





## Prologue

**T**he Longbeam cruiser slipped into the Nefitifi system as smoothly and silently as a sharp needle piercing black cloth. Only a few million years before, a star in this previously binary system had exploded, leaving behind a nebula of extraordinary scale. Trails of deep-purple and dark-blue gases laced between the planets, radioactive and opaque, hiding the entire system within swirls of mist.

Many smugglers had, in the past, taken advantage of that mist.

The Jedi now believed the Nihil were using it, too. It was their last place to hide.

“Any signals?” Master Indeera Stokes asked her Padawan.

Bell Zettifar, next to her, shook his head. “Nothing on any frequencies. It’s completely quiet out there.”

“It shouldn’t be.” Master Nib Assek shook her head, her gray hair painted silver by the shadows in which they stood. (When a Longbeam ran on half power to avoid attention—as this one now did—lighting dimmed accordingly.) “Gunrunners have used this part of space for a long time. You’d expect beacons, tagged cargo in asteroids, something of that sort. Instead . . . nothing.”

Bell glanced over at a fellow Padawan, the Wookiee Burryaga, who stood by Master Assek's side. Their shared look confirmed that they understood what was implied: The Nefitifi system was *too* quiet. Finding no activity here was like landing on Coruscant and finding it deserted: proof positive that something was very wrong.

Here it could only mean that the Nihil were near.

"They must be using silencers," Bell said to Master Indeera. "Satellites or shipboard?"

"Shipboard, I suspect. We'll soon find out." His Master squared her shoulders; her Tholothian tendrils rippled down her back. Bell felt the shiver of anticipation that went through the Jedi cohort aboard; the Force was warning them of what was about to come. Master Indeera put her hand on her lightsaber hilt. "The other Longbeams report similar readings—or lack thereof. The Nihil must be very near."

Finally, action. A chance to move on the Nihil. Bell had wanted this—*needed* it—ever since the loss of his former Master, Loden Greatstorm. Not for vengeance. Greatstorm would never have wanted that. For the knowledge that Bell had done something, *anything*, to counteract the evil that had robbed his Master of his life. The Nihil were already beaten, it seemed—Master Avar Kriss seemed on the verge of capturing their leader, the Eye, at any moment—but neither Bell nor the rest of the galaxy would be at peace until the threat had been laid to rest forever.

The debacle at the Republic Fair months ago could've damaged confidence in the Republic—and in the Jedi—past repair. Instead the Nihil were now on the run. The corner had been turned. This entire part of the galaxy would soon be wholly safe once more.

Once everyone else had regained their confidence and security, maybe Bell would, too.

As the Longbeam passed through another thick golden cloud of gases, Master Indeera was the first to say, "They're above us. Almost directly overhead." Burryaga growled in assent.

Ship sensors almost immediately began to flash, but the true



warning came to them through the Force. Bell's senses heightened; his muscles tensed. Readiness galvanized him on every level.

*Here it comes,* he thought as he looked out the cockpit. The dark, swirling nebula gases became translucent as the Longbeam rose, revealing the underbelly of the Nihil ship. Bell imagined the warning alarms on that ship's bridge, the frantic rush of activity as they prepared to fight—for by this point, surely, the Nihil had realized that the Jedi had come to fight.

But the Jedi had been ready from the instant they left Starlight Beacon, and their moment had finally come.

*For Master Loden,* Bell thought, *and that no one else may ever suffer at the Nihil's hands as he suffered.*

The initial boarding attack had been designed for precisely this moment: The mother ship of the Jedi group seized the Nihil craft in its tractor beam, holding it fast, as the Longbeam on which Bell and his compatriots stood angled itself to attach to one air lock and block several others. Docking—rough, uneven, forced—shook the entire vessel, but the team remained steady and alert, recognizing as one the moment when the vibration signaled their penetration of the hull.

“For light and life!” Master Assek cried as they dashed into the Nihil ship.

Bell had rarely felt the Force with him so powerfully as he did at the moment he rushed forward into a blazing array of blasterfire, slashing through the air that surrounded him so closely he could feel the heat. The scent of ozone filled Bell's breath. Yet his lightsaber blade deflected every blaster bolt so smoothly that it seemed to be moving itself, aiming without any conscious work from Bell other than fierce concentration. All around him, he saw a sea of faceless, soulless masks—Nihil shooting, scattering, scrambling—and, advancing upon them, the Jedi swift and sure.

“Now!” Master Indeera called over the fray, acknowledgment of the warning from the Force they all felt. Bell ducked behind a metal girder to shield him for the seconds it took to strap on his breather. No sooner

had he done so than the telltale hiss from the air vents revealed that the Nihil's poison gases had been deployed.

*Too late*, Bell thought with satisfaction. *It's your turn to be too late.*

Master Indeera led the charge toward engineering, or what passed for it on the cobbled-together, jury-rigged Nihil vessel. Bell and Burryaga fell in directly behind. It would be up to Master Assek to hold off the Nihil near the air lock; Bell's job was to paralyze this ship.

Even running at top speed, Bell could tell that this ship was ramshackle to the point of hazardousness; the interior was dismal, dull, and strictly utilitarian. What made someone want to live like this? To join the Nihil, visit infinite pain and destruction upon innocents throughout several systems, and for what? Life on a dark, dank ship creeping along the edges of space, with only the dim spark of potential future riches to provide any light—something that was no life at all.

Bell's wonderings only took up one small part of his consciousness, musings he'd examine later. The present moment was for completing his mission.

Green gas filled the corridors with toxic haze, to which the Jedi remained impervious thanks to their breathers. However, the gases meant that Bell *felt* the door ahead of them before he saw it. Master Indeera and Burryaga must have as well, because they all skidded to a halt at the same moment.

"Should we knock?" Bell asked. Burryaga groaned at the terrible joke.

Master Indeera simply plunged her lightsaber into the door's locking mechanism. The heated glow of melting metal illuminated all their faces in pale-orange light for the instants it took for the door to give way. It stuttered open to reveal only a skeleton crew, most of them young and unarmed, and all too willing to surrender.

It helped Bell, knowing that he wouldn't have to take additional lives. What had to be done, had to be done—but the pain he felt over the tragedy of Loden Greatstorm remained sharp. It could've pushed



him in dangerous directions. Instead he was satisfied with their capture, no more.

*You taught me well, Master*, Bell thought to the memory of the man that he carried within his mind.

Once they'd finished rounding up the prisoners, Burryaga whined curiously.

"Yeah, seems like a low crew contingent to me, too," Bell said. "Do you think Marshal Kriss's pursuit of the Eye of the Nihil has shaken them up? They might have deserters by the hundreds, even thousands." He didn't like the idea of Nihil escaping any justice for the atrocities they had already committed, but the most important thing was making those atrocities stop. If the price of saving so many lives was a few Nihil deserters getting off scot-free, so be it.

*We've gone on the offensive*, Bell told himself. *We've outplayed the Nihil at their own game. We did it for you, Master Loden, and for every other person who suffered as you—*

Bell couldn't even think about it.

Burryaga didn't seem to notice Bell's distraction, for which Bell was grateful. Instead the great Wookiee shook his head and growled.

"Sure, it was easy," Bell agreed. "I don't know if it was *too* easy, though. No point in worrying about it if the Nihil are finally collapsing."

In that, at least, Burryaga completely concurred.

Regald Coll had more of a sense of humor than most Jedi. At least, that was what non-Jedi told him. Most of the other members of the Order didn't agree.

Or, as Regald would argue, they just didn't have enough of a sense of humor to appreciate his own.

"So what is it with the storm terminology?" he asked his newest prisoners, a fierce-eyed adult named Chancey Yarrow and a young woman who had identified herself only as Nan. "You're all supposed to

be one big storm, but each group breaks down into Tempests and Strikes and Clouds. How far does it go? Is one Nihil on their own, I don't know, Slightly Overcast?"

The prisoners had been caught near a Nihil fleet in the Ocktai system, just one of the many raids on the Nihil occurring simultaneously. However, their ship wasn't definitively a part of that group, and at first he'd thought they'd probably just question the women before letting them go. But Nan had pulled a blaster on the first Jedi she saw, which prompted an identity check, which then revealed her true affiliation.

Nan looked furious at having been caught. On the other hand, Chancey Yarrow's face remained utterly unmoved as she said, "You're not as funny as you think you are."

"Probably not," Regald agreed. "Because I think I'm hilarious, and really, nobody's that funny." Enjoying his own jokes was enough for him.

"I'm not Nihil any longer," Nan said. The words sounded strange—as though she had to force herself to say them. "We work for—" She cut off as she caught sight of her companion. Chancey Yarrow's icy glare could've frozen lava. Regald thought about making a "blizzard" joke to go with the whole storm theme, decided against it. Nan finally finished, "We work for ourselves. I haven't been with the Nihil for months now."

"Convenient timing," Regald said. "And who knows? Maybe you're telling the truth. But you'll have to prove it before we can let you go."

Meanwhile, the *Gaze Electric* rested in quiet space between systems far away from the Jedi battle. No one on board even bothered monitoring the current Jedi activity, much less worrying about coming to the defense of their comrades. Instead it seemed as though nothing much was happening other than some random, ordinary housekeeping. Certainly nobody paid any attention as Thaya Ferr—a mere assistant, not a fighter—made her way through the long corridors.



Thaya was a human woman of middle years and nondescript appearance: flat brown hair pulled back into a practical tail, basic standard coverall, no telltale streaks, no mask, no weapon. She held nothing more interesting than a simple datapad.

This 'pad led her to the first door, the crew quarters for an Ithorian woman. Thaya sounded the chime and arranged a blank, uninterested smile on her face before the door slid open.

“Good morning,” Thaya said with all the meaningless cheer of a droid. “You’ll be happy to know that the Eye of the Nihil has found a new place for you, one ideally suited to your talents. Details are here.” She handed over a small datacard never pausing, lest the Ithorian say something. “Please report to the main docking bay for a transport at thirteen hundred hours today. Thank you!”

At that Thaya walked away, still smiling, leaving no opportunity for argument, gratitude, or any response at all. The Ithorian’s reaction was irrelevant. She would obey, which meant she would depart the ship days before the Ithorian male she was partnered with. That Ithorian’s departure needed to go unnoticed—and getting rid of the main person who would notice helped with that.

It served other purposes, too. But Thaya would turn to those when she’d finished delivering this first set of transfer orders.

As soon as she was done, she hurried back to the bridge of the *Gaze Electric*. To the Eye. To Marchion Ro himself.

He sat in the captain’s chair, studying reports. Thaya could tell they had details about attacks on other Nihil ships—ships loyal to Louna Dee, and therefore hardly Nihil at all anymore, in her opinion—and she gave them all the attention she knew Ro would wish her to give them, which was none. Instead she stood nearby, patiently waiting to be noticed.

Some on the bridge smirked at Thaya Ferr, and she knew why. She wasn’t a power player; she was only someone who ran errands for Marchion Ro.



Many people underestimated how much could be learned from such errands, or how much a leader might come to rely on someone who took care of such mundane, trivial concerns.

Thaya Ferr saw things more clearly.

Finally, Ro spoke to her. "You've put through the transfers?"

"Yes, my lord. I'll prepare the next orders for delivery later in the day."

A few ears had pricked up at the mention of "transfers"—evidence, perhaps, that some had lost the confidence and favor of Marchion Ro? There would be an appetite for names, details, the better to sneer over the fallen. As of yet, none of those on the bridge suspected that a transfer order might be coming to *them*—which was precisely how Ro wanted it, and precisely how Thaya intended to deliver.

Marchion Ro moved on to a different subject—one, Thaya noted, guaranteed to draw attention away from any talk of transfers. "It appears Lournna Dee's capture is imminent."

"Do the Jedi still believe she is the Eye of the Nihil?" She said this in precisely the tone of disbelief she calculated would be most flattering to Ro.

He smiled just as she had foreseen. "They'll know the truth very soon, Ferr. For the moment, let them have their fun. Let them enjoy believing they have defeated the Nihil.

"They will never have the luxury of that belief again."



# Chapter 1

**Stellan Gios** was among those Jedi who perceived the Force as the entire firmament of stars in the sky. Points of brilliant heat and energy, seemingly distanced from one another by infinite absence and cold—but actually profoundly connected. Families, friends, tribes, organizations: Each formed a different constellation, carving shape and meaning from the sky. (Were not he, Avar Kriss, and Elzar Mann such a constellation? Stellan had always thought so, even in childhood.) The Force shone forth from them all, illuminating the vast dark; if Stellan but had the ability to perceive every living being, it would have the same effect as being able to see every star in the universe at once: total, pure, all-encompassing light.

Rarely had he felt so close to that ideal moment as he did on this day.

Colorful banners streamed in the sunshine, fluttering over a throng of thousands who were laughing, eating food from tents and carts, and enjoying the beautiful day and—at last—a sense of true safety and belonging. Or so Stellan liked to think.

*Finally, he thought, we've regained the joy the Nihil stole from us for so long.*

*At last we can celebrate our unity the way we should've been able to from the beginning.*

Stellan stood at the head of the Starlight delegation upon a dais that overlooked the celebration. In the eyes of most of the galaxy, Eiram was an insignificant place, a tiny dot on a star chart too obscure to bother with. But this had been one of the worlds that had led the campaign for this part of space to finally join the Republic, which made their recent mission here all the more symbolic.

Eiram had recently suffered a storm—the kind of vicious cyclone only a handful of planets could muster, one that had at its apex covered almost an entire hemisphere. Terrible winds had badly damaged the desalination structures that supplied the planet's only fresh water. This was a crisis that would devastate an independent planet, leading to a mass exodus or even starvation.

But planets in the Republic had a reason to hope.

“And so, instead of returning to its place in the heavens, Starlight Beacon was transported here, to Eiram!” The storyteller gestured at the holo that showed Starlight being towed through outer space, for only the second time ever, following a lifesaving mission to the planet Dalna. Ringed around the storyteller, dozens of children oohed and aahed in wonder. The shimmer of the holo was reflected in their bright eyes. “The Republic and the Jedi came to save us all, by bringing us water, supplies, and most of all . . . hope.”

Stellan felt a faint twinge of regret that he hadn't been here to personally oversee the station's moving and the beginning of the repairs. He'd still been on Coruscant then, so he'd tasked Master Estala Maru with supervising every step—not because he doubted the specialists, but because it was so important for this to be absolutely right. Nobody in the galaxy paid more attention to detail than Maru.

Upon Stellan's return two days prior, the repairs for the desalination plant weren't entirely complete. All they had to do now, however, was attach the sluice gates—something that would be accomplished as soon as the tow craft were available, a week or two at most. The people



of Eiram might still have water rationing in place, but the rations were generous, and after several weeks of hardship the planet was ready to celebrate.

Stellan said as much to Maru, who replied, “Right. It’s the perfect time for everybody. But it doesn’t hurt that this is when the chancellor happened to be free.”

“Such is the state of politics,” Stellan said.

In truth, it was good of Chancellor Soh to have made the time to attend, even holographically. The flickering images next to him on the dais saw her sitting comfortably in an informal chair, her enormous targons lying on either side of her, dozing in the contentment of beasts. Stellan’s eyes met Lina Soh’s, briefly—each sharply conscious of the memories of the Republic Fair. The image of Stellan lifting her unconscious body from the rubble had already become iconic: both of the evil of the Nihil, and of the resilience of the Republic. Thus the two of them were in a strange way bound together in the public eye; in the same way, Stellan had become *the Jedi*, the symbol of the Order.

“*If we’re a constellation,*” Elzar Mann had said, before leaving for his retreat, “*the Council has made you the polestar.*” Stellan would’ve liked to disagree, but he couldn’t.

Stellan wasn’t sure how he felt about that. So he was guiltily relieved that the chancellor hadn’t attended in person. Otherwise there would’ve been pressure to come up with some new iconic image, somehow.

From the Jedi Council, his fellow members Masters Adampo and Poof watched via their own holograms as well. Cam droids hovered amid the streamers and balloons, capturing the event for people from Kennerla to Coruscant. No matter how distant this part of the frontier might be from the Galactic Core, the people of Eiram could know themselves to be truly as much a part of the Republic as any other world.

“They’ve needed this,” Stellan murmured as he looked out at the revelry of the crowd.

Maru surprised him by answering, “*We’ve needed this.*”

And that was the truth of it. Stellan's keen gaze picked out white-and-gold-clad figures among the festival-goers: Bell Zettifar and In-deera Stokes, sipping bright-orange ram'buchu from their cups; Nib Assek helping OrbaLin to make his way toward the dancers, the better to watch their performance; and Burryaga, playing with some of the tinier children. Being a Jedi was a sacred duty—but the light demanded more than obedience and sacrifice. Sometimes a Jedi had to be open to the simple, pure experience of joy. Today they all had that chance.

"A fine thing to see, isn't it?" Regasa Elarec Yovet of the Togruta was there in person, standing near the flickering image of Chancellor Soh.

It was the chancellor who answered, though Stellan entirely agreed: "It is, Your Majesty. And it's about time."

"It is almost time, my lord," said Thaya Ferr.

Marchion Ro gave his underling the slightest nod as he stared into the depths of the holographic star chart. His preselected targets glowed red among the whiter stars, and he studied each one in turn.

These were ordinary worlds. Large and prosperous enough to be of note at least to neighboring systems, not so large as to have strong planetary defenses or to draw undue attention. He walked through the holographic chart, imagining the suns and planets pushing apart to let him pass.

The worlds he had chosen had two things in common: First, they all had good communications systems that would allow them to reach officials on Coruscant within minutes.

Second, they were all very, very far from Starlight Beacon.

He smiled his bloodless smile. "Begin."

Aleen: a planet neither particularly obscure nor noteworthy. Although Aleen had been racked by wars in its distant past, it was now a place where nothing of significance had happened in a very long time—even by its own inhabitants' reckoning—and nothing of significance



was anticipated for perhaps an even longer time to come. The legends of the wars were enough to make every soul on Aleen satisfied with an uneventful life.

**Yeksom:** one of the longest-standing Republic member worlds on the Outer Rim, one that had suffered terrible groundquakes in recent years. The Republic was helping the planet rebuild, but it was a protracted, painstaking process. Its people remained guarded, uncertain, sad-eyed; everyone had lost someone in the quakes, and grief veiled the world's gray sky.

**Japeal:** a planet on the frontier, newly bustling, with no fewer than three small space stations in various stages of construction. Its temperate climate and plentiful water practically invited settlers to find a place they might call their own. Dozens of species set up storefronts and eateries; engineers mapped bridges and roads; families put finishing touches on brand-new, prefab homes.

**Tais Brabbo:** Anyone on Tais Brabbo who wasn't up to no good had taken a wrong turn somewhere. Rumor had it the Hutts had considered moving some operations onto Tais Brabbo but decided against it—the place was too corrupt even for them. It was a good place to get lost, and on any given day it housed millions of souls who wanted nothing more than to remain out of sight of any authorities more powerful than the ineffectual local marshals.

On each of these very different planets, under four different shades of sky, millions of very different individuals were going about tasks as divergent as spinning muunyak wool or taking bounty pucks when they each heard the exact same sound: the thudding hum of spacecraft engines descending.

All those millions of people looked up. They all saw Nihil ships streaking down out of the sky—numerous as raindrops—the beginning of the Storm.

Explosives dropped. Plasma weapons fired. The assault slammed into homes, factories, bridges, cantinas, medcenters, hangars. There was no specific target, because everything was a target. It seemed the

Nihil wanted to cause mayhem for mayhem's sake, which nobody who had heard of them found difficult to believe.

One passenger ship leaving Japeal at that very moment got lucky. It took damage—a devastating hit to its port side—but was able to limp out of orbit and even get into hyperspace. Its crew and surviving passengers thought it was a miracle they were still alive and might even remain so, if they could get to help in time.

The so-called “miracle” was, in fact, no more than a standing order Marchion Ro had given before the Nihil attack began. Some people *needed* to escape—because the Nihil needed them to run straight to Starlight Beacon, where they would be given comfort, medical treatment, and the full attention of the Jedi.

No sooner had Stellan Gios returned to Starlight Beacon from Eiram than the news of the Nihil attacks arrived. Estala Maru, normally not given to bad language, used phrases considered obscene on most planets when word came in of the Aleen assault. “Still more Nihil, still attacking, and for what? Nothing, so far as I can tell. They’re not even bothering to plunder ships or planets any longer.” He shook his head grimly. “The Nihil mean to cause us more trouble so long as there’s even one Cloud remaining.”

“This isn’t close to the scale of destruction we saw from the Nihil at first,” Stellan said, reminding himself as much as Maru. “We’ve made real progress. We ought to have expected to see the Nihil thrash around in the group’s death throes. For now, our attention should remain on helping those affected. It looks like some damaged ships are heading our way, no doubt with some injuries aboard—”

“Already on it,” Maru said. The man’s fanatical attention to detail only sharpened in times of crisis, and Stellan had rarely been gladder of this. “I’ve sent a couple of the Padawans to ready the medical tower for a few extra patients.”

“Excellent.” Stellan put one hand on Maru’s shoulder, a gesture of



gratitude. “Maru, sometimes I think you’re the one holding this place together.”

“And don’t forget it,” Maru sniffed. His grumpy demeanor was only a thin shield, however; Stellan saw the glimmer of satisfaction in Maru’s gray eyes.

Stellan hurried away, leaving the situation that was being taken care of to deal with the many that had yet to be resolved. A few damaged ships had already signaled their need of a place to land, and more would be coming.

In truth, he was somewhat more disquieted by the Nihil assaults than he’d let on to Maru. Stellan had had misgivings about Avar Kriss’s search for the Eye of the Nihil from the very beginning; it felt too much like a personal vendetta. Avar had walked away from Starlight Beacon—her assignment from the Council, the very symbol of the Republic in this part of space—all in the hope of making a capture others could have made equally well. Was it possible that her search had antagonized the Nihil, driven them to lash out instead of skulking off into oblivion?

*Or maybe these scattered attacks are a sign that Avar’s plan is working, Stellan allowed. The Eye is fleeing from her, possibly losing contact with the Nihil at large. Perhaps what we’re seeing is the Nihil newly decentralized, lashing out wildly before falling apart.*

If so, Stellan would be the first to apologize to Avar for doubting her. Until they knew more, however . . . he would keep his own counsel.

An electronic voice chirped: “Master Stellan Gios?”

Stellan half turned to see a logistics droid rolling toward him, coppers and bright, with a vaguely humanoid body above a rolling base. “Yes—are you delivering a message?”

“The message is that you are my new master. I am Jayjay-Five One Four Five and I stand ready to label, prioritize, sort, file, collate, and otherwise organize every aspect of your existence.” The droid practically vibrated with readiness to begin.



“There must be a mistake, Forfive,” Stellan said. “I haven’t ordered any droid, and the Council would’ve mentioned—”

“I am a gift,” JJ-5145 declared with apparent pride. “I come compliments of Elzar Mann, who sends word that as he can no longer be your right hand, he wished for me to serve in that capacity.”

There was almost nothing Stellan would’ve wanted less than a droid following him around to organize everything.

Which, of course, Elzar knew perfectly well.

Stellan had previously been concerned about sending Elzar off to work through his current crisis without accompanying him—as he had first planned, and in fact promised. In the end, Stellan’s many tasks had not allowed him any opportunity to step away, and he’d found an excellent replacement to guide Elzar through this difficult passage. But he’d worried that Elzar might on some level resent it . . . and in Elzar’s current state of mind, that resentment could too easily have turned to darkness.

It now appeared that Elzar wasn’t resentful in the slightest—and only irked enough to play a practical joke.

JJ-5145 said, “You have remained silent for three point one seconds. Do you lack clarity on how to prioritize your thoughts? Voice them and I can help you order them most efficiently.”

“That’s quite all right, Forfive,” Stellan hurriedly replied. “How about you help the Padawans get the medical tower organized? That would be of great assistance.” He guided the droid on its way, relieved to have something else for it to do. Later he would ask it to schedule some other tasks for a few days in the future.

One of those tasks would be, “Think up the ideal revenge for a practical joke.”

The first ship to arrive at Starlight Beacon after the Nihil attacks was neither damaged nor carrying the injured; it was the Longbeam tasked with bringing some of the Jedi back from their raids on the Ocktai system, with a handful of prisoners in tow.



Bell Zettifar, fresh from checking supply stores in the medical tower, prepared to assist in the prisoner unloading—but his Master, Indeera Stokes, waved him off. “There are only a handful of captives, and if help is needed, I can supply it,” she said. “Take some time to yourself.”

No doubt she’d noticed how dark his mood remained, months after Loden Greatstorm’s death. Bell didn’t want his new Master to think he didn’t appreciate her—to let his admiration and grief for his old Master cloud his new apprenticeship. (And it was clear he needed more time as an apprentice. Bell’s conviction that he was ready to become a Knight had turned to dust with Master Loden.)

That was something he should consider later. For now, there was little to do besides say, “Thanks, Master Indeera.”

She nodded as she began to walk away. “We’ll all have plenty to do soon enough. Best to take free time where it can be had.”

Burryaga, who was also at liberty, asked with an inquisitive growl whether Bell might want to meditate together. Dual meditation techniques sometimes succeeded where solo efforts failed; it was often easier to calm another person, or to be calmed by them. It wasn’t a bad idea, but a shadowy form at the far end of the corridor reminded Bell that there was something much more important to do first—someone he hadn’t been able to visit since returning to Starlight from Eiram that morning.

“Hang on just a second,” he said to Burryaga before dropping to his knees and opening his arms wide for the shape hurtling toward him. “C’mon, Ember!”

The charhound bounded from the shadows and leapt onto Bell, welcoming him back with all the enthusiasm she could muster, which was a lot. Bell allowed a couple seconds of frantic licking before he put his hand out to calm his pet. Her fur blazed warm against his palm. “Steady, Ember, steady. I’m back now.”

Ember wriggled with delight, and Bell couldn’t help grinning. There was nothing like a pet to remind you to release your worries and live in the moment.

Burryaga made a low, huffing sound. Bell glanced up to see his Wookiee friend watching Jedi Knight Regald Coll lead the two Nihil prisoners away. One was a tall, fierce woman with long braids and cheekbones sharp enough to cut. The other was a girl not even his own age, her hair pulled back in a tail, her garments slightly too large for her body—creating the illusion she was even younger than her true years.

Bell knew the young woman's face, not from personal experience, but from security briefings.

*"I thought of Nan as almost still a kid,"* Reath had warned them, soon after word had come of her capture. *"She's not. She's as capable as any Padawan—arguably more than me, because she fooled me completely. Don't take Nan for granted."*

Bell figured that speech was mostly about making Reath Silas feel a little better for having been so skillfully deceived. But as he watched Nan walk away, head unbowed despite her cuffed wrists, Bell found himself hoping Regald Coll had heard that warning, too.

"I suggest waiting before you question them," Regald told Stellan Gios. "Our transport was small. The Nihil prisoners might've heard about their comrades' successful attacks, and if so, that'll make them—"

"Overconfident," Stellan finished for him. "Exultant, even. Convinced help will come quickly. When it doesn't, then, perhaps, they'll be ready to talk."

"They claim they're not Nihil any longer," Regald said, "but the girl called Nan was absolutely with the organization just a few months ago, and it's a really convenient time for her to have left it, don't you think?"

"But not impossible." Stellan looked thoughtful. "If she did leave the Nihil, and we can figure out why—it could provide some valuable information about how to psychologically disarm the group."

"It would save a lot of time. Still? I kinda doubt it." Regald missed the old days when he had worked in the Jedi crèche, where when you saw a problem (three-year-old fascinated by fire), the solution was



obvious (remove three-year-old from vicinity of fire). “Will you handle the interrogation yourself, or will Elzar Mann take point? I’m happy to assist, but I’ve got to warn you, my jokes make me a little less than intimidating. Though there’s always the chance the captives will reveal all, just to get me to shut up.”

Amusement played on Stellan’s features. “I’ll call on you if I become truly desperate. Elzar, I fear, is unavailable. He’s off doing something even more important.”

“And what in the worlds would that be?”

“Elzar is taking some time to strengthen his ties to the Force,” Stellan said. “Connecting with the greater Jedi he may yet become.”



## Chapter 2

The oceanic planet Ledalau possessed only a few thousand square meters of land, all within one tiny archipelago. Long ago, this world had possessed mighty continents, but it had been more than a millennium since the waters had swallowed them whole. Few relics of the ancient civilizations remained; the planet currently possessed few resources and less infrastructure. Thus Ledalau was left almost entirely alone. That was what made it the perfect meditative retreat.

It also turned out to be the perfect place to get your pride handed to you on a platter.

Elzar had been skeptical upon his arrival several weeks before. The islands were at an upper latitude, which made the weather disappointingly cool and foggy. He was of the opinion that it was easier to concentrate when you weren't cold. It had then been pointed out to him that nobody needed to practice what came easy, and if he only wanted to do what he could already do, he might as well have stayed on Starlight.

So he'd abandoned his early, halcyon notions of a tropical retreat



and set himself to his task. His temporary home was a small stone structure, no more than a room and a privy. Elzar had no comm devices, no forms of entertainment, no droids—only the few items he would need to be totally self-sufficient, and a guide who cut him no slack whatsoever.

Once the mental noise of upheaval had died down, he began grappling with the truths that had brought him here:

*I have begun drawing upon the dark side for my strength in the Force.*

Elzar had not turned; nor did he feel he was close to turning. This was not a way of life for him—he still believed all the good and true lessons he had learned from Yoda as a youngling, then as a Padawan from his wise Master Roland Quarry. But anger was unavoidable. Fear was unavoidable. Extreme circumstances created extreme emotions. Denying them served no purpose. Why not use them?

Many weeks of meditation later, Elzar still felt those questions were valid. However, he'd also come to realize that every Sith Lord in history had probably asked the exact same questions until the darkness held them completely in its grip.

*Where do you draw the line?* Elzar asked himself. *You don't know. You can't know. And that's why you can't travel down that path at all.*

It had also become clear to him that part of the reason he was so deeply opposed to denying emotion was because negative feelings weren't the only ones he was trying to deny.

Even here, it had been hard for him to face that truth. But the truth within him demanded to be known. At night, when he looked up at Ledalau's three broad, shining moons, he imagined them as pinpoints of light in Avar Kriss's sky.

They'd never meant to become attached. Padawans often fooled around together on the sly; adolescence, a phase in virtually every sentient species, demanded its due. Instructors and Masters pretended not to notice as long as nobody went too far. When relationships formed, reprimands were rare. Instead a Master would promptly take her apprentice away on a long-term mission far from any Jedi temple. By the