Towering statues of old Masters, lightsabers pointed skyward, lined the broad avenue that led to the enormous doors to the Temple.

She remembered the sense of wonder she'd felt walking under those statues for the first time, side by side with Master Zallow. She'd been a child and the Temple and the statues had seemed impossibly big.

"This will be your home now, Aryn," Master Zallow had said, and smiled at her in his way.

She wondered how the Temple looked now, after the attack, wondered if it even still stood.

She imagined Master Zallow, commanding the Jedi Knights and Padawans, fighting Sith warriors in the shadows of those statues, just as she had fought the Sith warrior in the midst of the Alderaanian statues. She imagined him falling, dying.

Tears welled anew. She tried to fight them but failed. She could not level out her emotional state, wasn't even sure she wanted to. The pain of Master Zallow's death was all she had left of him.

A thought struck her, and the thought transformed into an urgent need. An idea rooted in her mind, in her gut, and she could not unseat it.

She wanted to know the name and face of Master Zallow's murderer. She wanted to *see* him. She *had* to see him. And if she could see the Sith, learn his name, then she could avenge Master Zallow.

The more she pondered the notion, the more needful it became.

But she could learn nothing on Alderaan, as part of a *peace* negotiation. She knew what Zym, Dar'nala, and Am-ris would decide, what they must decide. They would put up a show of negotiating, then they would accept whatever terms the Sith offered. They would betray the memory of Master Zallow, of all the Jedi who had fought and fallen at the Temple.

It was obscene, and Aryn would not be party to it.

Unable to contain her emotion, she shouted a stream of expletives, one after another, a wide and long river of profanity of the kind she had not uttered since her adolescence.

Moments later, an urgent knock sounded on her door.

"Who is it?" she called, her voice still rough and irritable.

"It is Syo. Are you . . . well? I heard—"

"It was the vid," she lied, and powered off the vidscreen. "I want to be alone now, Syo."

A long silence, then, "You don't have to carry this alone, Aryn."

But she did have to carry it alone. The memory of Master Zallow was her weight to bear.

"You know where to find me," Syo said.

"Thank you," she said, too softly for him to hear.

She passed the hours in solitude. Day gave way to night and no word came from Master Dar'nala or Satele. She tried to sleep but failed. She dreaded what the morning would bring.

She lay in her bed, in darkness, staring up at the ceiling. Alderaan's moon, gibbous and hazy, rose and painted the room in lurid light. Everything looked washed out, ghostly, surreal. For a moment she let herself feel as if she'd stepped into a dream. How else could matters have transpired so? How else could the Jedi have failed so?

Master Dar'nala's voice replayed in her mind, over and over: *I fear we will have no choice.*

The pain of the words came from the fact that they were correct. The Jedi could not sacrifice Coruscant. The Republic and the Jedi

Council would accept a treaty. They had to. All that remained was to negotiate terms, terms that must be favorable to the Empire. In the end, the Empire's betrayal, the Sith betrayal, would be rewarded with a Jedi capitulation.

While Aryn recognized the reasonableness of the course, she nevertheless could not shed the feeling that it was *wrong*. Master Dar'nala was wrong. Senator Am-ris was wrong.

Such a thought had never entered her mind before. It, too, brought pain. Everything had changed for her.

Her fists balled with anger and grief, and she felt more shouts creeping up her throat. Breathing deeply, regularly, she sought to quell her loss of control. She knew Master Zallow would not have approved it.

But Master Zallow was dead, murdered by the Sith.

And soon he would be failed by the Order, his memory murdered by political necessity.

Her mind walked through memories of Master Zallow, not of his teachings, but of his smiles, his stern but caring reprimands of her waywardness, the pride she knew he'd felt when she was promoted to Jedi Knight.

Those were the things that had bonded them, not pedagogy.

The hole that had opened in her when she'd felt his death yawned still. She feared she might drain away into it. She knew the name of the hole.

Love.

She'd loved Master Zallow. He'd been a father to her. She had never told him and now she never could. Losing something she loved had ripped her open in a way she had not expected. The pain *hurt*, but the pain was right.

The Order had wrought a galaxy in which good capitulated to evil, where human feelings—Aryn's feelings—were crushed under the weight of Jedi nonattachment.

What good was any of it if it brought matters to this?

Her racing thoughts lifted her from bed. She was too restless for sleep. She put her feet on the carpeted floor, hung her head, tried to gather the thoughts bouncing chaotically in her brain.

She realized that she still wore her robes, not her nightclothes. She

crossed the room and stepped through the sliding doors to her balcony. The brisk wind mussed her hair. The scent of wildflowers and loam saturated the air. Insects chirped. A night bird cooed.

It would have been peaceful under other circumstances.

A hundred meters down, the Alderaanian landscape unrolled before her, a meadow of tall grasses, shrubs, and slim apo trees that whispered and swayed in the breeze. She could not see the walls of the compound through the vegetation.

It was beautiful, Aryn allowed. Yet she still had the sense that she was standing at the scene of a crime. The cool night air and calm setting did nothing to assuage the feeling that the Jedi had failed catastrophically. She gripped the top of the balcony so tightly that it made her fingers ache.

Beyond the compound, in the distance, the surface of a wide, winding river shimmered in the moonlight. The running lights from a few boats dotted its surface. She watched their slow, hypnotic traverse over the water. The sky, too, was dotted with traffic.

She found it infuriating that life went on as it had for everyone else, while for her, everything had changed. She felt as if she had been hollowed out.

“Thinking of jumping?” a voice said, a gentle smile in the tone.

She started before placing the voice as Syo’s. For a moment, he had sounded exactly like Master Zallow.

Syo stood on the balcony of his own chambers, five meters to her right. He had to have been there the whole time. Perhaps he could not sleep, either.

“No,” she said. “Just thinking.”

His usual calm expression was marred by a furrowed brow and worried eyes. “About Master Zallow?” he asked.

Hearing someone else speak her master’s name at that moment pierced her. Emotion welled in her, put a fist in her throat. She nodded, unable to speak.

“I am sorry for you, Aryn. Master Zallow will be missed.”

She found her voice. “He was more to me than just a master.”

He nodded as if he understood, but she suspected he did not, not really.

“To speak of nonattachment, to understand it, that is one thing. But to practice it . . .” He stared at her. “That is another.”

“Are you lecturing me, Syo?”

“I am reminding you, Aryn. All Jedi must sacrifice. Sometimes we sacrifice the emotional bonds that usually link people one to another. Sometimes we sacrifice . . . more, as did Master Zallow. That is the nature of our service. Don’t lose sight of it in your grief.”

She realized that there was more separating her from Syo than five meters of space. Her grief was allowing her to see for the first time.

“You do not understand,” she said.

For a time he said nothing, then, “Maybe I don’t. But I’m here if you need to talk. I am your friend, Aryn. I always will be.”

“I know that.”

He was silent for a moment, then stepped back from the ledge of his balcony. “Good night, Aryn. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Syo.”

He left her alone with her thoughts, with the night.

Sacrifice, Syo had said. Aryn had already sacrificed much in her life, and Master Zallow had sacrificed all. She did not turn from sacrifice, but sacrifice had to have meaning. And she saw now that it had all been for nothing. Always she had quieted her needs, her desires, under the weight of sacrifice, nonattachment, service. But now her need was too great. She owed Master Zallow too much to let his death go unavenged.

Dar’nala and Zym and Am-ris and the rest of them could accede to onerous Sith terms to save Coruscant. That was a political matter. Aryn’s matter was personal, and she would not shirk it.

She returned to her room and flicked on the vidscreen. More commentary on the attack, a Cerean pundit offering his analysis of how it changed the balance of power in the peace negotiations. Aryn watched the vids to distract her, barely saw them.

Vids.

“Vids,” she said, sitting up.

The Temple’s surveillance system would have recorded the Sith attack. If she could get to it, she could see Master Zallow’s murderer.

Assuming the Temple still stood.

Assuming the recording had not been discovered and destroyed. Assuming the Jedi did not surrender Coruscant to the Empire. *It should not come to that*, Master Dar'nala had said. *Should not*. Aryn would not leave her need to chance, not this time. She *was* thinking of jumping after all.

Having made the decision, she knew she had to act on it immediately or let doubt assail her certainty. She rose, feeling light on her feet for the first time in hours. She gathered her pack, tightened her robes, and stepped back out onto the balcony. The wind had picked up. The leaves hissed in the breeze. The next step, once taken, was irrevocable. She knew that.

She spared a glance at Syo's room, saw it was dark.

Heart racing, she turned and leapt into the open air, following her thoughts groundward, untethered from the Order, from nonattachment, from everything save her need to right a wrong.

Using the Force to slow her descent, she hit the ground in a crouch and sped off. No one had seen her leave and no one would mark her absence before dawn. She would be at her ship and gone well before that.

She'd need to figure a way to get to Coruscant, and she had an idea of who could help her. She wanted those surveillance vids. And then she wanted to find the Sith who'd murdered Master Zallow.

The Order might be forced to betray what it stood for, but Aryn would not betray the memory of her master.