

Star Wars

The New Jedi Order

Emissaries of the void

by Greg Keyes

#####

Chapter V : A Perilous Plan

As the "No Luck Required" tumbled laconically though the void, Vook Gehu watched the stars drift across his view, remembering a Duro maxim older than some species.

If a star should but blink, it would miss all of our history.

The stars did not care who won this war. They did not care if Vook was freeze-dried in vacuum or blasted into vapor. That he would die without companions did not trouble them.

Vook found an odd comfort in that.

He checked to make sure the emergency transponder was working properly. It was, pulsing a steady distress call. He hoped it would be answered soon, or this would all be moot.

He needn't have worried. Five minutes later, a response came, and Vook's blood seemed to drop to the temperature of surrounding space. He searched the stars a few more moments before he found the newcomer-an irregular darkness that was not a distant nebula, but something much nearer.

Something that-unlike the stars-did indeed take an interest in what happened to Vook.

In this, he took no comfort at all. His mind wandered back to the conversation-only an hour or so before-that had crashed him into this situation, and he sighed.

He answered the hail.

"This is Vook Gehu of the No Luck Required. I need help. The rest of the crew is dead, and I am injured. My sensor grid is down and my ship is badly damaged. I am in great need of assistance."

The comm unit sputtered and clucked, then spoke to him in a harsh, nasal baritone.

"You have found your assistance, infidel," the reply came. "I am Vintul Cat of the Yuuzhan Vong. Shut down all of your auxiliary systems and prepare to be boarded."

Vook vented another sigh and keyed the return. "Hello, Yuuzhan Vong," he said. "So runs my luck-I hoped to attract a friendly ship, but I see my gamble has failed."

"There is no luck," Qat replied. "There are only the gods and what they will."

"Yes? Then you may tell your gods I will not be boarded, Vintul Qat, not by you or any other of your despicable kind. I shall die before surrendering."

"By your own admission you have no sensors," Qat replied. "Your ship is losing atmosphere."

"My weapons are still on line," Vook replied. "And my reactor is damaged, yes. Indeed, in its condition it might well make a better weapon than a power source. Consider that, and come for me at your peril."

"My ship is full of captives," the Yuuzhan Vong said. "Some of your own kind. Should you manage to destroy it, you will kill many more infidels than glorious Yuuzhan Vong."

"Better they die than receive the fate you offer them," Vook said.

"In any event, it is moot," Qat snapped. "We are out of your range."

"For the time being," Vook replied. "Try and board me."

"I can be patient," Qat replied. "In a short time, your reactor will either go critical or fail. If it overloads, I'll watch you die. If it does not, I will take you then."

"Delude yourself if you wish," Vook muttered. "It makes no difference to me. You destroyed my planet and scattered my people. Do not think you will find me easy prey, no matter the condition of my ship."

Vintul Qat's only answer was a harsh laugh.

Vook closed his eyes, wishing it were an hour ago, when the boss was still with him.

Realspace was somehow always a surprise after the nothingness of hyperspace. The relativistic universe was never quite as Uldir remembered it, as if his mind protected itself from the absurdity of faster-than-light travel by distancing itself from the reality it had been formed to comprehend.

Whatever the cause, reversion was one of Uldir's greatest pleasures, even if the view was-from any other perspective-unimpressive.

But sometimes the show was better than all expectations, and for the crew and single passenger of the No Luck Required, this was one of those times.

From their entry above the system's elliptic plane, the primary was a blue-white jewel, a spark of electricity captured and made constant. But something had reached into the star and tugged out a streamer of glowing plasma, pulled it in an arc half a light year long before twisting it into a spiral that wound tighter and tighter before vanishing. Intersecting the spiral and girdling the blue pinprick was a vast, faintly glowing indigo torus.

His instruments and charts told him that the cause of the phenomenon was a black hole, sucking matter into the nowhere of its event horizon, the great wreath the stray hydrogen atoms that had escaped to orbit in the singularity's path, but the cause didn't matter. For a moment, beauty swept everything from Uldir's mind, including the absurdly dangerous business that had brought him and his companions to this unpopulated system along the Hydian Way.

'They aren't here,' Vega Sepen pronounced in that terribly certain way that meant "I told you so."

Uldir glanced at the platinum-haired Corellian, wondering if she felt anything beneath that tough exterior, if the wonder of the universe penetrated through those steely eyes to the person beneath.

Maybe. He thought he caught a glimpse of blue fire in them, not a reflection from without but a light from within.

At least that's what he imagined he perceived for about a nanosecond. In that instant, he saw Vega in a very different way. The angular plains of her face seemed softer-younger, though she hadn't yet seen her thirtieth standard year. He realized with a start that she was pretty, in a quirky way. Hadn't he ever noticed that before?

Then the moment was gone as if it was a quantum phenomenon, destroyed by observation.

"Boss?" Vega's voice became more insistent.

"What?"

"Where are you? I said they're not here. No sign of any Yuuzhan Vong vessels in the system."

"Our sensors aren't that good," Uldir said.

"Well, no, not if they're hiding. But this sector of space is completely under Yuuzhan Vong control, and they have nil reason to expect company. What with that black hole down there, and all of the attendant gravitational hoopla in this system, there are only a few places it makes

sense to drop out and plot the next jump. This is one of them-I've checked the others. Nothing."

"They'll be here," another feminine voice said.

Vega raised her eyebrows in the same way Uldir had once seen her do when she'd discovered a Barraken weed-scorpion stalking her. Then, the small forehead twitch had been quickly followed by a blaster rifle discharge. Uldir tensed, involuntarily.

The new speaker, Klin-Fa Gi, tensed too, her Jedi senses doubtless warning her of danger. Klin-Fa was small, with dark eyes and black hair hanging in bangs. Her eyes narrowed as if challenging Vega.

"Yeah?" Vega's voice was soft, but it was mynsilk wrapped around durasteel. "How do you know they haven't already been here and gone?"

"I would know," Klin-Fa replied.

"Ah, the infallible, inscrutable Jedi," Vega scoffed. "But I thought you couldn't feel the Yuuzhan Vong in the Force?"

"I can't," Klin-Fa said. "I feel Bey."

Uldir never liked it when the Klin-Fa said that name. He'd never met the fellow but was developing the opinion that he wasn't going to like him if he ever did.

"Good," Vega said. "Just find him on the sensors now, and you can contribute something useful."

"They'll be here. I feel it."

"Great," Vega said. She rolled her eyes.

Klin-Fa pressed her lips in a tight line and didn't reply. Uldir felt a momentary desire to defend the young Jedi. She'd changed out of the living Yuuzhan Vong cloaker she'd worn when she came aboard and was now dressed in a pair of Vook's red coveralls. They were too big for her, making her seem small and vulnerable.

Yeah, right, he reminded himself. Small and vulnerable enough to cut a Yuuzhan Vong warrior in half at the waist. He'd seen her do exactly that. Not to mention the grief she'd put his crew, his ship, and himself through-stranding them in the middle of nowhere, for instance. She was big trouble in a small package. Vega was right-he was crazy to trust her after all she'd done.

Still...

"Move out of the safe point," he told Vega, "and power down. I don't want them seeing us when they get here."

"When?" Vega asked skeptically.

"If," Uldir conceded. "And Vook, you and Uvee run diagnostics on the weapons systems and shields again. It was a minor miracle you managed to patch our girl up in the time you did-if we have a breather, I want to use it to bring our combat readiness to maximum."

"Well, that makes sense at least," Vega allowed. "How's this? We go find a Star Destroyer and come back. That should improve our chances a little. This isn't a warship we have here."

"We're not exactly defenseless, Vega," Uldir pointed out.

"And our target isn't a warship either," Klin-Fa added.

"Every Vong ship is a warship," Vega countered. "And it'll come escorted: "

Klin-Fa rolled her eyes. "We're talking about a Yuuzhan Vong slave transport traveling through secure Vong territory. The Yuuzhan Vong are proud-escort will be minimal, because they won't want to seem like cowards. Besides, when I infiltrated their data systems I noticed something interesting-one out of every three warships on duty in this sector has been relocated. It happened almost overnight."

Vega frowned. "That sounds like they're starting a new offensive. Now that's something worth knowing. Shouldn't we be reporting that instead of trying to rescue some old lover-boy of yours?"

Klin-Fa colored slightly. "That isn't what this is about. It's not about Bey, or me. Jedi fight, Jedi die. We know the risks. Bey knew the risks-but the secret he carries is crucial. And it's more important than any conventional Yuuzhan Vong offensive."

"Despite the fact that you don't know exactly what this hypothetical new weapon of theirs is," Vega said.

Klin-Fa crossed her arms and leaned against the bulkhead. "I know they believe it will all but end the New Republic's resistance to their invasion."

"Well, yes, that's what you say," Vega replied. "That and two hydrogen atoms will get you helium if you squeeze hard enough."

"That's enough," Uldir cut in. "This debate is over."

Vega looked surprised at his tone, and he realized he had been uncharacteristically harsh.

But Klin-Fa had blushed when Vega referred to Bey as her 'loverboy.' Uldir liked the missing Jedi less every second.

"Just..." he stopped, sighed. "Vega, I may be crazy, but I believe her. And I'm the captain, last I heard. We're doing this. I need your support now, not your dissent."

Vega's eyes widened. "Boss, just because I don't agree with you doesn't mean I'm not a hundred percent there for you. I am with you."

"Glad to hear it."

"I mean, even if were to think this were a bone-headed, irresponsible, absurdly dangerous gambit to salvage the remaining shreds of your masculinity. .."

"Point taken, Vega. You're with me. Now shut up."

"Yes, sir. Always eager to shut up."

"I'm with you too, captain," Vook's voice came over the intercom. "And we'll be ready to fight, I promise you." He sounded confident, for a change. Vook never sounded that way.

Vega noticed it too. "Is that really Vook?" She asked softly.

"I don't know," Uldir replied, muting the comm unit. "After that outburst of his yesterday-I'd better have a talk with him."

He found Vook in the turret, working at the turbolaser. He didn't look up as Uldir came in. His flat Duro face registered no emotion Uldir recognized.

"Vook, is there a problem?"

"No, sir. I'm adjusting the phase modulation for more efficient fire."

"That's great, but I wasn't talking about the turbolaser. I was talking about my mechanic."

"I'm fine, sir," Vook said, stiffly. "I can do my job."

"I'd never question your ability to do your job, Vook. I'm worried about your anger."

"The Yuuzhan Vong destroyed my homeworld," Vook said bluntly. "My people flew among the stars when most species in this galaxy were still subsisting on the fruits and bugs of their native forests. To be destroyed by the Yuuzhan Vong, by barbarians who don't even have brains to comprehend what they've done-" he broke off.

"No one expects you to have any love for the Yuuzhan Vong, Vook. No one expects you not to mourn your homeworld-"

"Yes. Mourn is what I do. Don't you think I know what you all think of me? Vook the mournful. Vook the always sad. Poor old Vook. Well, I'm tired of it. If my choice is to be between misery and anger, I'll take the anger, sir. It feels better."

"Those aren't the only two options," Uldir pointed out.

"Sir, with all due respect, you have no homeworld to lose. You wouldn't understand."

Uldir was silent for a moment.

"There was an arboretum on Bburru. Did you know it?"

Vook's brow wrinkled oddly. "Yes."

"I spent my fifth and my eleventh birthdays there. There was one tree in particular, a big olop, and if you sang near it, it would chime an accompaniment--"

"I remember the tree," Vook said. "It was a native of the homeworld, the last of its kind. They were trying to clone it when the Vong destroyed the city. Now it's lost forever."

"Yeah," Uldir said. "I'll miss it."

"Not as I will," the Duro replied.

"Probably not. That's not my point. I spent my fourth birthday on Coruscant. I spent my fifteenth on Yavin Four. You're right, Vook, I have no homeworld. My parents were traders and freighter pilots, and I grew up in the space lanes. This galaxy is my homeworld. Look what the Yuuzhan Vong have done to it"

Vook dropped his head and nodded slightly. "I understand."

"I know you do. I don't hurt more than you do Vook--that's a competition I can live without. But you can't turn inward and imagine that not all of us have lost something. And you can't give in to your anger. My Jedi training may have been a bust, but I know that much. Anger isn't good for anyone, Jedi or no. It just feels that way." Vook sighed. "There is logic in what you say. Logic ought to be comforting. It is not."

Uldir cocked his head quizzically. "Why now, Vook? Why, after all this time are your emotions just now getting the better of you?" Vook turned back to the turbolaser. "It's this Jedi woman. She's made me understand how little I actually do:"

"She said something to you?"

"No. But she acts. She takes the fight to the Vong. So do you."

"No I don't," Uldir averred. "I'm a rescue pilot. I became a rescue pilot because I didn't have what it took to be a Jedi, but I wanted to be like them--to help people in trouble. Jedi don't live to kill, Vook, not the good ones. They avoid it when they can. Sometimes they avoid it at the cost of their own lives. I passed up offers from half-a-dozen fighter squadrons because I like doing what I do. We've been in a lot of scrapes

the past week or so, but never because I wanted to attack the Yuuzhan Vong. Never because I wanted to kill one. I'm just trying to do my job-a job that would be impossible without you, by the way. We could never have escaped Wayland without your expertise, Vook. Who else could have fixed our hyperdrive with century-old junk? Why do you think I requested you for my crew?"

"You requested me?" The Duro sounded genuinely surprised.

"Of course. What did you think?"

"I thought-I mean no one else..."

"Vook, you're the best mechanic the service has. And I like you." Vook dropped his gaze to the deck, and then lifted it to meet Uldir's.

"Thank you, sir."

"Now..."

"Hey, boys," Vega's voice came over the intercom.

"What is it?"

"We've got company."

"Looks like your sweetheart was right after all," Vega said, as Uldir entered the cockpit. "It's late, but that's definitely a Yuuzhan Vong transport."

"Big," Leaf-the fourth member of the crew-grunted. The Dug scratched behind his ear with one of his foot-hands.

Uldir silently agreed. Irregular but vaguely lozenge-shaped, the transport looked to be half a kilometer long. Like all Yuuzhan Vong vessels, it gave Uldir the impression of some sort of thousand-legged sea creature, though it had no limbs in evidence.

"Minimal crew, though," Klin-Fa said. "I was on one just like it. Most of the space is reserved for captives."

"Escort?" Uldir asked.

"Four skips," Vega answered. "Nothing we can't handle."

"I don't like it," Uldir said. "It seems too easy."

"Easy?" Vega said. "Maybe if our goal was to blow it out of the sky. But we're aiming to capture that thing, remember? Without killing this Bey Gandan fellow or any of the other captives."

"Yeah," Uldir agreed. "That is the tricky part. But Klin-Fa has an idea."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Vega wondered.

"Follow her plan?" Leaft snarled. "I'd sooner milk a rancor."

"I don't think rancors produce milk," Vook commented over the intercom.

"Just listen to her," Uldir said. "Klin-Fa?"

The Jedi nodded, made a point of meeting Leaft's angry gaze, then cleared her throat.

"When I was on Wayland, I managed access to one of the Yuuzhan Vong data-storage modules, what they call a qahsa. That's how I discovered which ship Bey would be on and where it was going. I also had a look at the structural design of the ship. The outer hull doesn't have nerve endings, but the inner hull does. Breach it, and alarms go off everywhere."

"Okay," Vega said. "We knew that."

"Here's something you may not know. Near the dovin basal, the inner hull nerves are compromised."

"Compromised?" Uldir said.

"Yes. The dovin basals are creatures in their own right-they don't grow as a part of the ship but are nursed separately and then grafted on. But it's not a perfect symbiosis-the gravitic distortion of the dovin basal desensitizes the nerve clusters immediately adjacent to it. In warships or on any vessel where it's important to have a complete tactile net, the Vong compensate by implanting special nerve biots around the dovin basals that aren't confused by the gravitic anomaly. In transports like this, such a small vulnerability isn't worth the effort of amending." Leaft switched his scratching to his chin. "So there's a dead spot where we can breach the hull without them noticing. Great. What's that mean?"

"It means the boss really has gone out of his m-" Vega began, then caught Uldir's glare. "-gone out of his way to really think this plan through," she finished.

"So I have," Uldir said. "Here's what I have in mind. Vook? Are you listening? You're important to this."

Vook watched the Yuuzhan Vong vessel edging nearer. He keyed on the comlink. "I warned you!" He snapped. "Come no closer."

"The holy and terrible Yun Yuuzhan and all the gods know you will never be in a position to command me," Vintul Qat informed him.

Something hit the No Luck Required, then, hard. Vook cursed in Duro.

"Perhaps without your sensor grid you did not notice our escort," The Yuuzhan Vong commander said.

Vook allowed himself a thin smile. "Perhaps in your arrogance you did not notice that my ship is fully functional."

He flipped on the shields, launched a spread of concussion missiles, and kicked in the ion drive. "Uvee," he told the astromech droid, where it was patched into turbolaser, "Destroy those coralskippers. I will handle the transport."

Affirmative, the droid's reply scrolled across the translator.

"This is foolish," Vintul Cat warned. "What can you hope to accomplish?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Vook said, under his breath. But over the comlink he shouted, "For Duro! Death to the Yuuzhan Vong!"

"It's started," Uldir said, pointing to the sudden flashes of light across the interstellar night. "Klin-Fa-if you please, before they start maneuvering. We don't want to be standing next to the dovin basal when they turn it on."

"Got it." The Jedi's yellow blade strobed into existence and she began quickly hacking at the yorik coral hull they had tethered themselves to. Leaft pulled at the chunks as she cut them loose, sending them drifting off into space.

It took only minutes before Uldir felt the gentle pressure of atmosphere blowing out of the hole. A moment later it was large enough for them to enter.

Uldir stuck his head in.

Like the outside of the ship, the inside had the grown, organic look that came from actually being grown and organic. The walls glowed a pale yellowish green, though even as he watched the light began to fade as the absolute chill of space killed whatever creature created the luminescence.

Uldir pulled himself quickly through. "Hurry," he said. "They might not notice the hull breach, but pretty soon they'll figure out they're losing air. "

"They'll put it down to a laser strike," Klin-Fa said.

"I hope we aren't counting on that," Vega grumbled.

Pseudo-gravity pulled Uldir to the deck, which-though biotic-was already frozen harder than most metals. He saw that they stood in a long corridor that followed the curve of the outer hull. In either direction, membranes were dilating to close off the breached section.

He picked the nearest seal, only about three meters away, but before he could reach it, it had completed its job.

"What now?" Leaft grunted.

"I can cut it," Klin-Fa said.

"Right," Vega drawled. "Then the next section decompresses and seals off, we cut through that, and the next section decompressesno, they'll never guess we're coming."

"Watch and learn," the Jedi said. With the tip of her weapon, she cut a narrow horizontal line through the emergency bulkhead. Then she stepped forward and pushed through the flexible membrane.

"Hurry," she said.

Uldir went through last, and found it difficult, for the slit was now only half the size as when Klin-Fa cut it.

"It's alive, remember?" She said. "It heals quickly. No more decompression. They won't know we're here until we're nearly to our destinations. Maybe not even then, if they're really distracted by the battle outside."

Uldir noticed the barometer on his wrist array registered breathable pressure. He pushed up the visor on his pressure suit mask. The others did the same.

"Which way, Klin-Fa?"

She gestured up the corridor. "This way."

Now that they had opened their visors, Uldir could smell the ship. It wasn't unpleasant, exactly-a faint musk with hints of iodine and sulfur compounds. The bioluminescent whatever's were still alive in this section, and though it provided them enough light to navigate, the dimness was unsettling. Too many shadows, and in every one Uldir imagined a Yuuzhan Vong warrior bristling with weapons. But none of the shadows moved, and the corridor was silent save for the faint swish of clothing and shush of breath. Even their footfalls were silent, for the deck here-also still alive-flexed faintly beneath their feet. Klin-Fa passed several small corridors, and then stopped at a larger one.

"This leads to the auxiliary passage," she said. "Follow it until you reach a large, straight corridor. You can follow that up to their bridge."

"Which way when we get there?"

"Right. I think."

"You think?" Uldir said.

"Hey, I've gotten us this far."

"Right," he sighed. "Okay. Vega, you go with her to find the prisoners."

"See, this is another part of the plan I don't like," Vega said. "The whole splitting-up part where I have to trust my back to our oh-so-dependable Jedi pal here. Why don't we just all take the bridge and then worry about the prisoners?"

"Because the guards will kill them once they know they ship has been taken, that's why," Klin-Fa shot back. "Besides, the prisoners can help us fight. Especially Bey-he's a Jedi too, remember?"

"Yes," Uldir said, "An unarmed one, fighting enemies who don't exist in the Force."

"Boss-boy, you for this plan or not?" Vega asked. "I take orders from you, not from her."

"No, she's right. They will probably execute the captives once we've taken the bridge-if not before."

"If we take it, as opposed to standing here all day wagging mandibles," Leafth said.

"Right," Uldir said. "Come on, Leafth. Good luck, you two."

"Wait a moment," Klin-Fa said. "A word alone with you, captain?"

Uldir noticed Vega raising an eyebrow.

"What about?" He asked.

"Alone?"

"You can trust everyone here," Uldir replied. "I do. Just say whatever it is you wanted to say."

Klin-Fa sighed and stepped closer. "Okay. If that's the way you want it. I just wanted to thank you for trusting me, that's all. Whatever happens."

She was very near. All he could see were her eyes. He could feel her breath on his face, and something went funny in his chest.

And then she kissed him. It was just a brush on the lips, but it nearly knocked him off his feet.

Then she spun on her heel and started down the corridor.

"Brother," Vega said, her voice registering a mixture of impatience and disgust. She followed the Jedi, shaking her head.

"Hey..." Uldir began, but the two women had turned and were out of sight.

"That's one of the single most sickening things I've ever witnessed," Leafth said. "Thanks for ruining the rest of my day." He shuddered. "Humans."

"Hey, I didn't do anything!" Uldir protested.

"Right. You just stood there and took it."

Uldir scratched his head. "Yeah. I did, didn't I?"

"Come on," Leafth growled. "Now I really want to kill something."

This corridor was as empty and silent as the last, save for the occasional distant thud that testified that Vook and Uvee were still out there shooting. He hoped the Duro was okay; he and Uvee should be able to handle four coralskippers, and the transport's defenses were probably too slow to nail him. Still, so many things could go wrong...

The corridor took a hard turn to the left, just as Klin-Fa had said it would. The lack of guards and personnel were really starting to make Uldir nervous-he kept reminding himself that this was just a transport, and like his father's freighter, didn't need a large crew. Besides, the Yuuzhan Vong had spread themselves pretty thin in the last few months. Though they were technically at peace with the New Republic, they still had to control the planets they had taken-and they had taken a lot of planets. And if Klin-Fa was right, and they were gearing up for a military strike-shoot, maybe there weren't any warriors on this vessel at all.

He was just thinking that as he emerged into the auxiliary corridor and saw a Yuuzhan Vong. He never even got a chance to see what caste he-or she-was; Leafth snapped off shots from all three of his blasters nearly simultaneously, and the Vong went down, smoking.

"That might not have been a warrior, Leafth," Uldir said.

The Dug looked at him as if he had just suggested a nudist colony on Heth. "Boss-I don't care," Leafth said. "It's four of us against a whole ship. We stop to ask questions, we'll be alight meal for one of their ugly gods."

"True," Uldir said. "Still-"

He was interrupted by the whirr of thudbugs. Two Yuuzhan Vong-clearly warriors by their tattoos and facial mutilations-had just stepped from somewhere in front of them and released the deadly insect-weapons. Uldir turned sideways and fired his blaster. Leafth joined him, filling the corridor with a web of coherent light. One of the thud bugs struck Uldir a blow in the shoulder, but it was already carbonized and didn't hurt to speak of. The warriors rushed forward, raising amphistaffs. Blaster bolts sparked and ricocheted from Vonduun crab armor, but the

warriors weren't wearing masks. Uldir walked his blasts up the front of the lead Vong until he came to the face. Leafthit both knee joints of the other, sending him stumbling. He didn't fall, though, but kept coming, jerking his amphistaff up in an arc, then swinging down in a blow that would crush even Leafth's hard skull. Leafth coolly fired at point-blank range into the armpit thus exposed. Experience had taught that that was the most vulnerable point in such armor, and experience did not let the Dug down. The warrior collapsed, his weapon clattering away harmlessly. Leafth hopped up on the fallen body and whirled the blaster around his finger.

"Nice shooting," Uldir said.

"There's plenty more where that came from," the Dug said.

"That's good, because there's plenty more of them," Uldir noticed, firing down the corridor at another five warriors charging toward them.

"Good!" The Dug roared, and was suddenly off, holstering the blaster in his foot-hand and firing with the other two as he propelled himself along. Uldir followed more slowly, picking his shots, wishing the Dug had just a little more common sense and discipline. A thudbug was suddenly right in his face. He jerked to dodge, and almost did, but it grazed his forehead. Blood exploded from the wound, and he cursed, his shots going a wild as blood blinded his left eye and his depth perception was suddenly grossly impaired. Ahead, Leafth and the warriors were in hand-to-hand range; the Dug was bouncing in and around three of them. As Uldir watched, he leaped high over an arcing amphistaff and the head of its wielder, sending a blaster bolt straight down through the crown of the Yuuzhan Vong's skull, whooping as if completely mad.

The other two were still coming for Uldir. Trying to wipe blood from his eye, he nailed one in the head, but the other threw a thudbug. Uldir tried to shoot it but managed only to interpose the gun between the insect and himself. It struck the blaster and sent it skittering down the corridor. Howling in satisfaction, the warrior followed up, amphistaff held at the ready.

Uldir blinked once at the heavily armored warrior, then ran as fast as he could after his weapon.

The amphistaff relaxed, whipped out, wrapped around one of his ankles, and yanked Uldir off his feet. He went down, face and belly slapping into the deck. Stunned, he clawed at the organic surface, but a viselike grip closed on his neck and lifted him off of the floor, turning him. He kicked feebly at the air as the Yuuzhan Vong warrior's face came into view.

"Pray to your infidel Force," the warrior growled.

Over the warrior's shoulder, Uldir saw Leafth was still busy. Blaster bolts were flying, and the Dug was a small cyclone, but there he still had two enemies left. No help was coming from that quarter.

"Put me down, now, and you might walk away from this alive," Uldir advised.

The warrior's eyes widened. He laughed harshly, and then began to close the space between his fingers. The only thing stopping him was Uldir's neck, which didn't seem to be much of an impediment. Uldir wrenched at the Yuuzhan Vong's massive hands, to no avail. Or so he thought. But as the universe faded to black, the pressure suddenly let up. The warrior set him almost gently back on his feet, and then slowly toppled over. Uldir fell with him, noticing almost absently that the Yuuzhan Vong no longer had a head.

Leafth was bouncing down the corridor toward him, his remaining opponents prone and still. Uldir shook his head and stood groggily.

"You okay, Boss?" Leafth asked.

"Yeah. Thanks for the assist."

The Dug cocked his head. "What? What do you mean?"

"That one almost had me," he explained, gesturing at the headless warrior.

"Looks like you took pretty good care of him," Leafth observed.

Uldir frowned. "You didn't shoot?"

"Urr? Negative, captain."

That's when Uldir noticed the hole in the ceiling, and a corresponding charred area on the deck. A moment before the Yuuzhan Vong's head would have been on the line drawn between those points. Leafth followed his gaze.

"Vook must have gotten a shot through the hull," Uldir murmured. "He wasn't supposed to fire at the transport."

"You're kidding," Leafth said.

"It's the only thing I can think of."

"No." Leafth said. "Not in my universe. That's the craziest thing I ever heard of, even with your luck. I mean, I know he was the enemy, but that's just not fair."

"Well, it's not like I had anything to do with it," Uldir grunted, retrieving his blaster. Even as he said it, he had an uneasy, prickling feeling. His luck had always been strange and was frequently unlikely. Most people figured it had some thing to do with his Jedi training, but Uldir knew that couldn't be the case-he hadn't ever been able to lift even a pebble with the Force.

Still, he had to admit Leafth was right-this was ridiculous. And not something he had the leisure to ponder, anymore than he had the spare time to think about Klin-Fa's lips on his, and those eyes, so near his own...

No pondering.

"Come on," he said, "We've got work to do. That must be command and control up ahead."

Vook flinched as the blast he had intended for a coralskipper went wide, bending at a sharp angle as it passed near one of the small singularities the vessels generated to protect themselves, and punched through the transport's outer hull. He'd been trying to avoid actually damaging the vitals of the transport, since the others were aboard it. He took comfort in the statistical knowledge that the odds against one stray bolt hitting one of his friends were about the same as the blue-white star below him going nova in the next two minutes. But he didn't have too long to dwell on the improbable. He'd sent one of the four coralskippers whirling off to the Cenotaph of Joor, but the other three were still coming strong.

So was he, though. The controls felt good beneath his hands, and he realized he hadn't flown enough lately. Flying made him feel good, yet he had been deferring that duty to others, wrapping himself in his role of ship's mechanic.

Why?

He rolled the ship and hit reverse thrusters. One of the coralskippers trailing him came so close to his hull that it sang with magnetic resonance. He pulled some distance, fired a concussion missile, and cut in the forward lasers. Voids appeared, sucking the light into nothingness-then the slower missile caught up. A void appeared to gobble it, too-and the warhead promptly exploded, as it was programmed to do. The coralskipper made a dramatic and involuntary course change when the shockwave slapped it, and Vook fired the laser again. This time one of the beams sliced through, so that for a moment the irregular craft looked like a grilled urt on a charspit.

"That's for my uncleTyro," he muttered. He swung the ship around. "Come on, you two," he said. "I have plenty of dead relatives left."

The "door" to the bridge was dilated shut, but Leafth sliced it with his vibrodagger and hurled himself through the opening, blasting. They found two warriors on the other side-one sat beneath a cognition hood, obviously piloting the ship. The other was waiting for them by the door. He slashed at Leafth as the Dug rolled by, saw Uldir, and tried to hit him with the reverse end of the staff. Uldir shot him twice in the armpit. The Vong staggered back, looking offended, then started toward Uldir again.

Four bolts hit him at once, and he crashed, snarling, into the bulkhead. The second warrior-the pilot-ripped off the hood and reached

for his staff. He found himself confronting Leafth. The Dug was balanced on one foot-hand and had three blasters aimed at him.

"Do it," Leafth said. "Please."

The warrior jerked up the staff and whirled it over his head, slicing through the cognition hood as he stabbed the sharp-headed end toward Leafth.

Leafth's blasters whined in unison.

"Leafth, watch the door," Uldir said, after checking to make certain neither warrior would ever rise again.

"Got it, boss."

He keyed on his comlink. "Vega? What's happening?"

"No problem, boss-boy," the Corellian's tinny voice assured him. "Not a scratch on the prisoners. Well, none dead anyway-you know how the Yuuzhan Vong treat their guests."

"That other Jed i there? Bey?"

"Our favorite girl is looking for him. No luck, so far." 'That's not good:'

"No, I'd say not. But I'm sure you're hopeful. I assume you've taken the bridge?"

"I'm master of all I survey," Uldir replied. "Keep looking. And keep your eyes open. I think we got all the warriors up here, but this ship may hold a few surprises yet."

"No doubt."

He changed frequencies and hailed the No Luck Required. "Vook?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you busy?"

"No, sir. I finished off the last of the coralskippers a few moments ago. I assume you command the enemy vessel, as it has ceased fire."

"Yep, we've got the bridge. Good work, Vook. I knew you could do it"

"Thank you sir. It was a pleasure." There was a slight pause. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For the opportunity-and the advice."

"Any time, Vook."

"And sir?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sure you've noticed this and are working to correct--"

"What is it, Vook?"

"You might want to change your course. The transport is accelerating toward the black hole. You have plenty of time-15.02 minutes-but the sooner the better."

"Oh, that's-thanks, Vook."

"Did I hear something about a black hole?" Leafth asked, from the doorway.

Uldir stepped over the body of the pilot. "Yes. The pilot must have aimed us at it. Leafth, what do you know about flying Yuuzhan Vong ships?"

"No more than you, probably. They link to their ships telepathically, with those hoods."

"Is there any back-up system that you know of? Manual controls?"

"If there is, I've never heard about it. Why?"

Uldir lifted the remains of the hood the pilot had been wearing. It was sheared more or less in half, and the cable-or nerve cord, he supposed-had been cut as well. Yellowish ooze leaked from both ends of the severed connection.

"Because if there isn't, we may be in a bit of a situation."

"Nah. Let it fall-one less Vong ship is a good thing. We'll go back to the No Luck."

Uldir tapped his comlink on. "Vega, you there?"

"Of course I am. It's a party down here. We found the Jedi, too. He's in some sort of coma."

"That's good. That you found him, I mean. I don't mean I'm glad he's in a coma..."

"Boss-boy, you sound like an idiot. What's the matter? You think this guy is competition for your suave good looks and smooth talking?"

"Vega, get serious for a second and tell me how many captives you have there."

"Looks like around two hundred. Why?"

"That's about a hundred and eighty more than we can get aboard the No Luck Required."

"Yes, surprisingly, I knew that," Vega replied. "I thought our plan was to capture this ship and use it to get the captives to safe space."

"Right. It was." He rubbed his forehead. "Why can nothing ever be simple? "

"I think you're pretty simple sometimes, boss," Vega said, sweetly.

"What's the trouble?"

"Nothing much. We're just falling into a black hole."

"We're what..."

Uldir cut her off, switched back to Vook.

"Vook? We have a small problem. We can't fly this thing. I need you to figure out if the No Luck has the power to tow us. And I need you to figure this out quickly."

"Yes, sir. I think we-oh, no."

"Vook?"

"Sir, I may have a problem too. A Yuuzhan Vong ship just arrived." There was a moment of silence.

"Yes," Vook said after the pause. "Definitely a problem. It's firing on me."

Tsaa Qalu allowed himself a grimace of pleasure as he turned his weapons on the transport. He had hunted often since entering the infidel galaxy, but never had there been a hunt like this. It was clear Yun Harla favored him.

The infidel began returning fire. That was even better, for helpless prey brought no glory.

And this hunt would bring him much glory, if it continued to go as he anticipated.

His smile vanished. Kills were counted after the battle, not before. A confident hunter was a stupid one, and Tsaa Qalu was not stupid.