

Star Wars

Online sequel to Tales from the Empire: The Final Exit

Emanations of Darkness

by Patricia A. Jackson

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An aggravated grinding noise accompanied the hiss of a depressurizing seal as the ramp of the Prodigal detached itself from the freighter’s hull. A week’s worth of sand and micro-debris contaminated the external servomotors, causing the main access ramp to stop and restart in manic fits. The unpleasant grinding grew to a crescendo of scraping noises, not unlike the shaving of sharpened metal against metal. Deke Holman grit his teeth, imagining the damage being done to the inner workings of the ramp’s lift system. Blast scoring from the torpedo hit that caused the damage to the YT-1300 was evident along the inside paneling and along the edges of the ramp itself. The Socorran shook his head sadly, surveying the damage.

Beside him, Captain Fable Astin willed her racing heart to be quiet, purging the rush of fear and rage that threatened to overwhelm her senses. A thick mane of fiery auburn hair fell over the tapered shoulders of her flight jacket, framing her pale, troubled face. Haunted green eyes peered from beneath the shadows of auburn bangs, glaring into the blinding white light of the expansive docking bay before them. Tall and wiry, she started down the ramp, even before it completely lowered, and jumped down to the deck. Her boot heels echoed against the docking plate floor with uncommon authority. Barely containing her fury, she made a quick survey of the docking bay. Despite several years as a Rebel Intelligence officer, she had never been inside the bay of a functioning Imperial Star Destroyer.

“Easy, Capt’n,” Deke whispered in Socorran. “This is a nice visit, remember? If we make nasty with the locals here, we may never get those hostages back.” He stepped down to the deck beside her, holding his hands up to show his willingness to comply. Around them, armed with blast rifles, no less than a hundred stormtroopers aimed their weapons at them, fingers poised on the triggers. Nervously, Deke watched Fable’s hands. It was not the heavy blaster slung low at her thigh that worried him, but rather the cylindrical object dangling from her holster belt. His commando leader had a temper as fiery as her red tresses. And in the heat of the moment, she was known for igniting the pulsating white shaft of the lightsaber, and letting the archaic weapon do all the talking for her.

“Can you believe it?” Fable whispered, her breathing strained. “The Empire is crumbling to dust in all corners of the galaxy, and you’d never know it looking at this.” She eyed the well-maintained rack of TIE fighters, Interceptors, Avengers, even gunboats arrayed in the hangar above them.

Deke chuckled at her disdain. “They might look Imperial, Capt’n, but they’re not.”

Her astute pilot was correct. Fable felt a bit of her anger subside, distracted as she was by the peculiar blue tinge to the stormtroopers’ armor. Though they appeared to be the same glistening white-on-black suits, there were slight imperfections-imperfections that only a trained commando such as her Harrier Infiltration team would notice. Even the weapons were slightly modified, the sights filed down or customized. “Mercenaries.”

“Well-trained mercenaries,” Deke replied. “And no doubt a smuggler or two among them, Corellian, maybe even a few Socorrans. In any case, they’re definitely not Imperial and-” he paused midsentence as a blaster rifle was raised to his face, “definitely not friendly.”

An entourage of stormtroopers emerged from the inner bay, flanking a man dressed in a black uniform, which bore no mark or insignia. Closely cropped above the ears, his hair was fallow, platinum white. His eyes were so blue and so pale as to appear translucent, shadowed beneath the visor of his officer’s cap. A dark, heavy robe billowed from his shoulders as he walked, carrying an air of unquestioned authority, which even Fable had to respect. “Leave them,” he said in a voice that was no more than an audible whisper. At his quiet command, the sea of armored bodies parted before him without vacillation, leaving a circle of clearance around Fable and her pilot. “You are Captain Fable Astin?”

Fable hesitated to reply, sensing the undeniable strength of the Force about him. Her rage momentarily brushed against an impenetrable wall of darkness and shadow that sent tremors along her backbone and shoulders, causing an icy sensation of pain to ricochet through every bone. “I am,” she managed to say, recovering from the experience. Exchanging a concerned glance with Deke, she saw the Socorran nodding his understanding of their imminent danger.

“You will follow me.” Surprisingly, the statement was a request, and yet Fable sensed a strength in his words, leaving her to wonder at his identity.

“I am Lieutenant Bane Werth,” he answered her unspoken question. Turning his shoulder to her coolly, he gazed across the bay at his soldiers. “I am second in command to Lord Jaalib Brandl, the commander of this ship, the Protectorate I, and the fighters who are currently blasting your Rebel friends from space. If you wish to alleviate any more bloodshed, I suggest you come with me.”

Nostrils flared, hands knotted in fists, Fable stepped toward him. “C’mon, Deke, let’s get this over with.”

A line of stormtroopers stepped between her and the Socorran pilot, weapons poised at Deke’s face and throat. “The Master requested that you be alone,” Bane whispered in that quiet voice. “Your companion will not be harmed.” He turned back to meet Fable with a disarming smile. “So long as he behaves himself. This way.” Bane extended his arm, as if in welcome, indicating a certain path along a corridor of armed mercenaries.

“Go on, Capt’n,” Deke whispered. “It’s not time to make it personal. Get those hostages back.” He winked at her and smiled. “Don’t you worry. I’ll be here when you get back.” The Socorran watched as his captain and friend followed the mercenary officer, adding, “I hope.”

Werth was silent during their short walk into the inner bay area. They were well into the Imperial Destroyer’s operations arena before Fable noticed that the escort of stormtroopers had not followed them out of the bay. “Are you a Jedi?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

Werth stopped and turned to face her, something of a coy smile parting his lips. “Why do you ask?”

Fable felt the opportunity for an insult and delivered it. “Because Jaalib would not be so stupid as to leave me alone with just any ordinary underling.”

“Well said,” Werth laughed, bowing his head to her. “Jaalib mentioned that you had a sharp tongue and an even sharper wit. I know a great deal about you, Captain Astin. A great deal. Enough to thoroughly respect your talents as both a soldier:and a Jedi. But do not be deceived by appearances. You’re safety here is at the request of the master; and no one:no one questions the orders or the motives of Lord Brandl.” He keyed in a code on a nearby access panel and stepped to the side as the blast door slid open. “Please, he awaits you inside.” Bane inclined his head, only temporarily lowering his eyes in homage, as she brushed past him into the room.

The area beyond the corridor was a decidedly cold and ambiguous chamber, full of shadows and a darkness that moved with the slow, tangible grace of twilight fog. The only light source in the room came from a viewport, a transparisteel portal that ran the length of the twenty-meter compartment. It provided her with an unhindered view of the ugly, rubicund face of the planet Redcap, as well as the battle raging above its dreary gray atmosphere. As she watched, heart pumping in her throat, an elite TIE Avenger took an X-wing fighter to task. The faster, more agile Imperial ship made short work of the Rebel fighter, causing the X-wing’s engines to overload, and shutdown. As the fighter’s fuselage grew dark and the ship began to drift helplessly, the Avenger spun on its axis and suddenly dropped out of sight, back into the fray.

“I’ve order them to disable, not to kill,” said a familiar voice from the darkness. “I have some of the finest fighter pilots the Empire had to offer. So long as they do not feel threatened, the casualties to your Rebel forces should be minimal, except for ships and equipment of course.”

Fable spun on her heels to face the darkness, seeing nothing and no one moving. She closed her eyes and concentrated, reaching out with her Force-enhanced senses. Her immediate thoughts met resistance, a powerful resistance that repelled her probing with an unsettling ease. As she sought to strengthen the mental query, she was repelled physically, raised nearly a meter off her feet, and knocked back into the viewscreen.

Gasping for breath, she shook the cloud of daze from her head and stood up, supporting herself against the cold glass of the portal. “Why are you doing this, Jaalib?”

“Because it seems your people are always standing in the way of something that I want. Just as he stood in my way.”

From the darkness, a man-sized form emerged, walking with unsteady, faltering steps. As the light from the viewport cast a faint shimmer over the anguished face, Fable recognized Rhob Hardnt, a Twi’lek member of her infiltration team. Blood and spittle mingled at his chin, dripping from his lips as he convulsed and fell to the floor at her feet. “Your spies are excellent, Fable, well-trained and seasoned. But then, I would expect nothing less from you. It took me nearly an hour. Imagine that:an hour with your companion to uncover how the Rebels managed to learn of my plans. I never imagined a Twi’lek could be so resilient.”

Fable bit her lip and restrained herself, dropping to one knee at the Twi’lek’s side. Her chest tightened as her trembling fingers failed to register any sign of life in the still body. She touched the Twi’lek’s face. His skin was death cold beneath her fingertips. It was only through her connection with the Force moving through her that she sensed the remnants of life within him.

“He’s alive,” Jaalib said, “but barely. A week or so in a bacta tank will cure what ails him:at least physically.” Gentle laughter reverberated from the shadows, and then was seemingly absorbed by that darkness. “I would have killed him had he not mentioned your name and then the little ambush you were planning for me. I left a breath or two in him:for you.”

“For me!” Fable hissed. “Jaalib, this is madness! You have no right to do this. These Garosian hostages were ransomed from the Empire and paid for with Alliance fund monies. You have no right to interfere with their transfer!”

“The Rebel Alliance has no reason to fear. I have no intentions of harming your hostages, nor do I seek any Alliance fund monies.” His tone was mocking and cruel. “I only want to borrow them for a short time. And when I am finished with them, you may have them back, unscathed and no worse for wear.”

“Stop playing games!” Fable demanded. “I’m in no mood for theatrics. Show yourself!”

“Theatrics?”

“Stop it!” Fable screamed. “You’re acting like you father! What’s become of you, Jaalib? I never imagined that you, of all people, could ever descend into this type of cruelty.”

There was an unsettling silence, a stillness as tangible as the man hidden among the shadows. “You speak of cruelty. Am I not my father’s son?”

Slowly, like a stalking predator at night, Jaalib Brandl emerged from the darkness. The shadows dissipated before him like a heavy shroud at his unspoken command. The bitter iciness of the dark side permeated the very air about his person, a dark halo that cast veils of shadow over his face. Fable recognized the youthful lines of his mouth and the handsome blue eyes framed within a shoulder length mane of black hair. Gone was the innocence she remembered. In his forehead, the setlines of determination were deeper and more pronounced, etching an untold story within the otherwise flawlessness of his face. “Your sentiments betray you,” he whispered, a hint of remorse in his voice. “Have I changed so much?”

Fable bit her lip, fighting the painful lump rising in her throat. Here before her was the man who seven year ago traded his soul for her salvation, saving from her the cold, bitter touch of the Emperor’s hand. “What has your father done to you?”

Jaalib smiled, his lips bright red in the dimness. “What my father did was not so terrible a sin as those perpetrated upon me by his dark masters and his rivals.”

“You’re working for the Empire?”

“No.” He said it with a harsh tone to his voice.

Assured by that tone, Fable knew that he was telling the truth. “Then why are you trying to kidnap these people? They’ve been Imperial prisoners for over six months. There is no need to traumatize them any further.”

“Six months. I was a prisoner of the Empire for six years-six long, memorable years. They will suffer no worse than a few days delay of their freedom.” He turned to face her, arching at eyebrow. The light emanating from the viewscreen cast a pale, languid reflection of blue shadow over his face, accenting his eyes. “I need them:as a lure.”

“A lure?” Fable felt her chest tighten.

“You remember my homeworld, Trulalis? Well, it seems Lord Darius Onneir, an Imperial Moff once loyal to the Emperor, is attempting to stake out his claim to this area of space. Unfortunately, those officers who remain loyal to the Empire have found him out and even now threaten his feeble existence. He’s not strong enough to oppose them, but with a little leverage he could.”

“The hostages-you’re going to offer them to this Moff!”

He smiled, a strange youth emerging in his face. “Only temporarily. Onneir knows of my mutiny from the Empire; and he thinks that I offer these hostages as an offering of loyalty to him. He has plans to meet with me to exchange the hostages for his acceptance. The hostages are only there as a lure to insure his undoing. When Onneir’s troops and ships arrive, our Protectorate forces will destroy him, rendering him no threat to the Trulalis system,” he paused, glancing over his shoulder at her, “or anyone else. Even your Alliance masters would have to approve.”

“Our Protectorate Forces?” Fable felt a chill down her spine. “Who else is involved?”

“My father will be waiting on the far side of Trulalis with one half of the Protectorate forces. I control the other half. When we converge on Onneir it will be with no less than four Imperial Star Destroyers, as compared to Grand Moff Onneir’s two. We will crush him and take back our home.”

Fable leaned her back against the transparisteel viewport. His intentions were just, or so her confused conscience told her. And if those intentions meant the destruction of a renegade moff, who was she to object? “The Alliance would back you on this, Jaalib. I would make certain of it. Just give me time to talk-“

“There’s no time to talk with your superiors,” Jaalib interjected. “The plan is laid. It’s time to spring the trap before all is lost. Besides,” he laughed softly, “your Alliance might look upon it as a gesture of subjugation to their way of thinking. The Protectorate has no love for the Empire, quite the opposite in fact; but we have no wish to make any allegiance with the Rebel Alliance either.” He closed his eyes, a serene visage of peace overtaking his haunted features. “Ah, and our guests have arrived.”

Fable spun on her heel, looking out the viewport as the distant crackle of a hyperspace entry portal flashed against the black backdrop of space. Battered and scarred with blast scoring, the escort shuttle re-emerged in normal space, right in the midst of the dogfight. Alarmed by the sudden show of force, the shuttle pilot miscalculated a bankroll and collided with a Y-wing fighter, who at the time was desperately avoiding an Interceptor. The TIE deftly dodged out of harm’s way while the Y-wing spun helpless out of control. Damaged as a result of the collision, the shuttle bucked and faltered, its engines firing in sporadic succession as it drifted into the gravitational embrace of the planet Redcap.

Jaalib frowned, a deep thoughtful sigh echoed in the stillness. "You are still the Fable I remember from long ago:with trouble always following on your heels. Bane!"

"Here, Jaalib," the lieutenant replied from the darkness by the blast door.

"It seems our retrieval mission has become a rescue mission." Still looking out of the viewport, Jaalib pulled black gloves on over his long fingers and straightened the robes at his shoulders. "Have my fighter prepared. I will over see this myself to insure no other uncertain variables." He glanced at Fable, his look dismissing her without further comment. "And instruct those active fighters in the area to do what they must to keep our path clear."

"Was that a threat?" Fable snapped.

Jaalib paused in the doorway, looking over his shoulder at her. "My father was the one who loved riddles and enigmatic gestures, Fable. I have no time for them. My words were a warning. Should you follow me, great harm will befall you. That I promise you. And," he smiled ominously, "there will be no hero to come on stage and rescue you this time."

"She's to live?" Bane whispered to the dark Jedi, incredulous. "She's permitted to leave the ship?" He glared at Fable and then back to Jaalib, where his hardened expression softened in obedience and respect.

"She is of no consequence to us, nor her Rebel friends," Jaalib said sternly.

"Long live the king," Fable hissed, clapping contemptuously. "Long live the king. You have become your father."

"On the contrary," he retorted. "I have become what I have always been meant to be. Good bye, Fable."

Amid a fury of activity, men, and equipment, Fable hurried back to the docking bay area in the underbelly of the Star Destroyer. Half carrying, half dragging the semi-conscious body of her crewmate over her shoulders, she struggled to get back to the Prodigal. Her comlink was jammed, a result of the current battle waging outside the warship; and with no way to reach Deke, she was alone to her burden. No one offered to help her. And none barred her way as she rushed through the frenzy of mercenaries, who were preparing for what seemed a final massive offensive. TIE ejector racks reverberated with the noise of eager fighters blasting from the docks to reform in squadrons beyond the swarming bay. The meager forces of the Alliance had not been prepared for such an onslaught and were outnumbered five to one.

A hopeless and needless slaughter, Fable thought. And the hostages were in equal danger. She was the only one who could handle this, now that she was certain Jaalib Brandl was involved.

"Deke!" she shouted, pulling the Twi'lek's body up the Prodigal's ramp. She cued the freighter's main door to close. The outer seals were pressurizing as a large shadow moved toward her from the bridge.

"Capt'n," the Socorran hollered. "By the frozen wastes of Neftal! Rhobbie." Maneuvering under the Twi'lek's shoulder, Deke helped Fable carry the unconscious Rebel spy into the crews' quarters. "It was him, wasn't it?" Deke whispered, recognizing the grief-stricken look in her face. "Talking to him didn't work?"

"No." Fable shook her head sadly, shaken by the reunion. "He's no better than his father."

"Then it's true. His father offered him up to the Emperor, in lieu of you. He's a dark Jedi now."

"And as powerful as his father, if not more so."

"How'd you get a way? I thought we were done for this time."

"He let me go," Fable explained. She helped Deke secure the Twi'lek safely in a bunk until they could reach proper medical facilities at base. "Are you alone?" She briefly scanned the dark corridors leading to the cockpit.

"They left a few minutes ago."

"Contact the Rebel command station. Don't worry about encrypting the message; we haven't time. Tell them the escort shuttle has been hit and is going down into atmosphere." She rushed into the forward bridge and sank down into the lead pilot's chair. "What's the name of this rock?"

"Redcap."

"Tell them to call off the fighters. We're hopelessly outnumbered here."

"Tell me about it." Deke sat down at the communications console, obeying her initial orders. "Anything else?"

Fable brought the main engines of the YT-1300 online, feeling the power of the freighter beneath her hands as she toggled the manual flight-control levers. "Tell all remaining fighter pilots to meet us on Redcap at these coordinates. Anyone that can still stand, walk, or hold a blaster ought to be there."

"Capt'n?" Deke hesitated. "We'll still be outnumbered no doubt."

"No doubt," Fabled replied, guiding the Prodigal through the expansive launch tube and out into open space. "No doubt, but I'll be there this time:to help even the odds."

Beneath the dismal, gray skies of Redcap's inundated atmosphere, thick coils of smoke rose from the ruined tail section of a disabled escort shuttle. The thinning smoke trail provided a ready beacon to the downed ship, which was stuck fast, nose-first, in the porous clay surface. Freezing rain fell in unrelenting sheets, drenching the vermilion landscape of the planet and covering the shuttle in a pale, pink acid-wash that fell from the polluted firmament. Excess water gathered in rivulets, creating a diminutive river, which gathered into blood-red pools on the lower surfaces, such as where the shuttle had crash-landed. Only an hour down, the disabled ship was partially submerged in that stained, cloudy water.

The area where the shuttle crashed was a labyrinth of crisscrossing canyon passes. There was no secure area for a ship, not even a small fighter, to land safely. Rocky escarpment walls, some hundreds of meters tall, sloped down into the ridged basin. A deceptive white mist swirled about the lowlying ground, making vision and footing precarious. One misstep could mean a bruising impact with the rocky ground or, to the other side, a bone-splintering fall to the lower cliffs and ridges below. The sound of blaster fire reechoed in the lower chasm, accompanied by the persistent drone of a lightsaber. "Hurry, Deke!" Fable urged, running along the tops of a muddy ridge toward the wreckage.

"I'm right behind you, capt'n," the Socorran said, breathless from their half-kilometer sprint.

Below them, the orange and black flight suits of soldiers were scattered among the crags of rocks and boulders-some fighting with rifles, others with their fists.

Squatting in the mud, Protectorate mercenaries and Rebel soldiers fought for control, each seeking the same prize. As they fought, the escort shuttle sank deeper into the bloody waters of the planet's surface. The terrified passengers rushed through the upper escape hatch on the aft section of the ship to stay above the fast-rising water and the suction of the clay. As the danger mounted for the sinking ship, neither side gained any ground until the Rebel blaster fire was diverted toward a secondary team of advancing mercenaries led by Jaalib Brandl.

The dark Jedi moved with graceful strides over the slick clay and mud, his pacing urgent, but unhurried. The white shaft of his lightsaber broke the eerie dimness, dispersing the fog about him. But the darkness that clung to the Jedi and his black robes, like a tangible guardian of shadow, remained. As he advanced with his team into the basin, the Rebels took aim and fired on them, but to no avail. With a gentle twist of his wrist or a feint that caused the Jedi to square his shoulders, the blaster bolts were deflected harmlessly off the lightsaber. A few of those deflected bolts were sent back toward the shooter, taking out the weapon or the man who initially fired it. To Jaalib's right, Bane Werth, blaster in hand, was issuing orders for their men to move in and outflank the weakened line of Rebel pilots.

Panting at the top of the ridge, Deke shook his head. "They don't stand a chance, not with Jaalib down there. And that lieutenant, if what you say is true:he has to be packing a lightsaber too. What are we-"

Before he could voice his question, Fable was already moving off the ridge pass, stepping off the rock ledge and into the ankle-deep mass of clay. She slid down the slope, one knee braced beneath her like the rail of a hover sled, her hand acting as a rudder to control her descent. Her eyes were locked on the shadowy shape of Jaalib as she approached the base of the ridge. Allowing her body to tumble forward on her hands, Fable leaped, somersaulting through the air, and landed on her feet between the dark Jedi and the shuttle. As Deke suspected, Bane Werth was carrying a lightsaber, and at the sight of her, he reached for the weapon igniting its pale yellow shaft.

Jaalib smiled, stretching out his arm to hold the lieutenant back behind him. "Leave her to me. Get those hostages. And get back to the ship." No longer caring about the flurry of blaster fire around him, Brandl advanced toward Fable and stopped in the center of the basin, glaring at her

Covered in thick layers vermilion mud and clay, Fable met him. The frenzy of activity about her faded away until nothing else existed, not the blaster fire, not the soldiers, friends nor foes, not the hostages. "Well," Fable whispered, "is this the scene where I ask you to reconsider and come back to the light side? Or is this the act where you try to seduce me?"

"Persistent as ever."

"As if you're giving me a choice."

"Go back to your ship, Fable," Jaalib said, as if speaking to a child. "I give you my word; your hostages will not be harmed. They will be well cared for and defended. You have my word on that. In a few days, I will return them to you, personally. Perhaps then, we can sit down for dinner and discuss old times."

"And I'd have to listen to your rehearsed soliloquies, just as I had to listen to your father's? No thank you, I'd rather not."

"Oh, you wound me," he mocked. "I thought you liked those dramatic, little interludes with me whispering sweet words in your ear. Remember that afternoon during the storm? You and I, in the dark theater, the rain, your lips. It could be that way for us again, Fable."

Fable scowled at the insinuation. "I am not the same, sniveling little girl your father could frighten and control with his methods."

"That much is obvious," he replied with a wanton look in his eyes. "And I admire the woman you have become, but you have only my respect, not my compliance. I will have those hostages."

Fable swallowed hard, reaching for the lightsaber at her belt. Strangely, it felt cold and unfamiliar in her hand. With effort she restrained the swell of fear rising in her throat, burying it deep before it could persuade her to leave as the Jedi asked. And with it, she buried a sense of indebtedness. This was the man who had saved her life, saved her from the dark side and the Emperor's shadow. And as reward, he took her place. Was she so eager to kill him?

"Heroism is a virtue of the troubled heart, is it not?" Jaalib asked. "And yours is a troubled heart, Fable. The guilt you feel for what has happened to me:it is your guilt. You created; and even now, you nurture it with your fear. Now, Fable:let it become the focus of your strength:that is if you want to win this contest of wills."

Fable lunged at him, savagely bringing the lightsaber above her head and down again as she ignited the blade. Dropping her shoulder, she feinted to the left and then came back to the right, sweeping the lightsaber in wide, aggressive arcs. Any other opponent might have taken a few steps back to regroup and counter her hostile charge; but Jaalib Brandl was no ordinary opponent. Undaunted, he stepped directly into the arc of her assault, parrying her most artful blows with the precision of a true master. His technique was flawless, as Fable knew it would be. She would have to prove just as masterful if she hoped to defeat him.

The clinging ground mists swirled about their feet, evaporating where the lightsabers sliced through the dense fog. Fable struggled to focus her energies, feeling herself succumbing to set-in patterns of aggression and reckless ire. It was a struggle. She felt Jaalib simply toyed with her, dancing through her defenses with exceptional ease, as though he might end the fray at any moment of his choosing. At one point, he fought his way through her defenses, holding her blade arm at bay as he pulled her tight against him and kissed her passionately on the mouth. Then to a chorus of laughter, the Jedi disengaged and stepped back from her, callously turning his back to her. He bowed to the gathering of Protectorate mercenaries watching the fight. They applauded their commander and whistled, maliciously jostling their Rebel prisoners to do the same.

Bewildered, Fable noticed that the Rebel pilots had been defeated and captured, even Deke. They were forced down on their knees at blaster point and made to watch her humiliation. An aspect of Fable that was familiar, and yet some years abandoned, resurfaced. It was the reckless, impetuous side of youth that she had never entirely shaken. With a vengeance, she lunged at Jaalib and caught him around the waist with a shoulder block. Though her slight weight would have done little to topple him, the momentum of her tackle brought the Jedi down to the muddy surface, where she straddled him and began hitting him in the face with the hilt of her disengaged lightsaber. The laughter abruptly stopped.

With blood trailing his nose, Jaalib grabbed Fable's arms and shoved her back, delivering a kick to her midsection that sent Fable flying back. Rising from the mists, the dark Jedi shed his black cloak, which was heavy and soaked with vermilion clay and rain. Shaking the semi-solid soil from his hands, he glared at her, wiping another trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. His eyes dark were dark with rage as he extended his hand toward the ground, calling the lightsaber to his fingers. "My, what a temper we have. But that was to be expected. How stupid of me to forget that fiery spirit. It's the one quality that drew my father to you; and me as well." He wiped his bloody chin a final time. "The time for play is over, Fable. Leave now, with your men, and I shall keep my promise to you. If you do not leave:I fear something unpleasant will happen."

"So be it!" Fable screamed. Re-igniting the lightsaber, she brought the weapon shoulder high and attacked him with such ferocity that the dark Jedi was forced to retreat.

Reeling under her blows, Jaalib took a misstep and stumbled in the clay, permitting her into his defenses. Fable took full advantage, bringing the lightsaber down across his shoulder. Jaalib recoiled quickly, the smell of singed flesh fresh in his nostrils. Diving in low, he repaid the insult by bringing his own lightsaber down across Fable's blade arm. She screamed as the lightsaber sliced cleanly through her flight jacket and down to the vulnerable skin. Cursing him, she retaliated. Blow for blow, some hitting their mark, others missing, the Jedi battled, moving out of the circle where their two opposing forces had fought. The Protectorate soldiers followed the fray with earnest, as neither Jedi gave quarter.

"Fable!" Jaalib cried, as he dodged a blow to his chest. He dropped to his knees as they climbed up the slope of a rocky ridge. "Fable, enough!"

"I'm not listening to you!" she screamed. She brought the lightsaber down to parry his blade. The weapons hissed and sizzled against the other, causing a sinister echo to reverberate through the hollow basin. "You're no better than him, your father. Who's no better than Vialco! Or Tremayne! Or Vader! All dark-siders, killers, murderers! Butchers!" She pressed the attack, ignoring the frightened expression that came over his

face. His eyes, normally so blue, were almost black, the pupils fully expanded, exuding a fear so tangible that she could feel it. It's a trick, she told herself. She had to kill him and kill him now before her heart betrayed her.

Fable drove the Jedi before her, leaving him no chance or room for talk, as she brought her lightsaber down and around, grazing him several times. He was on the defensive for some reason, serving only to defend himself and even then, he appeared nervous and fretful. She was winning!

"Fable!" he pleaded.

"Save it! I'm not listen-"

The reason for his distress was clear now. As their movements spun the ground fog at their feet, Fable could see that they had fought their way up a narrow, rocky outcrop, which jutted from the base of the canyon basin. Below her was nothing more than insubstantial fog, which would hardly support her weight as she took a final step into the abyss. The lightsaber fell from her hands as she tried to spin and fight her way back to solid ground, but that is the instant in which she started to fall.

"Fable!" Jaalib screamed, diving for the edge of the escarpment. His hands and arms were fully extended, trying to catch her. Their fingers touched, briefly but then she was torn away and falling, falling through the fog to the hidden ground below. The last thing she saw before the fog rose up to swallow her were his eyes, as wide and frightened as a child afraid of the dark:and then blackness.

Rain falling in her face awakened Fable. Each stinging drop felt like molten rock, causing tremendous pain throughout her body. Panting for air, Fable gasped for breath, the act causing such agony that she was nearly swept away, back into unconscious oblivion. She was lying face up in a cradle of rocks. Her right leg was twisted and misshapen, caught between the cliff embankment and a newly fallen cache of clay. Despite the leg's grotesque angle, she could feel no pain in it. There was no pain at all below her waist. She wandered what the other leg looked like and tried to rise but found that her body would not respond. She tried again, in earnest, and learned that every attempt to move was instantly met with a surge of renewed pain. As the shock waves of anguish swept through her, Fable collapsed, dizzy with nausea.

Now beneath the fog, she could see up, up to the jutting cliff from where she had fallen. It was nearly twenty meters high. She was lucky to be alive-so long as she remained alive. The coppery taste of blood rose in her throat, assuring her that she had moments, perhaps minutes to enjoy what was left of that life. No amount of bacta would help her, not here, and she felt the tears of rage and sorrow slowly falling to her cheeks, burning her skin in their passage.

"Fable."

The voice was distant, and yet close by:familiar and yet strange. Fable followed the sound if it, her eyes coming to a shadow standing against the cliff wall. Enveloped in fog, the shadow remained unseen and unmoving, gray and colorless except for the vibrant red mane of hair at the shoulders. It was so red that it made the vermilion clay pale in comparison. "Mother?" Fabled grit her teeth in shame. "Mother!"

"Listen, Fable. You've fought your entire life to be different, to be unique. And in this, you are no different from any other. Stop fighting yourself. Belonging and acceptance lie where your heart is; and your heart is where you belong."

"Fable!" As the image began to fade, it was replaced by a more animated figure. Jaalib raced across the slick footing, falling and catching himself in his haste to make it to her side. "Fable, no!" he cried, his face awash with rain and emotion. "Fable, don't move." He pulled a comlink from his belt. "Bane!"

Crackling over the transceiver, "Is she alive?"

Jaalib stood up and turned his back to her, as if she might not hear. "Her back's broken, possibly her neck."

"Shall I send for a med-shuttle?"

"No time, she'll be:be:I must:" his voice trailed off for a long moment.

"Jaalib?" Bane asked.

"Get back to the ship," Jaalib said, head bowed. "Call an end to all engagements. Order the fighters and all other personnel back to the ship."

"Jaalib?"

"You heard me. Now obey me!"

"As you will, Jaalib." The comlink clicked, echoing with the hiss of silence as Jaalib again came to Fable's side, kneeling over her, protecting her face from the rain. He shook his head, disparately. "Fable, I've been a fool."

"N-n-no more than I," she whispered. Though she was becoming accustomed to the pain in her upper extremities, it was difficult to breathe and becoming more so. There was a frightening wheeze that accompanied her breathing, a disturbing rattling that foreshadowed her future, or any hopes of her future. She closed her eyes, succumbing to the darkness on the edge of her consciousness.

"Fable, no," Jaalib said in earnest, taking her hand. "Stay:stay!"

The rain had grown remarkably warmer. Fable opened her eyes and saw Jaalib sitting over her, his eyes glazed with a peculiar sadness.

"Jaalib?" Her voice was a quiet whisper. "Why are you cry..."

The rain and the tears had ceased falling. Fable felt cool air blowing gently over her cheeks, cool recycled air. She opened her eyes and breathed deeply. Her chest hurt, lungs bruised, but she had no other difficulty. Then remembering her fall from the rocky cliff, her mangled leg, and a cessation of feeling below her hips, she sat bolt up right, running her hands over her lower body. Other then a few scrapes and an odd tingling sensation in her toes, she was whole. Glancing about her, she saw only shadows. "Where?: Jaalib?"

A shadow moved from the far corner of the room, emerging from the darkness. He knelt beside her and took her hand, holding it against his cold cheek. Noticing the manacles that bound his wrists, Fable swung her legs around and stared at him. "Where are we?"

"Solstice V, in the Al-ghenis system, I believe."

"That's my home base." She looked at the shackles binding his wrists. "You let them:you let the Alliance capture you?"

"And only me." He laughed, looking up at her. "What a prize for them: capturing a dark Jedi. You would think they had caught the Emperor himself." His smile faded as he glanced at the crude metal shackles. "These are only for show, a decoration to make your companions feel at ease. Removing them would be much too great a show of force and would cause undue stress:for your friends:and I imagine, for me." He laughed as if he had given the punch line to a joke.

"Show of force?" she scoffed, taking him firmly by the chin and staring into his eyes. "I think the true show of force has come and passed, right there at the base of those cliffs on Redcap." Fable paused, reliving those moments just after her fall. "I should be dead right now. Dianoga food. But? How?"

Still kneeling beside her, Jaalib rested his chin on her thigh and stroked her leg affectionately. "My Imperial mentors whispered of legendary powers that the Force could generate. The Emperor sanctioned numerous experiments to raise the dead or near dead, all with disastrous results. I often disregarded the skill as a myth, until then:when I saw you:dying."

"It's a dark side talent?"

Jaalib laughed. "True talent, Fable, is the ability to harness the Force, to control the vibrant channels of energy about you. Good and evil? Light and dark? These are merely measures for how heavily you use that power." Her eyes were focused intently on him, boring into him. "Your curiosity is refreshing, but it could also be a dangerous thing, Fable."

"Then satisfy that curiosity, Jaalib. Tell me, what is it like:the dark side."

He bowed his head, a tangible sadness coming over him, weighing heavily on his shoulders. "It's a void:a vast, infinite void of silence. An utter terrible silence where even the token sounds and echoes are swallowed in the vastness of it. And once there:you are so alone." He trembled visibly. "I once hated the dark Jedi, as did you. But since I have become one of their number, I have learned to pity them:to pity myself."

"Pity? Pity for murderers, butchers, animals-"

"Driven animals, Fable:driven animals drawn into madness and chaos to escape. The dark side is the essence of despair, a place to move beyond this world of suffering and vileness. Once there, it is so easy to think, to be free of emotions, attachments. But this:" he sighed, "this we soon learn is an awful illusion meant to draw us into the same madness we sought to escape in the first place."

Jaalib took her hand, massaging the fingers and caressing her palm. "Just when I feel myself surrendering myself totally to its power:some familiar sight or sound brings me back-my mother's voice, her gentle touch:a heart beating faintly, distantly in memory." He looked up at her, his eyes glazed again with sadness. "Your heartbeat, Fable. Though we've been apart these long years, I have never been totally separated from you. You were the one thing Tremayne could not drive from my soul."

"Lord Tremayne, he was your mentor?"

Jaalib nodded. "My father's greatest and most hated rival." He smiled sadly, brushing a hair from his smooth forehead. "And you thought my father could be cruel and merciless. Every ounce of hatred that Tremayne bore my father was taken out on me, physically, emotionally, and mentally. I came to depend on those memories that I still had of you to keep my sanity. When you fell from that cliff," his voice caught in his throat, "and I saw you lying there:broken and bleeding. I drove you to it. I did it! And the silence was there to be a witness. I thought I had lost you. I could not bear it. And now the circle is complete."

Fable stared into his eyes, running her hands over his feverish face. "What are you saying, Jaalib? No more riddles, no more staged lines."

He laughed, his body trembling beside hers. "I am a dead man walking, love:my soul is forever condemned:but it was a small price to pay." He met her eyes. "What I am saying in short is: my pact with the dark side is complete. Your life kept me from falling completely under its power. And it was the loss of that life that has sent me into its embrace." Jaalib pulled away from her, pacing the floor. "Oh, Fable, if I had never come here:this would never have happened."

Numb with the sacrifice that he had made for her, a second time, Fable whispered, "Why did you come?"

"Because I knew you would be here, defending the hostages. I hoped against all hope that I would see you. Maybe convince you to join me. The Empire is in ruins now that the Emperor is dead. From Garos IV to Socorro, the foundation of Palpatine's regime is crumbling to dust whilst greedy warlords and pirates feed at the dying carcass. My father and I will also feed, carving out our own empire."

"For power?" she challenged.

"For peace:our own peace, Fable. Trulalis, our homeworld, we will make it live again. We will revive its former glory and make it the capital of the arts and theater once more, safe from the prying hands of warmongers and politicians. Artists and actors will be free to perform any play they like, sing any song, without fear of reprisal from the governing tyrant."

"Then I will come with you, and I will share the price you pay."

Jaalib froze in place, glaring at her. "Have you heard nothing? The dark side is a demanding master. The Force derives its power from life:the crux of all living things. The dark side is just the opposite, Fable. There is no life, no breath:just emanations of darkness, figments and shadows of what life should be-a mockery. You see familiar faces, friends, experience sensations, but they are not real."

"But I am real, Jaalib. I know the paths to the dark side better than most. Not as well as you:but I know them. And I am real!" She took his hand and placed it over her heart, only now understanding what her mother had spoken to her. "Belonging and acceptance lie where your heart is; and your heart is where you belong. I am no emanation of darkness, no shadow, Jaalib."

"What will the Alliance say?"

"Nothing. I'll exchange myself for the Garosian hostages. That Imperial Moff you mentioned, I'm sure he'd rather have the captain of an Alliance Special Ops team rather than a bunch of civilians anyway."

"The hostages are already with your Alliance leaders."

"You gave them up? Knowing the Alliance could hold you, with no bargaining?"

"Nothing could have kept me from staying with you," he smiled sheepishly.

Fable hopped down from the med-cot, lightly brushing by Jaalib as she made her way to the med-lab computer. Within moments, she had the console open, wires, and communications lines arrayed between her fingers. She worked with deliberation and haste.

"What are you doing?" Jaalib asked, anxiously watching the door.

"Calling an old friend. I'm going to get you out of this base."

"Is that wise?"

"I'm the leader of the Harrier Infiltration Team, anything is possible, especially under the noses of our own people."

Jaalib frowned. "I didn't say you couldn't do it. I've more than seen the results of your tenacity; I asked if it was wise. These are your people. Would you seriously cross them for me?"

"Didn't you cross your father for me?" she replied, without looking up from her task. "It cost you your freedom, and then some. I owe."

"If this is about evening debts, I would rather-"

"Look," Fable said, growling as a spark jumped from the wire and burned her fingers. "You saved my life, Jaalib." She glanced over her

shoulder at him, adding, “Saved me for the second time. I owe you this one. Besides, when you saved my life this time, you bought the package. I’m going with you.”

“Fable-“

She held her hand out to him, silencing him with a simple dismissive gesture as she hovered over the jury-rigged net of wires. “Deke, come in, Deke.”

“Capt’n,” an excited voice cried over the static-charged comlink. “You’re awake at last. I’ll be right down.”

“No, Deke, I need you to stay right there and wait for me. Get the Prodigal’s main engines on line. We’re leaving.”

“Are you sure? You took a hard hit this time, capt’n. No need to rush into another mission, especially since your Jedi friend is on base. Let’s wait until Admiral Pardis disposes of Brandl, then we can blast off onto our next adventure.”

Fable bowed her head, stifling a laugh as Jaalib chuckled at the remark. “I can’t let that happen, Deke. I-,” she faltered. “I owe him.”

“Oh,” came the chided reply. “He’s there, isn’t it?” A slew of Socorran curses followed, translating over the frequencies as the Socorran realized his mistake. After a moment of grumbling, his hoarse voice softened. “What do you need me to do?”

“Get the ship ready-“

Abruptly, an alarm sounded within the Rebel garrison, temporarily drowning out Fable’s voice. “Deke?”

“Hold on.” He swore another vehement curse. “I’ve been reading Imperial encrypted codes so long it’s hard to read the Rebel codes anymore. Can’t tell what’s got the natives restless, Captain. Something’s going on. Whatever it is:it might be a great time for a distraction. I’ll have the ship primed and ready when you get here.”

“We’re on our way, Deke.”

“Capt’n, they posted guards. Watch yourself. If you must take them, take them out easy. Deke, out.”

“Guards.” She turned to Jaalib, her heart racing in time to the alarm klaxon. “I don’t want anybody killed.”

“As you wish.” He nodded to the door as the blast portal slid open and two youthful-looking Rebel guards stepped into the room. Weapons at the ready, the sentries raised their rifles, and then paused at the sight of Jaalib. Brandl simply squeezed his fingers together, his hand trembling slightly, and the two guards fell to the floor unmoving.

“Asleep?” Fable asked, checking the men first for a pulse.

“If you want to call it that.” Jaalib stepped over them, seeing his personal possessions on a wall unit across the corridor. “They’ll wake up with no more than a headache.” He carefully glanced outside into the hallway.

“What about those?” Fable asked, taking a blaster and holster from one of the guards. She glanced at the shackles.

“Leave them for appearances,” Jaalib suggested. “If we’re caught, there will be less explaining to do. The two of them stepped into the dimly lit corridor, awash with red alarm screens.

Dodging security patrols at regular intervals, Fable led Jaalib through the inner workings of the Rebel base. The majority of the personnel was inside or headed toward the landing bays to assist with the departure of pilots and ships. Pausing behind a repulsorlift truck of foodstuffs and supplies, she overheard the driver mention the arrival of four Imperial Destroyers within orbit of the planet. As she turned to Jaalib, she found the Jedi lost in a deep trance-like state, his face at peace. He opened his eyes at her touch, the look of serious concern confirming all of her suspicions. “Your father?”

“He senses that I am here. He will offer terms for my release, but only once. Then.”

He bowed his head with a sigh, and then looked about him. “I saw what forces you have here, Fable. This base and its resources were little match against just my command Destroyer and its sister ship. Now there will be four. My father won’t be so accommodating. It will be a massacre-with us in the midst of it.”

Fable felt her heart pounding inside her throat, her chest tightening in an attempt to restrain it. A strange popping noise resounded through the docking bay, a familiar sound of engines burning off debris. It was the distinctive sound of sand, specifically Socorran sand, being fed through repulsor engines. The unique chemical properties of the sand caused a strange popping reverberation that was quite popular among Socorran airspeeder pilots, swoopchase racers, as well as a certain member of the Harrier Infiltration team, who kept handfuls of the sand in case of emergencies.

Activating the comlink that she had taken from one of the guards, Fable changed the frequency and opened the channel. “Deke?”

“You’re busted, capt’n,” Deke whispered into the mic. “Med techs discovered those unconscious guards in your room, as well as you and your missing companion. They think Brandl has you prisoner somewhere in the base. Any unassigned personnel are now scouring the base looking for you and they have orders to shoot first and question the body later.”

“So much for infiltrating your own base,” Jaalib said with a hint of humor. He shook his shoulders and the shackles fell from his wrists with a noncommittal rattle as they hit the floor.

“Welcome to my world:Harrier Infiltration Team-if the mission can go bad, it will. This is how it usually goes.” She rolled her eyes, exasperated. “There’s only one thing to do.”

Jaalib smiled. “Now I start to worry.”

Fable scanned the docking bay, searching among the numerous faces until she saw him, Admiral Pardis. Dressed in a flight suit and speaking from the cockpit of his A-wing fighter, he was addressing the Rebel pilots arrayed about him. When Fable walked toward him, her presence brought an instant hush over the docking bay. Only the sound of launching fighters reverberated in the close confines. “Hold your fire!” she screamed as every blaster in the bay turned on Jaalib, who stood where she had left him, by a crowded repair bay.

“Admiral Pardis, I’m not prisoner, never was one.” Fable met Pardis’ eye with coolness, almost defiant. A legendary fighter pilot, Pardis was known for his gruff opinions and off-handed remarks. As a legend, he commanded respect, but his own judgments were reserved and distant, except for the more talented soldiers under his command hierarchy.

“Explain yourself, Captain Astin. Two of my men were found unconscious in your med room. Are you responsible?”

“In part, Admiral. I was taking him back to his people. Those four incoming destroyers are Protectorate ships led by Brandl’s father, Lord Adalric Brandl. They only want one thing-him. One man is not worth the slaughter that will follow if we try to keep him as our prisoner.”

“Admiral,” said a tech, “we have an incoming transmission.”

Ignoring the tech, Pardis said, “We caught him. We keep him. Besides, Ackbar’s reinforcement ships will arrive in less than an hour to support us.”

“In less than an hour, Admiral Ackbar won’t need to bother with support ships. All he’ll need to send is a recovery team - to recover the bodies.”

“Captain Astin-“

“Admiral, the transmission,” the tech said urgently.

Fable stood her ground. “Let him go, Admiral, we stand to gain much more-“

“Gain:gain what:another Emperor!” He jumped down from the nose of the fighter, storming toward her with fire in his slate-gray eyes.

“Admiral, sir, with all due respect,” whispered the tech,” the Protectorate is trying to initiate contact. Sir-” He fell immediately silent at the admiral’s furious gestures.

“While the battle still wages in all corners of the galaxy, Admiral Pardis, the war is over,” Fable said. “The Empire is fallen and the Emperor is dead. Militant groups such as the Protectorate are rising, and we can either unite with them to bring peace to the galaxy or spend the next decade fighting them, wiping out one after the other, while two others rise in their place.” She sighed, looking away from him. “Just as the Empire hunted us down. And like the Empire, we can keep hunting these renegade groups until one of them gathers enough momentum to wipe us out.” Fable sighed again and took a deep breath. “I know how this sounds, sir, but you have to trust my judgment. Lord Brandl and his father have broken ties with the Empire, long ago, and they have worked against the Empire at every juncture. You’ve read my reports. Our intelligence teams have confirmed this.”

“But the Protectorate has also attacked the Alliance as well, weakening our forces.”

“No more so than those pirates we encountered in the Yavin sector last week. Here’s our chance to make the first of what promises to be a powerful allegiance.”

“Admiral Pardis?” The tech’s voice wavered on several notes of fear. “They’re powering up their weapons systems-“

“And who will make certain they remain allies, Captain Astin?” Pardis questioned. “Can they be trusted? These abominations! They are ke’dem, Fable, condemned men. Abominations of everything the Jedi once held sacred. Surely you can see through-“

“Sir, their weapons’ batteries will be within medium range in-“

“I’ll make certain their loyalty remains steadfast,” Fable said, with a shuddering breath. “I’m going with him. I-” she steeled herself, “I love him.”

The reaction to her statement was instant and spread through the bay. Pardis’ face was pale as he took a step back. Waiting for the murmur to quiet, he turned to Jaalib. “And you,” he grumbled. “What do you have to say?”

Jaalib kept his eyes lowered, a thin smile veiling his lips. He walked toward Admiral Pardis, taking Fable’s hand in his. “The voice of the Protectorate conscience has spoken. And because I am the conscience of the Protectorate, I will insure that from this day forward, Protectorate ships will no longer move against Alliance operations, and will in time rally with Alliance forces to snuff out what remains of the Empire, so long as there is a profit in it.” He raised his head and smiled to stifle a protest from Fable. “There is a price for loyalty, dear Fable, most of my troops are mercenaries. It has been my ambition to encourage them with bounty rather than fear. So long as they are well fed and happy, they remain a formidable force that even the Empire has difficulty circumventing.”

An explosion rattled the underground hangar as a laser barrage erupted on the perimeter of the base. Jaalib grinned, shaking his head. “In all his years, with all his wisdom, my father still lacks the one thing every father needs-patience.”

Righting himself, Admiral Pardis looked at Fable, his gray eyes intense. “Are you certain you’re doing the right thing, Captain Astin?”

Fable backed away from him, finding comfort in Jaalib’s shadow and nodded. Confidently, she smiled up at Jaalib, then at Pardis. “I know I am.”

Pardis sighed deeply, and motioned to the communications tech. “Open a channel.” The tech officer, sweat rolling from his temples, quickly opened the channel on the garrison’s main frequency.

“-garrison, this is the Protectorate ship, Protectorate One, accompanied by support destroyers. You have one of our command personnel-“

“Bane,” Jaalib whispered, his low voice easily carrying over a frequency that no machine could mimic.

There was a pause in the transmission. “Jaalib:Lord Brandl, are you well? “

“I am. I shall be returning to you shortly. Tell my father there is no longer a need for force here, these people are now our allies.”

“Understood. Shall I send a shuttle?”

“No need, Captain Astin’s ship, the Prodigal, will do.”

“I shall send immediate word of your arrival to your father. Werth, out.”

Jaalib turned to Pardis, a coy smile parting his lips. “You have made a wise choice, Admiral, and a powerful ally in the Protectorate.” He offered his hand in friendship.

“That remains to be seen,” Pardis replied. Hesitant, he took Jaalib’s hand and shook it firmly. “Where and when shall we dispatch our negotiations teams?”

“Captain Astin will contact you with the details. In the meanwhile, you and yours will find us in the Issor system on the planet Trualis where Alliance forces are welcomed. Come for a visit, and while there, perhaps we might treat you to a dramatic play and dinner.”

“Perhaps,” Pardis glanced at Fable, as if imploring her to reconsider her decision. “Stand down from alert status. Dockmaster, clear the fastest lane of traffic for the Prodigal’s departure. I have faith in you, girl,” he whispered in Fable’s ear. “I always have. If anyone can make this work, you can. Clear skies.”

Jaalib straightened his shoulders, walking beside Fable as they headed toward the docked YT-1300. “How slowly their trust comes.”

“You’ve done a lot of damage, Jaalib. Damage that will be a long time in repairing relationships.” She paused, staring at her ship and the pilot waiting at the ramp for her. “By all the moons of Nar Shadaa.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Deke. I wasn’t even thinking about Deke.” Heart again pounding in her throat, Fable swallowed pensively. “The Prodigal, the team-it’s his life. This is going to be harder than I imagined.” She stiffened as Jaalib took her hand. Squeezing his reassuring fingers, she walked up to the ramp of the ship. “Deke?”

The Socorran pursed his thick lips apprehensively, staring at his boots. “I heard, Capt’n. No need to explain.”

“About the Prodigal,” she bowed her head, “you’ve always been-“

“I was a mercenary once,” Deke said, looking passed her to Jaalib. “A member of the Black Bha’lir. I’m pretty good at sniffing out Imperial ambushes. I can outwit a few of their pilots-even the special ones. I can read Imperial code like Basic. I’m not much to look at first, but-“

Jaalib offered his hand to the Socorran, who accepted it without hesitation. “There is always a place for you. Now quickly, we have a warlord to meet. And a new plan of action to initiate”

Deke saluted. “Sounds like old times. Welcome aboard, Captain:and Commander.” Deke cued the YT-1300’s ramp to close as Jaalib led Fable onto the freighter.

Aboard the Protectorate I, the greeting was different, but no less intimidating. As she stood at the top of the Prodigal’s ramp looking around the massive docking bay, more than a thousand white armored troops jumped to attention, weapons poised in formal salute. Not bad for a bunch of mercenaries, she thought, as Jaalib gently took her arm and led her, no less regally than a queen, down into the ranks of his men. The officers lining the main corridor between the stormtroopers bowed curtly at their approach, forcing Fable to send a bemused glance over her shoulder to Deke, who walked behind them in a place of voluntary subservience.

Midway down the parade of uniforms, Bane awaited them, kneeling down on one knee. “Welcome aboard, My Lord.” He glanced briefly at Fable, an emotionless expression in his face. “Welcome, My Lady.”

“Welcome aboard, indeed,” said a familiar voice.

Fable struggled to stifle the shudder that coursed along her spine as Adalric Brandl approached them, dressed in his unassuming black robes. A petite young woman, a girl really, dressed in a lavish black gown accompanied him, staying close at his side, her raven black hair pulled back in a severe braid that hung at her pale shoulders. “Jaalib.” Adalric smiled, his eyes turning from his son to Fable. The left side of his face was still scarred, as Fable remembered it. A haunting reminder from a close encounter with a thermal detonator, an encounter that only a Jedi could have survived. Damaged in the blast, the left eye was yellowed and alien, seeming to have an eerie perception all its own.

“Fable,” Adalric greeted warmly, with open arms inviting her for an embrace. “Welcome home, daughter.”

Fable stepped forward, though reluctantly into the cool embrace, taking Adalric’s offered hand and accepting the kiss he bestowed upon it. Glancing over her shoulder at Jaalib, she felt her lungs grow tight for want of air. Her chest felt bruised, as it did after her fall from the cliff on Redcap. As she felt Adalric’s hand tighten on her own, she wondered what unspoken vow she had accepted, a pact that left her frightened and barely able to breathe.