

Star Wars

The New Jedi Order

Emissaries of the void

by Greg Keyes

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Chapter 2: Dark Tidings

"What a nice start to the day," Klin-Fa Gi commented, cutting her dark eyes at Uldir. Her sarcasm wasn't lost.

"At least we're alive," he said. "That was anything but a given last night."

Klin-Fa's mouth settled in a thin line. Uldir wondered if he would ever see the young Jedi smile. She was pale, her short brown hair matted and full of silt from the flood they had survived the night before, and the bump on her forehead had gone a shade of purple he'd heretofore seen only in certain nebulae. Still, he felt if she smiled, she'd be pretty.

Annoying, almost insufferable, but pretty.

"Yes, we're alive," she admitted. "Bravo. Terrific job. Now if you'll just take care of that search patrol and the í what? Eight enforcement fliers? Maybe I'll forget that if it weren't for you I wouldn't be in this mess at all."

That was a little too much. "CSA was chasing you before I ever laid eyes on you," Uldir said. "Without me they'd have you by now."

"Doubtful," Klin-Fa retorted. Then she sighed. "Also irrelevant. Do you have any weapons?"

"No. I lost the blaster." My hands were full saving you from drowning, he silently finished.

"At least I still have my lightsaber."

"Yeah," Uldir said, eyeing the ever-nearing search party coming down the arroyo toward the cave where Klin-Fa and he were hiding. "Look, I'll admit you're pretty handy with that thing, but against these odds í
"

"The Force can prevail against any odds," she insisted firmly. "Anyway, it's not like we have a choice. They'll find us soon enough. Unless you have a plan."

"I do, as a matter of fact. Sit tight until the rest of my outfit shows up. They're bound to be here soon. If you want to use the Force, try to project the thought that we're in a different direction."

Klin-Fa's mouth twisted as if she'd just chewed a sour thorn, but she eased her head in a reluctant half-nod. "That might work if even at this distance, I might be able to project a suggestion. But it won't fool that Yuuzhan Vong down there." She lifted her chin toward one of the members of the search party. Even from this distance, Uldir could make out the scars and tattoos that marked him as a member of the extragalactic invaders bent on conquering the galaxy if and doing a more than competent job of it so far.

"True," he admitted, "But he doesn't know where we are. He'll have to trust his local guides."

Klin-Fa grunted what he guessed was agreement, took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She reached out her arm, and the fingers of her right hand fluttered slightly. Uldir felt the Force in motion, which had the effect of deepening his frustration with the whole situation. He'd studied at the Jedi academy but left it a failure, having no natural aptitude for the Force. The most his training had left him with was a slight ability to sense Jedi when they worked with the Force, and what some would say was an uncommon sort of luck. Still, the experience had taught him something important if sometimes it didn't matter how hard you wanted something, you weren't going to get it. You lived with what you did have and took pride in your real assets, not the ones you wished you possessed. He'd thought he was over useless self-remonstration at his failure, and he had been. He really had if at least until Klin-Fa Gi had bounced off the center of his table in a local cantina, pursued by law enforcement officials of the Corporate Sector Authority. Her attitude had managed to wake the old resentment in him. Why did someone like her have such strong affinity with the Force, while he could only hear it whisper?

It wasn't fair, which made him even angrier, because he knew the universe wasn't fair.

But it ought to be balanced. That was what the Force was all about, right? And there was something very unbalanced about Klin-Fa Gi. When she had used the Force to cushion the crash of their atmospheric flier, he'd almost thought he sensed something dark.

Her eyes were still closed, and Uldir studied her. She didn't look evil, in her tattered yellow skirt and black leggings. She looked young and intent.

Ah, what do I know? Uldir asked himself. I couldn't tell a Sith from Master Yoda himself, not with my puny senses.

She'd said she was on a secret mission for Master Skywalker. He'd believe her until proven wrong. Anyway, she was Jedi, and Uldir's job was to rescue Jedi from the Yuuzhan Vong and their agents. He might not be able to use the Force, but no one had ever said he wasn't good at his job. There wasn't a better rescue pilot in the business.

Of course, right about now it would be nice to have something to pilot.

The group of searchers was pointing up the other side of the arroyo. He heard shouting, and then they broke into a trot.

"You did it," Uldir breathed.

"Yep," she said. "It won't fool them for long." She started forward, out of the cave mouth.

"Hang on," Uldir said, waving vaguely upward. "There're still the fliers to consider."

"You consider them. You're the pilot."

"No. We should wait on my people, or make some kind of plan."

She pushed a straggling lock of hair from her face. "Hey, you had a good idea, jets. Don't spoil it by thinking too much."

"Now, listen í hey!"

Too late. She'd already sprinted from the cover of the cave and was starting up the arroyo slope in the opposite direction in which she had sent the search party.

"Vaping Mofffs!" Uldir snarled, and did the only thing he could do, the thing he'd been doing from the start of this whole mess í he started after her.

He came over the lip of the ravine in time to see her vanish down into another one. Bonadan had lost most of its natural life forms to the brutal industrialization of the Corporate Sector, and without roots and rhizomes to hold them in check, erosion had fast furrowed the highland soils outside of the spaceport, peeled back their planetological history, and turned them into a badlands.

Somewhere, Uldir heard the whir of fliers, but he didn't see them. They were probably conducting some sort of grid search. They likely had satellite intelligence, too. The broken nature of the terrain gave them a chance, but only a small one.

He caught up to Klin-Fa Gi as she hit the bottom of the next ravine at a dead run. "Where do you think you're going?" He snapped, trying to keep his voice down and match her pace at the same time.

"Away," she said. "Away from the Vong."

He got it then. "You're scared of them. The Yuuzhan Vong."

"Scared? No. I'm scared of nothing. But my Jedi powers are useless against the Vong. If I fight, I might lose, and I can't afford that. The galaxy can't afford it. My mission cannot fail."

"Hey, I've dealt with Yuuzhan Vong before," Uldir chuffed. "They aren't invincible."

"It's great you feel that way. Why don't you go hold 'em off for me?"

"Maybe I'll just do that," Uldir snapped. "It's better than i down!" He yanked her against the wall of the ravine, just as the shadow of a flier moved across their feet. The steep angle protected them, mostly, but Uldir still held his breath.

The shadow moved on.

"That was too close," he said. "Next pass we might not be so lucky."

"Fine," she said. "What do you think we ought to do? Your friends don't seem to be showing."

"I can signal them," he said, indicating his comlink.

"You're just now thinking of that?"

"No," Uldir said reluctantly. "I called them last night."

"Last night? They're taking their time."

"Our ship's in dry-dock. It might have taken them all night to get it out. Besides, it's not like I had exact coordinates to give them."

"Maybe you would have if you hadn't had the stupidity to fly into a sweeper storm," she reminded him.

"Me?" Uldir growled. "I was just trying to make the best of a bad situation, and you were no help. Maybe if you weren't so closed-mouth about what it is you're up to..."

"Uh-uh," she said. "I can't trust you."

"Not even now?"

"No."

"That's just great."

"Why don't you stop whining and call your shipmates?"

"I could do that, but those fliers would get a fix on us. If my friends aren't around, we'll only get caught faster."

Klin-Fa slowed to a halt and gave him a glance as hard as durasteel. "Fast or slow, makes no difference," she said. "Either your crew found some way out here or not. Either we'll get caught or we won't. What, do you have a cushy retirement planned?"

Uldir returned her glare, but she was right. He keyed on the comlink.

"This is catchhawk one," he said. "Catchhawks, do you copy?"

Static drizzled for a moment, then the voice of his second-in-command, Vega Sepen, answered him.

"I hear you boss-boy. You're still alive, I guess." There was nothing in the tough Corellian woman's tone that suggested she'd been worried about him.

"I'm in a bad spot, two, right between a supernova and a black hole. Did you manage to find some legs?"

"Ah... sort of," Vega replied.

"Great. Got a fix on me?"

"Sorry. Don't have that sort of equipment on board, I'm afraid." There was a background gabble he couldn't quite make out í Vega talking to someone else í and some sort of music. Then Vega's voice came back. "Vook thinks he can triangulate with our comlinks. Can you keep sending?"

"Sure," Uldir said. "Asyui-ln."

"Understood. We'll get you boss-boy, sit tight."

"What's that music?"

"Nothing."

"What in the Force are you flying, two?"

Vega didn't answer.

"If you keep sending, they'll be able to track us," Klin-Fa snapped.

"Shh." He laid the comlink under a nearby rock. "I know that."

"But your friends í "

"My friends know that asyui-ln means 'not' in Dug." Uldir replied. "They'll look in a radius around the signal. Now, come on."

"Wait," she said. In the next instant, she bounded up the side of the ravine, just as Uldir noticed the sound of the flier returning. Klin-Fa reached the lip of the chasm as the patrol vessel came over. Blaster

fire kicked up dust around her feet, but she dodged lightly, and her lightsaber was suddenly on. In the next instant it was a whirling disk of brilliance, shearing through the nose of the flier. More blaster fire from somewhere else made a spectral bridge over the arroyo top, but by then, Klin-Fa had dropped back below the rim, the deadly lightsaber returning to her hand and extinguished.

"Carbon flush!" Uldir breathed. Then she was rushing past him.

"Move!" She shouted.

They ran down the arroyo, cutting over a low rise into the next, then doubling back.

Right into a patrol, four humans with enforcement blasters and a Yuuzhan Vong. They were less than two meters away.

"Hey!" One of the humans shouted.

Uldir didn't think. He hurled himself low and hard at one of the humans, feeling the heat of blaster fire scorch his back. He hit the man in the waist and they went down. Uldir hoped the others would be reluctant to shoot for fear of hitting their comrade. The two men rolled, and then rolled some more as Uldir suddenly realized that his mad tackle had taken them down yet another slope. Rocks dug angrily at his back as his opponent tried, with moderate success, to club him with the butt of his blaster. Fortunately, the blows were glancing, and by the time they fetched against a stone large enough to stop them, Uldir had managed to get one of his hands free for a sharp uppercut. He felt teeth snap together, and the officer went limp.

Blaster fire cracked the stone that had arrested them. Frantically, Uldir dove away, at the same time searching for the officer's weapon. He found it a meter away, rolled and caught it up, then trained it back up the slope. Another shot dug into the sand centimeters from his knee. Uldir fired, missed, scrambled to his feet and ran up the slope shooting. His third shot hit an officer in the sternum and kicked him back out of sight.

By the time he reached Klin-Fa, she had taken out the remaining officers and was in a swirl of motion with the Yuuzhan Vong. Like all of his kind, the warrior disdained the use of mechanical contrivances; he fought with an amphistaff, a living weapon that resembled a snake, at turns rigid and sharp and flexible and whip-like. Klin-Fa was having a hard time countering the furious, complex attack. Uldir raised his blaster to change the odds.

At the same moment, another flier came over the ridge, blasters pumping. Swearing an Ettian curse he'd never quite understood but liked the sound of, Uldir dodged into cover behind a shelf of rock and fired back. His bolt ricocheted off of the side of the flier, and the answering shots pulverized his shelter. He could see the pilot grinning through the windscreen. Snarling, he broke out at a run, firing as he went. He couldn't get a proper bead, and his shots all either went wide or glanced

off the tough metal of the flier. The pilot was having no such trouble aiming i hovering, his front-mounted blasters followed Uldir like a pair of fiery footsteps, getting closer. One bolt hit so close it caused him to stumble, and in a strange moment the world seemed to go entirely still. Uldir felt his finger depress the trigger a final time, and then the weapon went flying from his hand as his face smacked against the ground. He spat out the taste of blood and metallic dirt, waiting for the inevitable.

The inevitable didn't come. Warily he glanced back up. The flier was still hovering, but the pilot wasn't smiling anymore i he was slumped sideways in his seat, and there was a neat hole in the windscreen.

"Wow," Uldir breathed. Sometimes his luck surprised even him. He picked up the blaster and turned toward the sounds of combat, fearing what he would see.

Klin-Fa was in his line of fire, but as he watched, she ducked beneath the whipping amphistaff and swept her leg at the Yuuzhan Vong warrior's foot. She clipped it, putting him slightly off-balance. He took a long retreat to correct for it, but Klin-Fa leapt high into the air, flipped over her opponent's head, and struck down at the same time. To his credit, the warrior caught the blow in a behind-the-back parry and spun to riposte. Klin-Fa, however, landed in a split, and the blow whistled over her head as she drew her blazing weapon through the Vong's midsection. He gaped and fell in two cauterized halves.

He still took another swing at her, but the Jedi was back on her feet, dancing out of range.

"For Yabeley," she snarled. Uldir wondered who or what Yabeley was.

The Yuuzhan Vong watched her go, black eyes glittering with hatred.

"Jeedai," he growled. "Your days are drawing to a close."

"Not as quickly as yours," she said. Her voice was colder than night on the dark side of an airless moon.

The Yuuzhan Vong spat blood. "Your blow was skilled," he said. "I salute you. But you will die. All of your kind will die. Even your own kind has turned against you."

Klin-Fa gestured contemptuously at the downed officers. "These cretins are not my kind," she said. "I don't claim kinship with anyone foolish enough to believe the Yuuzhan Vong will stop their conquest of our galaxy simply because they turn Jedi over to you."

The warrior smiled strangely. "It is not your galaxy," he said. "You have merely infested it for a time. We have come to end the infection, in the name of glorious Yun-Yuuzhan."

"Our galaxy," Klin-Fa repeated, firmly. But the Yuuzhan Vong did not hear her. His gaze had wandered beyond the stars.

Klin-Fa extinguished her saber and clipped it to her belt.

"Hey," Uldir said. "Nice moves. But we're not out of this yet. I hear more fliers coming."

"Let them come," Klin-Fa said, grimly.

They did, three of them, and soon Klin-Fa was acting as a living shield, deflecting bolts as Uldir tried to hit the fliers or their pilots at some critical point. These pilots didn't hover, however, but began spreading out to encircle them. When that was done, it would be all over. Klin-Fa couldn't block fire from every direction.

A bolt sang through her defenses and scorched Uldir's ear. Klin-Fa gasped as a second scored along her thigh, and the fliers tightened in for the kill. Uldir and Klin-Fa stood back-to-back.

"Thanks for trying," Klin-Fa said. It sounded as if she really meant it.

"No problem," Uldir replied. "It's my job." He wanted to say something else, but what it was exactly eluded him. He fired four shots at the nearest flier instead.

"Do you hear music?" Klin-Fa asked.

"Now that you mention it, yeah. I thought I was losing it." Two fliers had him firmly in their sights, now. He could try and dodge, but that would leave the Jedi's back unguarded. He repressed the urge to close his eyes. He'd watch death come for him, thank you, and stare it down until the last second.

Except that the flier didn't fire. Instead, it was forced to turn at a barrage of small-arms fire sizzling against its hull. In fact, all of the fliers were under attack. One didn't turn fast enough to meet the new threat, and lost its aft stabilizer and repulsorlifts within a few heartbeats of one another. It wobbled and then dropped like a stone. One of the others banked up and caught it in the belly, dropped low and limped away smoking. Uldir fired after it, as something rather strange showed itself over the edge of the arroyo.

A pair of gigantic eyes was staring down at them, set into a head at least a meter-and-a-half wide. From its gaping mouth, music was blaring. Stranger still, a figure seemed to be dancing on the head, spinning out streamers of bright green light.

"What in í " he began, before it finally started making a twisted sense as he noticed the light was not streaking off randomly but harassing the remaining flier. The dancer was a Dug, balanced on one forepaw and firing blasters with his other three hand-feet.

"It's Leafth!" he shouted.

A thicker series of bolts joined the Dug's wild firefight with the flier, and Uldir made out a platinum-haired woman standing beside the head, which he could now see was mounted on some sort of hover-platform. That was Vega and her blaster rifle.

"Come on!" Uldir told Klin-Fa.

"That's your crack team of rescue pilots?" She asked, skeptically.

"You better believe it."

"Why are they riding on exec Lounha's head?"

"I'm sure they have a good explanation," he replied.

The two ran through a decreasing volume of skyborn fire until they reached the floater. Vega gave Uldir a hand up without looking at him, at the same time stitching red bursts through the windscreen of the last flier still in sight. It went down, leaving a blaze of flame across the far wall of the canyon.

"That's three to your two," she called up to Leaf.

"Hurr. Human luck," the Dug snarled down. "Next time í "

Vega ignored her companion. "Vook," she called into the gigantic head. "We've got the boss. Now get us out of here."

"Doing!" The Duro called.

At an excruciatingly slow speed, the floater began drifting back toward the spaceport.

"This is insane," Klin-Fa said. "Where are we going on this thing?"

"Farther than you were going on foot," Vega said, dryly. "You okay, boss? "

"I'm fine," Uldir replied. "But she has a point. One of the fliers got away, and besides, they must be in contact with their headquarters. We can't fight off another half-dozen fliers on this thing, let alone something bigger. "

"Hey, we did the best we could," Vega said. "This was the only thing we could find on short notice."

Despite himself, Uldir cracked a grin. "A float from the parade? You were always good at improvising, Vega, I'll give you that."

"You better believe it," Vega replied. "And I'm not done yet."

"What's that mean?"

"I got a call from Uvee right before we picked you up. He finally got the ship out of dry-dock. It's on the way."

"Uvee?" Klin-Fa asked. "Another one of your aces?"

"Our astromech," Uldir clarified.

"An astromech flying a ship? Alone?"

"He's not your ordinary droid," Uldir replied.

"No," Klin-Fa said. "I don't expect he would be."

* * *

The No Luck Required arrived about ten minutes later, flying a little erratically and landing with a bump that set Uldir's teeth on edge. He hadn't wanted to say so in front of the Jedi, but he'd had his own doubts about whether he would ever see his ship again after Vega's casual announcement i though he'd modified the UV-002 droid to fly the ship in emergencies, the reality was pure theory until now.

Though the landing was a little rough, the droid seemed to have done okay, and it was good to see the rugged transport. They abandoned the floater and crowded up the landing ramp. Uldir went straight to the controls, where the readout was scrolling, Uvee talking to him from his mooring station.

Hi boss-boy. How did I do? the droid translator read.

"You did great, Uvee," Uldir said, making a mental note to keep Vega away from the astromech in the future. He hated being called "boss-boy." "Perfect."

"Shall I take us to orbit?"

"That's okay," Uldir quickly replied. "Take a rest. I'll get us out."

"Fliers, four clicks," Vook said, from tactical.

"That's just fine," Uldir said. "They can chew our exhaust." He punched in the drive, turned the ship skyward, and left Bonadan in a bloom of ions.

Only much later i two jumps from Bonadan i did he relax, and then not much.

"We still don't have shields," he noticed.

"No," Vook said. "And the hyperdrive is i undependable. The repairs were not completed."

Uldir blew out a breath and nodded. "Well, you take what you get," he said. "At least we have some drive capability. Where can we set down to finish repairs?"

"Well, there's Shelter," Vega said. "That's close."

"Yeah. And in the Maw. I won't try that run with a testy hyperdrive."

"Good point. How about Mon Calamari?"

"Sounds prudent."

"No!" Klin-Fa interrupted. "We can't spare the time for that. You have to plot a course for Wayland, immediately."

"Wayland?" Uldir said. "What in blazes are you talking about?"

"And just exactly who are you?" Vega asked, her gaze tracing uncharitably up the Jedi's figure.

"And what in space makes you think you can tell us what to do?" Leafth added, edging close to her, his teeth barred.

Klin-Fa tensed, but otherwise ignored the threatening Dug.

"I suppose introductions are in order," Uldir allowed. "Everyone, meet Klin-Fa Gi. She's a Jedi, if you haven't figured that out already. Klin-Fa, this is my crew í Vega Sepen, Leafth, and Vook Gehu."

Vega nodded her platinum tresses curtly. Leafth continued to growl, and Vook turned his flat face toward her and nodded absently. "Pleased to meet you," the Duro said. He didn't sound pleased í he sounded doleful. Vook always sounded doleful.

Klin-Fa wasn't distracted. "I have to get to Wayland," she said.

"It's important."

Uldir grinned sardonically. "But you won't tell me why."

"I can't. I've explained that."

"You want me to space her, boss?" Leafth asked, in a helpful tone.

"Yes," Uldir returned, "but you'd better not. Klin-Fa, Wayland is in Yuuzhan Vong occupied space, in case you haven't heard. I'm not taking a ship in this condition there unless I have ample reason. You've given me no such reason."

"I'm on a mission for Master Skywalker. That should be reason enough."

"Sure. If I believed you, but I'm not sure I do. Trust goes both ways. You want me to take you to Wayland? Tell me why."

"I can't."

"Fine. Then we're going to Mon Calamari. Meanwhile I'll try to contact Master Skywalker and see what he has to say about this."

"You're making a mistake."

"I've been making mistakes since the moment I first saw you. Why should things be different now?"

"Because the fate of the galaxy depends on what we do now, that's why. There's no time to lose."

"So you say," Uldir said, shrugging.

Klin-Fa's face registered barely concealed fury, and again Uldir felt something a little troubling in her presence. The feeling faded as she composed herself and vanished when she quirked a little grin, the first he had seen. He was right if it made her prettier.

"I guess I wouldn't believe me, either," she admitted, reluctantly. "Fine. When you contact Master Skywalker, he'll confirm what I've said. But you ought to do it quickly."

Uldir raised his eyebrows in surprise. "That sounds almost too reasonable."

She shrugged. "What choice do you leave me? I'm at your mercy."

"Great," Uldir said. He glanced at his filthy clothes. "I'm glad that's settled. We've got a long hyperspace jump if I for one, could use a 'fresher. You could probably do with the same."

"I suppose," she conceded.

"You can go first. Vega will find you a change of clothes."

* * *

An hour later, feeling considerably more human, Uldir met with Klin-Fa again in the ship's small lounge. She looked smaller in one of Vega's black jumpsuits, and younger, too.

"Maybe we got off on the wrong foot," Uldir said. He stuck out his hand. "I'm Uldir Lockett. Pleased to meet you."

She grinned wryly and took his hand. "Pleasure," she said.

"You'd better watch that," he said.

"What?"

"That's twice now you've smiled. It might ruin your look."

"If you'd been through what I have..." she began, but trailed off, her gaze going muddy, lost in a past that Uldir knew nothing about.

"Yeah," he said. "Well, if you ever feel like talking about it, I'm a good listener."

"Right. The soul of concern." She shifted. "So this is a Jedi rescue ship."

"Yep. My little kingdom."

"Looks kind of beat up."

"Well, we don't like to attract attention. But she can do the job, when she's in good condition."

"You're proud of her," Klin-Fa noticed.

"Sure. And of my crew. You won't find better."

"I don't deny the four of you seem to get through, somehow."

Uldir couldn't tell if that was a compliment or not. He let it pass.

"Want a look around?" He asked.

"Well, you've seen one transport..."

"Nah. C'mon."

"Shouldn't you be trying to contact Master Skywalker?" She asked.

"Vega's working on that. We have to bounce the signal around a good bit and put it through several layers of encryption. Takes time."

"Not too much, I hope."

"No. I expect an answer in an hour or so."

She sighed. "Fine. I guess I'll take that tour."

"Okay," he stood and started leading her around. "The chassis is an old Corellian medium transport," he explained, "but we've made a few changes."

He took her up the shaft into the turbolaser turret.

"Nice," she said, when she saw the armaments.

"Turbolaser is state-of-the-art," he replied. "Cesium vapor, and packs a real mean punch. We can also target proton torps from here, as well as from the central panel. And there's an extra layer of plating."

"But just one turret?"

"Yep. I sacrificed the other for something better."

"What's that?"

"The best part. Come back up."

She followed him to an access hatch.

"This used to be the cargo hold," he explained, keying the hatch open. "Between that and the missing second turret, we made room for these."

He finally had the pleasure of seeing her surprised.

"Starfighters!" She breathed.

"Yep," Uldir said, gesturing at the sleek little ships. There were four of them, nestled in a rotating frame. "We can only launch one at a time, but we can still get them all out in under a minute, if we have to."

"A-wings," she noted, sounding somehow disappointed.

"You know your ships," Uldir said. "They came out of the shipyards as A- wings. Now they're a little something special í each has room for a passenger and emergency medical equipment. Sometimes we have to get into tighter places than the No Luck Required can go."

"You use them to extract Jedi?"

"And place them. We're not only in the rescue business í sometimes we ferry Jedi into Yuuzhan Vong space, when a mission calls for it."

"Interesting. Things have changed a little since I've been away."

"I guess so."

"I see you sacrificed the escape pods, too," she mused. "But I suppose the A-wings can serve the same purpose."

"Yeah. It's never come to that, but that's part of the plan. Number one there is even hyperspace capable, so if we have to split the mission or send for help, we've got the extra legs to do it."

"Fine," she said. "You've impressed me." As if to belie that, she yawned. "Now, with all of this, do you have a spare bunk? I haven't slept in í well, I guess a week. I think I'll take the rest of that hour to have a nap."

"No problem," Uldir said.

After showing her to her bunk, Uldir went back up to where Vega sat at the controls.

"Nice new friend you've got there," the Corellian commented.

Uldir nodded. "Not bad with a lightsaber."

"From what I saw, I'd say spectacular," Vega corrected. "Cute, too."

"That I hadn't noticed."

"No, of course not. You just instantly recognized her as Jedi in need of aid and chased after her."

"I thought she was a thief," Uldir said, defensively. "I thought I'd help the local authorities catch her. I didn't know they were the bad guys."

"Yeah," Vega said. "Speaking of which, I think we can mark the whole Corporate Sector down as unfriendly now. I did some checking up on that new exec, the one whose head we borrowed. From what I was able to glean, I'm guessing he's been in secret negotiations with the Yuuzhan Vong for two weeks now."

"Given that there was a Vong in the search party, that's not surprising. And Klin-Fa said there was an executor on Bonadan."

"Well, things just keep getting better and better don't they?"

"Just makes things more interesting," Uldir said.

"You can say that again. And you probably will. There's more hot systems every day."

"It'll turn around, eventually," Uldir said. "Now that Master Skywalker has plans in motion."

"You put an awful lot of faith in him," Vega said.

"It's not faith. Faith is something you accept without proof. Master Skywalker and the Jedi have proven themselves time and again. It's the government of the New Republic that's gumming things up."

"Don't be too sure," Vega said. "The Jedi are all well and good, but they aren't invincible." Her tone became somehow more cautious and more leading. He knew Vega, and knew she was about to make a point of some sort, probably an unpleasant one.

"What?" He said.

"The Jedi. If even one of them turns to the dark side, we could have bigger troubles than the Yuuzhan Vong."

"That's true, but I don't think it's likely." He tilted his head in suspicion. "You have a reason for bringing this up?"

"Sure. Just how much do you know about this Klin-Fa Gi?"

He hesitated.

"Well?"

"It's just í I got some disquieting feelings from her, back on Bonadan."

"What do you mean?"

Uldir frowned. "I'm not sure. Probably nothing."

Vega twisted her mouth. "Look," she said, "I know you've got a little of this Force thing í ""Very little. What I have isn't dependable."

"Maybe not. But don't let a pretty face distract you from what it might be telling you."

He turned to her seriously. "What are you saying?"

"Well, I got a feeling from her, too. Not one of your mystical ones í just the suspicion that something doesn't add up about her. And Wayland í why Wayland? I can think of only two possibilities, right off hand, to explain why a Jedi would want to go to Wayland."

"I haven't had time to think about it all," Uldir admitted. "Fill me in."

"Wayland is where Emperor Palpatine's secret toy-box was. All kinds of nasty dark side things on Wayland."

"Not anymore," Uldir said.

"Wrong. I've read the reports. Some of the Emperor's devices are still there í buried, yes, but still there."

"Buried under a mountain," Uldir corrected.

"Yes. But the Yuuzhan Vong are there now, and they have a way of digging things up, don't they?"

Uldir acknowledged that with a tilt of his head. "But the Yuuzhan Vong don't exist in the Force," he pointed out. "Even if they found some kind of dark side weapon, they wouldn't be able to use it."

"Probably not í but they might be able to learn something about the Jedi that will be of use to them." she held up a finger. "So that's one possibility í they've studied the Emperor's old tech and are developing some sort of anti-Jedi weapon. Our new friend learned of this somehow and is off to foil their evil plot."

"You mentioned two possibilities."

Vega unfolded a second finger. "The other possibility is that they've found something Klin-Fa Gi thinks she can use herself."

"You're saying she's gone dark."

"I'm saying she's angry. Even I can see that. And aren't you always telling me that anger is of the dark side?"

"I think she lost someone," Uldir said. "She mentioned a name, when she killed the Yuuzhan Vong warrior. And I'd be angry too, if my home planet was doing its level best to turn me over for sacrifice."

"Does the reason she's angry really matter? So she feels justified in whatever she's planning. Would that make it any better?"

"But if Master Skywalker ordered her to Wayland í "

"Well, that's the problem," Vega said. "He didn't."

"What?"

She tapped a readout. "This came in just before you did. Klin-Fa Gi was killed on Gyndine, or presumed so, two months ago. And Master Skywalker doesn't know anything about any mission to Wayland."

"Oh. Carbon flush."

"Yeah. You see."

"What does Master Skywalker want us to do?"

"Bring her in for debriefing, as soon as possible."

Uldir nodded wearily. "I guess that's what we'll do, then."

"Where is she now?"

"Taking a nap. Or at least í " he paused. "Does the air smell funny to you?"

Vega's eyes widened, just as Uldir felt his ears pop.

He turned quickly to his instruments. "Vaping Moff's! We're losing air pressure."

At that moment, the ship shuddered as if struck, and the lights went out. Cursing, Uldir brought emergency power online. "We've dropped out of hyperspace!" He said.

"Interdicted?"

"No. The drive failed."

"I bet it didn't just fail," Vega said.

"I bet you're right," he agreed. "Vega, get back there. Don't be afraid to shoot."

"It's too late," the Corellian told him.

But Uldir saw that, too. A-wing one was just crossing their field of view, under full acceleration. An instant later it vanished into hyperspace.

"Vook!" Uldir shouted. "Get that vector!"

"Got it, boss," the Duro's voice replied. "But we have our own troubles."

The air was getting really thin now. "She's opened us to space," Uldir growled. "That little í "

"And sabotaged the hyperdrive," the Duro added. "We aren't going anywhere, sir. We're stranded here."

"Nearest planet on slower-than-light?" Uldir asked, grimly.

"Two years away, sir. The stars are sparse out here."

"Like I said," Vega drawled. "Things just get better all the time."