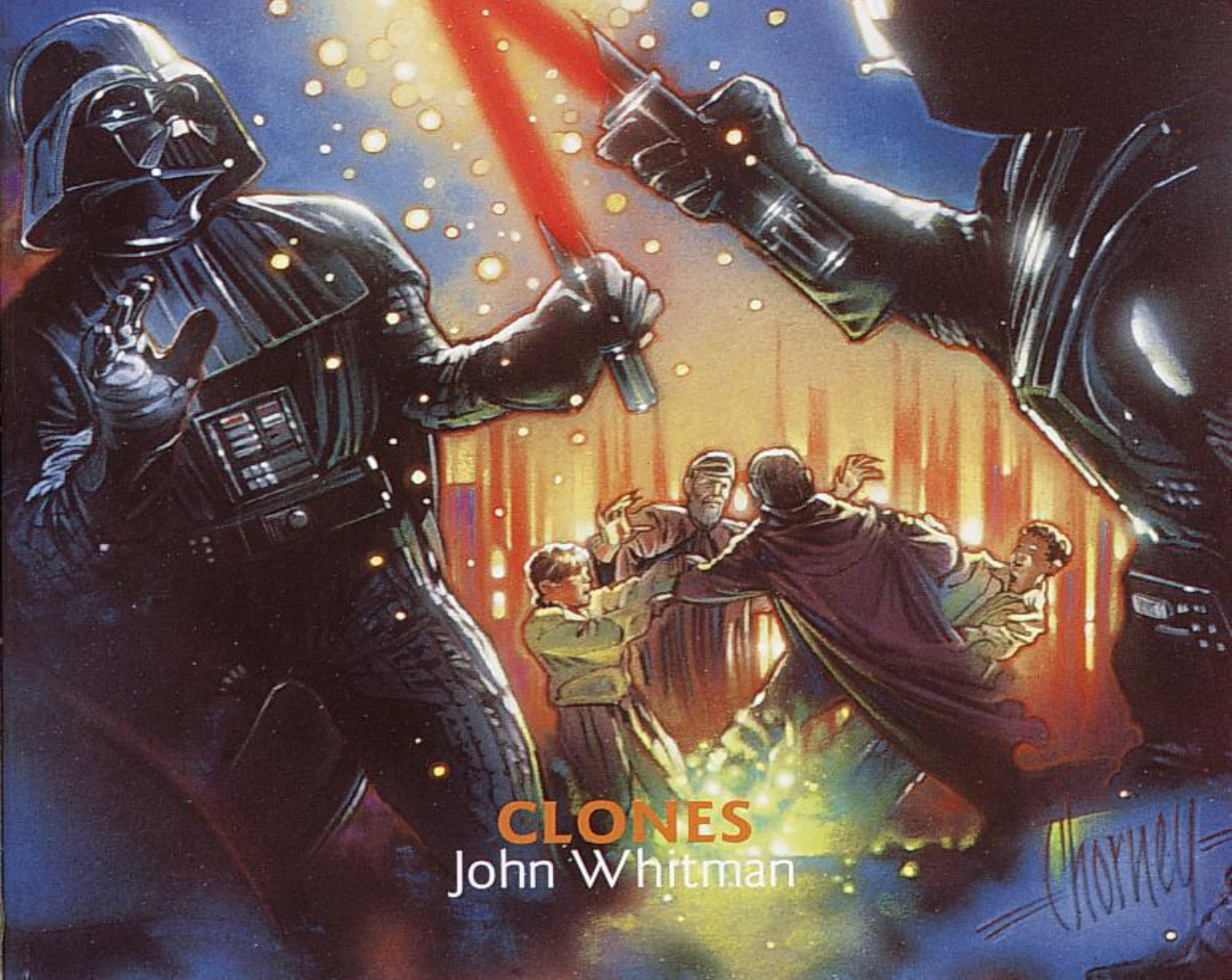


STAR WARS® GALAXY of FEAR



CLONES
John Whitman

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Star Wars

Galaxy of Fear

11

Clones

by John Whitman

PROLOGUE

Darth Vader approached the ancient Jedi ruins.

Once, a Jedi fortress had stood here. But it had been abandoned long ago, centuries before the rise of the Empire. For a moment, Vader paused, remembering a time long ago, before he served the Emperor. A time when he had been a Jedi Knight...

Behind him, his squad of stormtroopers hesitated, wondering why he had stopped.

Vader shrugged off the memories of his old life. He was a Dark Lord of the Sith now. He served the Emperor.

Vader had come to this planet in search of clues that might lead him to Luke Skywalker. The Rebels once had a secret base here, but like the Jedi ruins, it had been abandoned. The Dark Lord searched the abandoned Rebel base first. As expected, he found nothing of interest. Then Vader turned his attention to the nearby Jedi fortress.

He sensed something here. Something important.

He hoped it would lead him to Skywalker. Skywalker had managed to disappear after the destruction of the Death Star. In the moments before the battle station exploded, Vader had felt a disturbance in the Force, a disturbance that came from Skywalker. The Force was strong in him. Vader was determined to hunt him down.

The Dark Lord knew the Force would lead Skywalker toward his destiny. The young Rebel would want to learn more about the Jedi. Without a teacher, he would search for remnants of Jedi history. He might visit ancient ruins.

Just like these.

Vader entered the fortress with the squad of stormtroopers close behind. Around them, broken stones and crumbling walls cast deep shadows. Vader noticed something strange about the ruins. The old fortress seemed quite small from the outside, but inside the wall, the area was much larger.

Or at least it seemed that way. It might have been a clever design of the builders, or maybe a Jedi trick. Vader didn't care. With the dark side of the Force as his guide, he would not lose his way.

Near the center of the ruins stood the only remaining building. The structure was round, like a tower, except that it wasn't very tall. Curiously, the tower seemed to have no door.

Vader strode around the ancient building until he'd made a complete circle. There was no way inside.

Vader considered. Maybe this place had been designed so that only Jedi could enter.

The Dark Lord reached out with the Force. Ripples of dark-side energy rolled toward the building and, though he couldn't see it with his eyes, Vader felt the door with the Force. It was right in front of him. Still using the Force, Vader tried to push the door open, but it would not move. Behind his black mask, the Dark Lord frowned. He didn't know whether the door was locked or just frozen shut with age. He didn't care. Gathering the dark side around him, Vader shoved with his mind, and the hidden door exploded inward.

The stormtroopers behind him jumped back, startled by his display of power, but Vader didn't hesitate. He strode forward into the circular room. Here, Vader sensed, lay the source of the disturbance.

The Dark Lord stepped into the room, scanning it. There was something here...

The faint click of metallic weapons reached his ears.

Faster than thought, Vader drew and ignited his lightsaber. In the same moment, small openings appeared in the walls and ceiling, and hidden blasters fired. Energy beams rained down on the Dark Lord and his

soldiers. Stormtroopers cried out as blaster bolts shattered their white armor. At least a dozen bolts streaked toward Vader himself. Moving faster than the eye could follow, Vader's lightsaber blocked them all.

Except for one.

The last blaster shot slipped past his saber and glanced off the Dark Lord's armored shoulder. Circuits snapped and sizzled. Looking down, Vader saw that the energy beam had sliced a thin hole in his armor and reached his skin. A tiny stream of blood trickled down his armor and dripped onto the stone floor. The Dark Lord let out a low growl and covered the wound with his gloved hand. The wound itself was only a scratch, but he relied on his armor's power to keep him alive. Now that it had been punctured, he would have to have it repaired.

More blasters fired.

"Retreat," Vader ordered, backing out of the building. Only then did he realize that all his men were dead.

Angrily, Vader waved one hand across the room. One by one, the hidden weapons exploded and sputtered as if struck by invisible lightning. The blaster fire stopped.

The Dark Lord walked over to the wall and studied one of the small openings. Inside, the remains of a ruined blaster smoldered. By the looks of the device, the blaster weapons were as old as the building itself.

Interesting, Vader thought. The blasters were an ancient booby trap-a trap that would have snared anyone less

powerful.

Something important must be buried in these ruins. Something very old and very valuable..He had just decided to investigate further when his comlink beeped urgently.

“What?” he demanded into the microphone.

An Imperial officer aboard an orbiting Star Destroyer said, “One of our scouts just located a small Rebel outpost.”

“I’ll return to the ship immediately,” Vader replied.
“Prepare for hyperspace.”

Vader took one last look at the Jedi ruins. The ruins, would have to wait. Rebels and the mystery they held, came first.

Swirling away like a dark shadow, Darth Vader promised that he would return.

CHAPTER 1

Tash Arranda was lying on her back in the grass. Her eyes were closed and she was half asleep. She could feel the warm sun on her face and hear a soft breeze whisper around her. It was a perfect summer day on the planet Dantooine.

Tash felt something tickle her arm, maybe a blade of grass blowing in the wind. Then she felt something sharp clamp down on her skin.

“Ouch!” she yelled, sitting up with a start.

A snail hung from the soft inside part of her arm by its sharp teeth. She tried to shake it off, but it only bit harder. “Zak, help!”

Tash’s younger brother was already on his feet. Unlike Tash, who was only dozing, Zak had been deep in a nap, and he was bleary-eyed and confused.

“What is it?” he shouted. “Stormtroopers? Pirates?”

“Snails!” Tash shouted back.

Now awake enough to see what was happening, Zak laughed. Tash usually looked so calm and organized, with her neat clothes and her blond hair pulled back into a tidy braid. But now there was grass stuck to her hair, and her arms were flapping around as she yelped. She looked like a clown in a holovideo. Zak laughed again.

“Don’t laugh, help me!” she snapped.

Zak swallowed another laugh and grabbed his sister’s arm. “Here, you can’t shake these snails off. You have to pry them loose.”

The snail was almost the size of his fist. Zak grabbed it by its squishy head and carefully pulled it off so that its teeth slid straight out of Tash's skin.

"Yuck," she said, checking the wound. It wasn't very deep. The snail's teeth were sharp but not very long.

Zak tossed the snail into the grass. "There are more of them around here. Maybe we should move."

"Where to?" Tash asked. "It's all the same."

Tash was right. A huge prairie stretched out before them. Here and there, the grassy plain was spotted by groves of thorny bilba trees, and in the distance was a line of small hills. Over their heads floated a flock of fabools. Tash thought of them as birds, but they weren't birds, exactly. With their swollen round bodies and tiny wings, the fabools were more like living balloons that floated on the air currents, trying to avoid the bilba trees.

Zak and Tash, along with their uncle Hoole, had been hiding out from agents of the Empire on the planet Dantooine. Months ago, they had stumbled upon an evil Imperial plot and, with the help of some Rebels named Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa, and Han Solo, they had foiled it. Now the Emperor's agents wanted revenge.

They'd spent weeks looking for a place to hide, only to find themselves in more and more trouble. But finally they'd reached Dantooine, a planet so far from the rest of the Empire that no one visited the place. Ever. It was a beautiful world, covered by blue oceans and plains of green grass. But there wasn't much else. There weren't any cities, although Hoole had mentioned that there was an abandoned Rebel base somewhere around. The only inhabitants were tribes of primitive nomadic humanoids called Dantari.

Tash looked to her left, at a cluster of Dantari tents. When they'd arrived on Dantooine, Zak, Tash, and Hoole had made friends with one tribe of Dantari. The Dantari knew nothing about technology. Unaware that starships armed with blasters, ion cannons, and photon torpedoes traveled among the stars over their heads, the Dantari wandered across their prairies, using spears and stone axes to hunt the animals on the plains.

For the first two weeks, Zak and Tash had loved it.

Hoole had landed their starship, the Shroud, in an isolated spot in the hills to avoid scaring the natives. Hoole had equipped the Shroud with something called a slave circuit-a remote control device that would bring the ship to them wherever they might be.

After a few days of watching the Dantari to make sure they weren't dangerous, the star travelers had cautiously approached the nearest tribe. Since all the natives had dark hair and wide, flat faces, they were fascinated by Tash's blond braid. Zak's hair was almost as dark as the Dantari's, but his smaller mouth and nose revealed him to be human.

The Dantari saved their greatest fascination for Hoole.

Tash and Zak's uncle was a different species altogether. From a distance, he might pass for human. But his skin was gray and his face and hands were elongated. He was obviously from another planet. He was, in fact, a Shi'ido, a rare species with an even rarer ability: Hoole could change his shape at will.

Instead of being frightened by the newcomers, the Dantari tribe had welcomed them. Zak, Tash, and Hoole had joined in the Dantari's routine as they folded up their tents every morning and continued their endless journey across the plains in search of food. At midday, the tribe stopped to

eat and rest, and that was what Tash had been doing when the snail bit her.

“We might as well go back to the camp,” Zak suggested. “They’ll be moving again soon.”

“Where’s Uncle Hoole?” Tash asked.

Zak sighed. “Probably taking notes.”

Tash nodded. To the Arrandas, their time with the Dantari felt like a vacation. But Hoole had put himself to work. He was an anthropologist-a scientist who studied other cultures-and he’d spent every waking moment since they’d arrived on Dantooine studying the tribe. He had already filled an entire datapad with notes about what the Dantari ate, how they raised their children, what kinds of stories they told... his lists seemed endless.

Zak and Tash, meanwhile, had kept themselves busy trying to make friends. There were a few Dantari their age, but they were shy. The adults were a little braver, and Zak and Tash often spoke with them. The Dantari understood a broken version of Basic, the common galactic language. Communication was sometimes hard, but they had been patient with each other, and now Zak and Tash talked with the Dantari often. They had made many friends.

And one enemy.

His name was Maga. Zak and Tash saw him as they walked back to the Dantari camp. He was standing near his tent, talking with a few other Dantari, and he glared at them as they walked past. He was big, even for a Dantari.

Among his people, Maga was called the garoo. Hoole had explained to them that a garoo is a cross between a holy man and a magician.

“Makes it sound like he’s a Jedi Knight,” Zak had noted.

“Does that mean he can use the Force?” Tash had asked.

“I doubt it,” Hoole had replied. “I don’t believe he has any real abilities. But the other Dantari believe he has magical powers and can command the spirits of the animals, so they give him great respect.”

At least, Tash thought, they used to give him respect, until Uncle Hoole and I showed up. It wasn’t long before a few of the Dantari spotted Hoole shape-shifting and decided that he, too, had magical powers. Later, Tash had also attracted their attention.

Tash smiled, remembering what the Dantari had seen her doing, and tugged at a small pendant around her neck. She’d been using the pendant to practice using the Force. One evening, when she thought she was alone, Tash had made the necklace move-without touching it. Dantari children, spying on the blond stranger, had been amazed and had run off to tell their parents.

Tash had to admit that she was amazed, too. Still, every time she practiced, she felt the Force grow stronger in her.

Tash fingered the necklace again. The pendant wasn’t very valuable-except to her. It was just a thin metal chain with a small red crystal on the end. Ever since their strange adventures began, she’d kept it locked in her cabin for fear of losing it. It had been a gift from her mother, who had kept a matching one. They had both worn their necklaces on the day Zak and Tash had left their home planet, Alderaan, on a field trip. While they were away, Alderaan was destroyed by the Empire. Their mother and father were killed..

Tash frowned. Thinking of her parents stirred up painful memories. She missed them terribly, especially lately. She knew she was starting to grow up. She was thirteen-in a few years she would be an adult, and she knew the Force would grow stronger as she matured. She wished she could talk

about things like adulthood and the Force with her mom and dad. She had serious questions to ask. Why did she have the Force and not her friends? Was she meant for something special? Could she possibly be destined to be a Jedi Knight?

Tash had always thought that growing up would mean finding out who you are and what you want out of life. But the older she got, the less she knew about herself. She wondered if other kids her age felt the same way.

Of course, most of them had parents to talk to.

Tash looked at the pendant thoughtfully. She'd started wearing it again for two reasons. The first was that it reminded her of her mother and on peaceful Dantooine, she felt safe enough to bring her old memories out of hiding. But the other reason was more practical. The pendant was very small and very light, and Tash found that if she focused on it with the Force, she could make the tiny red pendant move.

She couldn't do much more than that. But it was enough to impress the Dantari.

All except Maga. He couldn't perform tricks like Hoole's and Tash's, and the awe of the other Dantari for the strangers made him angry.

"I think he's still mad at us," Zak whispered to Tash.

"He sure can hold a grudge," Tash replied irritably. "It's not like we did anything to him on purpose."

Maga grunted at them as they passed. His forehead was bumpy and sloped down to his eyebrows, which were bushy and thick. Tash recognized the other Dantari who were with Maga. She didn't know their names, but she knew they were Maga's closest friends, and they didn't like Zak and Tash any more than Maga did.

"Sun falls," Maga growled. "Time to move. You slow us down."

Tash looked up at the sun. “Sun falls” to the Dantari meant exactly what it sounded like: the sun had reached its highest point and was now sinking. It was just past midday.

Maga took an angry step forward. “Offworlders always slow us down.” His companions growled in agreement and stepped forward, too.

As the Dantari crowded around her, Tash’s heart skipped a beat.

“That is not true,” said the cold, hard voice of Uncle Hoole.

Tash suddenly realized her uncle was standing beside her. She didn’t know where he had come from. Hoole, like most Shi’ido, had a gift for moving silently and smoothly, and by now she was used to being surprised by him.

The Shi’ido was as tall as Maga, and stared right into his eyes. “My niece and nephew are always ready to move when the tribe moves,” he said, “and we always move just as quickly.”

Maga blinked. He didn’t like Hoole. But he was frightened by Hoole’s shape-changing power. He wouldn’t dare attack the Shi’ido. Maga stared back at Hoole for just a moment, then turned away, grunting, “Tribe moves. Do not be slow.”

Then he and his followers trudged away.

Tash scowled at Maga’s broad back. “That guy really sets my scanners off. Why does he have to treat us so badly? It makes me mad.”

“We must be tolerant,” Hoole advised. “Remember, we are their guests.”

“I don’t get why these Dantari are always so concerned about starting on time anyway,” Zak observed. “It’s not like there’s anywhere to go.”

Hoole frowned. "It may seem that way to us, Zak, but we are on their world. They have their own customs. They are nomads, and it is their tradition to travel from place to place."

"You'd think they'd get tired once in a while," Zak muttered.

"Remember," Hoole said, "the Dantari do not possess modern technology, and they know little about farming. They must continually travel across the plains in search of food."

Even after nearly a month, Tash and Zak were amazed by how quickly the Dantari broke down their tents, rolled up their animal-skin packs, and started off. In minutes, the small village of tents had vanished completely. The Dantari began marching away from their campsite in a loose, straggly line. With no discussion, the tribe seemed to know where it wanted to go.

Walking in the middle of the crowd, Tash saw the line of low hills ahead grow steadily larger. Because the prairie was so flat, it was hard to judge the distance. Tash thought the hills were very far away, but the tribe reached them long before sunset. The slopes weren't very high, but they were steep.

"How are we going to climb those?" Tash asked.

"Not climb," one of the Dantari said, pointing ahead.

Tash spotted a crack in the steep slope. As they approached, she realized that it was a ravine that led straight through the hills and to the other side.

Without pausing, the tribe of Dantari marched single file into the gap, forming a line to fit into the narrow pathway.

"Uncle Hoole," Tash asked, "how do they know where they're going?"

Hoole shook his head. "I do not have enough information to make a guess," he explained. "However, I believe they are following a traditional path. Their ancestors probably made the same journey, at the same time of year, for thousands of years."

"Boring!" Zak exclaimed.

His voice echoed loudly in the ravine. A moment later, something rumbled in answer.

"What's that?" Tash asked.

"More echoes," Zak replied. "I hope."

But the sound wasn't an echo. It got louder by the second, until it sounded as if the mountain itself was roaring. Tash looked up. For a fraction of a second, she thought she saw a broad-shouldered Dantari standing at the top of the ravine. Then her view was blocked by a boulder that came crashing down the slope. Behind it came another, and another. There were hundreds of rocks bouncing and tumbling down on them.

"Avalanche!"

CHAPTER 2

The shout of warning was all Tash could manage. She stood rooted to the spot, watching a boulder twice her size bounce down the steep hillside, heading right for her.

She watched it bounce once. Twice. Three times.

There were boulders falling all around Tash. She didn't know if she was paralyzed with fear or was just in shock, but she couldn't move.

Luckily, Hoole could. As soon as the boulders started falling, Hoole's skin rippled across his bones-the weird effect that signaled a shape-change. In the next instant, the Shi'ido had vanished, replaced by a wide-bodied, thick-legged dewback. Tash had seen the creatures once before on a visit to the planet Tatooine. They looked like giant lizards, and they were as strong as a dozen gundarks.

The dewback lunged forward, planting itself between Zak and Tash and the avalanche.

Tash and Zak threw their arms over their heads as the boulder slammed into the dewback's side. The dewback Hoole grunted, but didn't move.

Shocked out of her paralyzed state, Tash felt a flush of anger. She had seen someone on the hill. Someone had started the avalanche on purpose!

Around them, the Dantari shouted and screamed, searching for cover.

"Over here!" Tash yelled, motioning for the Dantari with her outstretched arms. Her voice was drowned out by the rumbling and scraping of falling rocks, but many of the Dantari saw her movements and dove for the cover of the dewback's broad body.

More boulders slammed into Hoole, but the Shi'ido stubbornly held his ground.

Most of the Dantari had reached safety behind Hoole, but a small Dantari child stumbled and fell to her knees, crying. Her mother turned and started back for her just as another boulder came hurtling into the ravine. It was going to land right on the child.

"Look out!" shouted Zak, but they could see that the little girl couldn't move in time.

Tash was too angry to think. She reached out with the Force, trying to move the flying rock the same way she'd moved the pendant. She pushed with her mind. In the split second before the falling stone would hit the girl, Tash felt something give, like a stuck drawer suddenly opening. The rock slammed to the ground, just missing the Dantari girl's head.

"That was close!"

"Yeah," Tash said. She felt exhausted, as though she'd just finished a footrace.

The dewback shivered, and a moment later, Hoole stood in its place. Boulders were piled up all around him. The Shi'ido's stern face wrinkled into a grimace of pain, and he rubbed his left arm.

"Are you all right, Uncle Hoole?" Zak asked.

"I am... bruised," Hoole replied. "Many of those boulders were quite heavy, and traveling quickly. Even in the form of a dewback, I'm afraid I took a beating."

It seemed like a miracle, but no one else was hurt. Many of the Dantari had not yet entered the ravine. And those who had, managed to find safety as the rocks fell.

The travelers hurried the rest of the way through the ravine and came out on the other side of the hills. By now the sun had begun to set. Before them stretched the prairie.

“Oh, that’s just prime,” Zak groaned. “More grass.”

“This looks different, though,” Tash said. She squinted and stared at something. On the horizon, she could just make out a few shapes rising out of the grassland. They were too small to be hills and too large to be trees. “There’s something out there.”

Zak squinted, looking where Tash pointed. “I wonder what it is.”

“We’ll have to find out tomorrow,” Hoole replied. “The Dantari have decided to set up camp for the evening.”

This was the most unsettling time of day for Zak and Tash. They were nearly blind in the thickening darkness, while the Dantari seemed to have no problem setting up their animal-skin tents in the dark. Today, however, Zak, Tash, and Hoole quickly set up their tent while the sun was still throwing reddish rays over the prairie. By the time it had set, they were sitting around a small campfire in front of their tent, just one of a dozen campfires lighting the temporary village.

“I’m glad no one was hurt,” Tash said, finally catching her breath. “But there’s still a problem. Who started the rockslide?”

Hoole raised an eyebrow. “Why do you ask that? I suspect such occurrences are quite common in these hills.”

“Maybe,” Tash said. “But I think this one was started on purpose.” She told them what she’d seen on the hill.

“Are you sure you saw a Dantari?” Hoole asked.

Tash shrugged. "I can't be sure. Everything happened so quickly. But I saw someone... and whoever it was, was as big as a Dantari. As big as a certain Dantari we all know and hate."

Hoole sighed. "You mustn't hate Maga, Tash. Remember, we are intruders in his tribe. And we have taken away some of his authority. But," the Shi'ido added, "if you think that Maga is the being you saw, we must report this to the elders."

Zak and Tash jumped to their feet and followed Hoole through the collection of tents until they reached a campfire burning at the center of the temporary village.

Unlike some other cultures, the Dantari didn't have one single leader. All important decisions were made by five or six of the oldest and most experienced members of the tribe. These elders generally discussed any problems facing their people and tried to find a solution together. The closest thing the Dantari had to a king or a chief was Maga, the garoo.

There were six elders sitting around the fire, their faces lined with age. Maga sat nearby, scooping out a bowl of porridge from a cauldron that hung over the fire. The elders were already discussing the rockslide, trying to decide if it was still safe to travel the ravine, when Hoole approached them.

"My niece has something to say," Hoole announced.

The elders looked at Tash. She had never really spoken to the elders of the tribe before. She had never thought of them as leaders-just quiet old men and women wearing animal skins. But now, looking at them, she realized that despite their primitive ways, they really were leaders.

Their keen, bright eyes reminded her of a look Princess Leia Organa had once given her, long ago.

"I...", she began, then stopped. She glanced at Maga.

"Perhaps this should be said in private," Hoole suggested.

One of the elders, who had a gap between his front teeth, shook his head. "Not Dantari way. No secrets from people."

Tash nodded. It was probably a good way to run the tribe. Or the galaxy. Secrets and hidden schemes were methods the Empire used. Still, she felt uncomfortable accusing Maga to his face.

"I saw...", she started again. "That is, I think I saw Maga standing at the top of the hill just before the avalanche started."

"Maga push rocks?" another elder asked.

Tash nodded.

All six elders turned toward their garoo, who was glaring at Tash. But instead of becoming angry, Maga shrugged and said through a mouthful of porridge, "Girl is wrong."

The gap-toothed elder turned back to Tash. "You saw his face? You know?"

Tash frowned. She hadn't seen a face. Finally, she admitted, "Everything happened too fast. I saw something up there. Then the rocks came down. I thought it was Maga... but no, I didn't see his face."

Maga snorted. "Not see my face because Maga was not there. Ask Bann. Ask Durba."

Tash scowled. Bann and Durba were two of Maga's friends. They'd say anything to protect him.

One of the elders shrugged. "Maga is garoo. Garoo does not lie."

But the gap-toothed elder shook his head. "Girl has power. Girl is like garoo."

"Only Maga is garoo!" Maga growled, leaping to his feet.

The elders stirred briefly, unsettled by his outburst. They murmured to each other in low voices for a moment, then nodded. Finally, the gap-toothed elder spoke. "Girl says she saw, but is not sure. Maga says he was not there, and was seen by eyes of others. We will do nothing. Water mixes with water."

Tash sighed. "Water mixes with water" was a popular Dantari saying. The Dantari believed that some problems could not be solved. It was like one cup of water poured into another cup of water. Which water was which, and did it even matter?

"But I saw someone!" Tash insisted.

"Who?" the elder asked.

Tash didn't answer.

Maga grinned. His teeth were crooked and yellow. "Yes, offworlder," he said. "Who?"

Again, Tash didn't answer. Maga snorted. "Girl is crazy. Whole family is crazy. Parents probably crazy, too."

Tash bristled at the mention of her parents. Anger boiled up inside her, hotter than a nova. Gathering her strength, she glared at Maga and lashed out with the Force.

CHAPTER 3

Tash was surprised at how easily the Force bent to her will this time. The cauldron near Maga suddenly tilted. A blob of hot porridge sloshed out of the pot, spilling right into his lap. The big Dantari leaped to his feet, howling as he tried to wipe the hot, sticky substance away.

The elders and Zak laughed. To them, it looked as if Maga had stumbled against the pot and spilled the porridge all over himself.

Tash turned away to hide the smug expression on her face. Without saying a word to Zak or Uncle Hoole, she went back to their tent, crawled onto a soft fur blanket that served as her bed, and fell asleep.

That night, Tash dreamed.

She was standing on the bridge of a starship. Through the viewport, she could see her home planet, Alderaan, floating in space like a blue-green gem on a necklace of stars. She felt happy. She was going home to see her parents. Everything was all right.

Suddenly, a shadow fell across the planet as a large dark object passed between Alderaan and the sun.

It was the Death Star. Tash watched the Imperial battle station slowly rotate until its enormous superlaser pointed directly at her homeworld.

“No!” Tash screamed, but her voice made no sound. The Death Star was preparing to fire.

Tash remembered the Force. She had moved the tiny pendant. She had moved the large boulder. Maybe she could even move the Death Star. She tried to calm herself to find the peaceful place within her where the Force seemed

to be. Then she reached out and willed the Death Star to move.

It didn't.

She tried again, pushing harder, but still the battle station crept forward, preparing to destroy her home planet, her parents, and everything she loved.

Tash's stomach twisted into an angry knot. She couldn't let her parents die! She wouldn't!

The minute she grew angry, Tash felt the Force take on a new shape inside her. It wasn't calm or peaceful - now it rolled and wriggled inside her as if she'd swallowed a snake. But it was powerful. Very powerful. With it, she knew she could do anything. She could destroy the Death Star with a thought. She would be more powerful than Darth Vader. More powerful than the Emperor himself! All she had to do was use her anger...

Tash awoke, sitting up with a start. Her heart was racing and her hair was matted with sweat. She held up her hand-it was trembling. She realized she felt angry. What had she been dreaming? Something about using the Force to destroy the Death Star...

She put her hands on her stomach, remembering the sick feeling of snakes wriggling around inside her. That wasn't the Force. At least, it wasn't the way she wanted the Force to feel.

The first time Tash had used the Force was when she'd met the ghost of a Jedi named Aidan. She'd felt calm and at peace. Using the Force had taken no effort at all.

Tash slipped her pendant from around her neck and put it on the ground. She took a deep breath, letting all her muscles relax as she focused on the little necklace. She

reached out through the Force and willed the pendant to rise.

The tiny red crystal trembled, then slowly lifted into the air. It hovered there for a moment or two, then dropped back down to the ground.

Tash looked around for something larger to move. On the ground near the entrance to their tent sat a serving bowl. It wasn't as large as the cauldron she'd dumped on Maga, but it was larger than anything Tash had tried to move during practice. She focused on the bowl, imagining that it would rise.

It didn't move.

Tash frowned. She'd moved bigger objects twice now-first the boulder, then the pot full of porridge. What was the problem?

Suddenly it struck her. Both of those times she had been angry. Was that the key? Was she supposed to use her anger to strengthen the Force?

That didn't sound right to Tash. She had read everything she could find about the Jedi, and although the Empire had banned all information about them years ago, she still managed to learn a lot. Everything she had read told her that the Jedi did not use anger or aggressive emotions. They fought for peace.

But her power was stronger when she used her anger. How could that be?

Tash wondered about her dream for the rest of that night, and it filled her thoughts all the next morning. As the Dantari broke camp and started their hike, she kept to herself, walking silently along with the other Dantari while Zak zipped in and out of the migrating crowd, running races with some of the Dantari children. At first Tash didn't think

he had noticed her change in mood, but when they stopped to rest at noon, he came up to her.

“So what’s got your comlink so silent?” he asked. “Why so gloomy?”

Tash frowned. “It would take a while to explain.” Zak replied, “Okay, you can tell me on the way.”

“On the way where?”

Zak started to walk. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

Before Tash could ask another question, Zak was running across the prairie. She had to sprint to catch up with him. She reached his side just as they came to the top of a very low hill. It was more like a mound of grass, really, but it was high enough to block the view of the horizon. At the top of the mound was a tall bilba tree, its branches covered with sharp thorns. Zak pulled her down so that they were crouched low in the grass.

“Look,” he said, pointing ahead.

But Tash had already seen it. Ahead of them lay the glittering silver line of a river. On the far side of the river, Tash could see two separate sets of buildings. The closer one looked ancient and ruined, but it was still too far away to be seen in detail. The buildings farther away had a familiar shape, as if they were new.

“I could see those places when we came through the ravine,” she said. “I thought they were hills or something.”

“Nope,” Zak said. “I heard some of the Dantari talk about them. They’re buildings. Here, on a planet that isn’t supposed to have any sort of civilization at all.”

“It is strange,” she agreed.

“You want to go investigate?” Zak asked.

Tash was tempted. "How far away are they?"

Zak shrugged. "It's hard to tell, especially since I don't know how big the buildings are. But I'd guess not more than a couple of kilometers. If we hurried we could be there in no time."

But Tash had already made up her mind. "No," she decided. "Not right now. Besides, I'm not sure how safe I feel wandering around alone after what happened at the ravine. Maga is awfully angry at me."

"Maga," Zak chuckled. "You handled him pretty well last night."

Tash turned to her brother. "You knew that was me? With the porridge?"

"Let's just say I figured you were trying to Force the issue."

Tash sat down in the grass, shaking her head. "It's not funny, Zak. I think I did something wrong."

"It was just a practical joke, Tash."

"But I used the Force," she explained. "And I was mad."

"So?" Zak replied.

Tash wanted to tell him about waking up angry the night before, but she couldn't. Finally, she said, "I don't know... it's not just the kind of thing I normally do."

"No kidding," Zak chuckled. "It's about time you started to loosen up a little."

Tash shook her head. "I'm just not sure that's the kind of person I'm supposed to be."

Zak shrugged his shoulders. "You're supposed to be who you are. That's all."

“Yeah, but who is that?” Tash asked, staring out at the prairie. “I mean, I can use the Force a little, right? So am I supposed to be some wise Jedi Master now, or a thirteen year-old? I don’t think I can be both.”

“You think too much,” Zak replied.

Tash was about to reply when she felt a hand clamp down on her neck like a vise. A powerful hand spun her around, and she found herself staring into Maga’s ugly face.

“So,” the Dantari growled, “now it is Maga’s turn to play tricks.”

CHAPTER 4

Tash didn't know how the huge Dantari had sneaked up on them so quietly. All she knew was that his enormous hand was poised to snap her neck like a twig. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Zak caught in a similar hold. Then her vision started to go black around the edges.

Maga spun her around and she found herself staring into his wide, flat face. He was so close that his stinking breath hung around her nose like a thick cloud. She started to swoon.

Just when she thought the Dantari would break her neck, his grip suddenly loosened. Tash dropped to the ground. The ground seemed to spin as she felt blood rush to her head. Fighting to keep her knees from trembling, Tash climbed to her feet and looked around to see who had stopped Maga from killing them.

But there was no one there.

Maga stood before them, almost twice as tall as Tash. Stringy black hair hung over his forehead and into his eyes. His face was set in an angry frown.

"Wh-Why?" she gasped.

Maga grunted. "Why do I not kill you?" His dark eyes gleamed. "I could. No one sees. I could break you!" He made a motion as though snapping a tree branch, and Tash shuddered.

But the Dantari's frown suddenly disappeared. "I do it to show you. To prove to you I do not try to kill you."

Tash didn't know whether to be happy or shocked or both. She looked around again. The Dantari camp was far away, and although they were standing atop the small hill, it

would have been a simple thing for Maga to carry them down the other side of the hill, away from camp, and dispose of them both. Uncle Hoole was not around to protect them. There were no witnesses.

"I-I'm sorry, Maga," she said at last. "I guess I misjudged you."

"Right," Zak added, although he didn't sound quite as certain.

Maga grunted softly, which must have been his way of accepting the apology, because his shoulders relaxed. He looked past them at the ruins in the distance. "You look at the place of fallen rocks?"

"The ruins?" Tash asked. "Yes, we were interested. We didn't think the Dantari built anything."

Maga shook his head. "Those are not Dantari. Offworlders built those. The far one built fifteen seasons ago, before Maga became garoo. The near one is older. Much older." His dark eyes studied Tash. "Thousands of seasons ago. Built by Jedi."

Tash's eyes widened. "Y-You know about the Jedi?"

Maga laughed at her. "Maga is garoo. Wise man of my people. My teacher pass down wisdom to me. His teacher pass to him." He puffed up his chest proudly. "What Dantari for ten thousand seasons have seen, and heard, is here. " He tapped his head.

Tash felt a heavy weight fall around her heart. She really had misjudged Maga. Uncle Hoole had warned her not to be so harsh. After all, they were the strangers in this beautiful but empty land. Tash had made the mistake of assuming the Dantari were as empty as their planet. She had thought the garoo was a fake, a phony magician. But it amazed her to think of all the things he must know.

“Is there anything left in the Jedi ruins?” Tash asked. “Anything worth seeing?”

Maga shrugged. “No one knows. Dantari do not go there. When offworlders built their hills of stone, they did go to ruins. But they left.”

“We’ve got to go!” Tash said. “Maga, please take us.” Zak looked from Tash to Maga and back to Tash. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Tash hardly heard him. “Zak, don’t you see? This is my chance to learn more about the Jedi. There could be old tools, or datadisks, maybe even a whole library that can teach me about the Jedi. Come on!”

And she was off and running before Zak could protest.

Distance was always hard to judge on Dantooine. Hills that seemed far away were actually less than a day’s walk. Ruins that looked close enough to reach in a short sprint turned out to be a long-distance jog. By the time Tash got close enough to the ruins to see them clearly, she was out of breath and hot from running. She had stripped off her long-sleeved overshirt and tied it around her waist. Even in short sleeves, she felt the sun beating down on her.

She had planned to enter the ruins whether or not Zak and Maga caught up to her. But as she reached the first few scattered building stones on the outskirts of the ancient Jedi site, she decided she couldn’t go on, and sat down to rest.

The ruins looked old, as old as anything Tash had seen. She had been to the planet Gobindi once, a jungle world where the ancient inhabitants had built huge stone temples as high as mountains. She had also visited the abandoned space station Nespis 8. These ruins looked older than either of those places.

Once, several dozen buildings must have stood here, protected by a ring of stones that encircled them all. But over thousands of years, the buildings had collapsed under the wind and rain of Dantooine's weather. Stones had fallen, ceilings had given way, walls had tumbled. Still, through the maze of stone blocks that were taller than she was, Tash could make out at least one building still standing somewhere amid the rubble.

By the time she had her breath back, her brother and Maga had caught up.

"Tash," Zak said between huge gulps of air. "I think we should go hack. The Dantari will want to break camp soon."

"Dantari will not move," Maga stated. "We camp at river for many days. Dantari will not move."

"Good," Tash said, pushing herself to her feet. "I want to see what's in there."

"Tash," Zak said, grabbing at the shirt around her waist to hold her back. "I don't think this is a good idea. Uncle Hoole--"

"He'll understand," she said. "Zak, this is a Jedi place. Don't you know what that means to me?"

Zak shook his head; "Yeah, but it's not like these ruins are going anywhere. They've been here a thousand years. They can wait until tomorrow."

"Maybe, but I can't!" she said, and jumped ahead. She reached the outer ring of stones that had once been a protective wall. Passing inside, she soon vanished behind a stone the size of a small starship.

Zak sighed. He knew he should run after her, but he had sprinted to catch up, and his legs felt as if they'd fallen into a black hole.

Beside him, Maga chuckled.

Zak suddenly thought of something. "Hey, Maga, I thought you said the Dantari would camp close to the river."

"We do."

Zak pointed to the river, which was less than a kilometer away. "But this was the closest way to the river. Why didn't the tribe just come this way?"

Maga shrugged. "Dantari do not camp here. It is too close to the fallen stones."

"So?" Zak asked.

Maga pointed at the ruined Jedi fortress. "Dantari fear the place of fallen stones."

"Why?"

Maga grinned. "Because of the legends."

Zak didn't like the way Maga was dragging this out. "What legends?"

"The ancient garoos say," Maga chuckled, "those who enter the place of fallen stones do not come out again."

CHAPTER 5

Tash was much too far away to hear Maga's triumphant laughter. And she might have heard Zak shouting faintly after her, but if she did, she thought it was the wind that moaned among the rocks.

She entered the ruins of the Jedi fortress.

Even after thousands of years of decay, the ruins were impressive. Most modern buildings were made of steelcrete. Even the ancient stone temples she'd seen on the planet Gobindi looked as if they'd been put together by machines. But these—these looked like ruined works of art. Tash walked up to the remains of a stone wall. Only three or four blocks were still standing, but each block was twice her height and several meters thick. They must have weighed many tons apiece.

Tash looked more closely and noticed that there were no marks on the stone itself. The stone was rough. It hadn't been smoothed by a construction droid, or even carried by one. If it had, there would have been scrape marks on the surface.

A small clump of grass grew at the base of the wall. Tash plucked a blade and tried to slip it between two of the stones. It wouldn't fit. Tash realized that only one thing could put stones together with such precision.

The Force.

She felt the Force moving all around her. It was like the wind, but not exactly. She could feel a breeze on her skin, but the Force.. she felt that inside her skin. It was like

Chink, chink! Tash heard something scramble over the rocks to her left. When she looked, there was nothing there.

Chink, chink! Something scuttled between two fallen stones in front of her, but disappeared before she could see what it was.

"I'm not alone here," she whispered.

She wondered whether to go forward or back, but when she turned around, she wasn't sure which way was back. "These ruins aren't that big," she said.

She turned in the direction she thought she had come from and trotted along the half-ruined wall. She turned left, and found herself looking down a narrow alley between two ruined buildings. That was the way she had come... wasn't it?

Chink, chink! Again she turned to look, and again saw nothing. Tash thought about running away, but she didn't know where to run. So instead she bolted after whatever had vanished.

By the time she reached the corner, whatever it was, was gone.

However, she knew she had reached the center of the ruins.

Before her stood the building she had seen from outside, the only intact structure still standing in the ruins. It wasn't very tall, and it wasn't very wide. It was built in the shape of a short round tower.

And the Force was strong inside it. She could feel it from the outside.

Cautiously, Tash crept forward. She felt as if she were being watched.

She reached the entrance. There must have been a door here once, but it had been blasted away, leaving a hole framed by jagged edges. Carefully, Tash put her hand on the

rough edge of the broken entryway and peered inside. The room was empty. But that didn't stop a chill from running down her spine like ice water. She felt something here.

The dark side of the Force.

The sensation that someone, or something, was watching her grew stronger. Her skin tingled, and the tiny hairs on her arms and the back of her neck stood on end.

The dark feeling frightened her. But at the same time, she felt something inside her reach out for it. She didn't want it to happen, but she couldn't stop it.

Distracted by the cold feeling of the dark side, Tash never heard the footsteps that closed in behind her. She didn't hear anything until a hand wrapped itself around her neck.

Tash felt herself jerked backward until she lost her footing. An arm encircled her throat, cutting off her air. Whoever it was, they were strong.

Maga! she thought. He's trying to kill me!

But then she heard a male voice speaking without the harsh Dantari accent. "Don't struggle, I-"

She didn't know who her attacker was, but she didn't plan to wait to find out. Briefly, Tash considered trying to use the Force to lift up a nearby rock and hurl it at his head. But she couldn't concentrate, so she settled for something simpler.

She bit him.

Her teeth sank into his arm and the man howled in pain. He loosened his grip and she broke free, turning to face her attacker. He was human, with a round freckled face and reddish hair. He had backed away, preparing himself for more trouble as he clutched at the bite wound on his arm.

When she saw that the man had given up the fight, Tash eased up a little. “Who are you? Why are you here? Why did you grab me?”

“I think I should be the one to ask the questions,” the man said.

But he didn’t get a chance to ask any. Something large and dark and furry vaulted over Tash’s shoulder and slammed into the stranger, driving him into the ground.

CHAPTER 6

Tash couldn't tell what species the creature was. All she could tell was that long, curved fangs stabbed out from its upper jaw. Then, an instant later, the creature shivered as if very cold, and transformed into a tall, gray-skinned Shi'ido.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash shouted.

"Tash, are you injured?" Hoole said, never taking his dark eyes off the stranger. He loomed over the man, who lay flat on his back, stunned.

"No," she said. "It's all right, you can-"

"Tash!" her brother yelled. He came running up from behind. "Sorry it took me so long to get here. I thought I'd better go back and get Uncle Hoole. And then we heard the screams."

Hoole still hadn't taken his eyes off the red-haired man. "We would have reached you sooner, but the design of these ruins is most intriguing. And confusing."

"Yeah," Zak agreed. "And I think Maga knew about it. He wanted you to wander in here and get lost, rash."

Tash had nearly forgotten about Maga and didn't care about him at the moment. She pointed to the man. "I think it's all right, Uncle Hoole. You can let him up."

Hoole stepped back, his face still dark with anger. "Why did you attack my niece?"

The man stood up and dusted himself off. He was wearing an old flight suit. His red hair was a tangled mess and dust now covered his face. His eyes were bright but, Tash thought, kind of empty.

The glowpanels are lit, she thought, but nobody's home. "I didn't attack her," the man answered. Words tumbled out of his mouth. "I was so surprised to see anyone here... we never get visitors... I just didn't know if she was real."

"Where did you come from?" Hoole demanded. "Over there," the man said, waving his hand toward the river.

"How did you get here?" Hoole demanded.

"I walked," the man replied.

Hoole's frown deepened. He tried an even simpler question. "What is your name?"

"My name is Eyal, and as I said, I should be the one asking questions." Eyal's eyes brightened, as though he'd just gotten a brilliant idea. "But why don't we go back to our base? We can talk there."

Hoole raised an eyebrow. "Your base?"

"Sure," Eyal said warmly.

He pointed in the direction of the group of newer buildings.

Hoole and the two Arrandas exchanged glances, and Tash could tell her brother and uncle had the same questions she had: Was this the old Rebel base? Wasn't it supposed to be abandoned?

"Excuse us," Hoole said, pulling Zak and Tash to one side. Eyal simply nodded and smiled.

"I don't like this," Zak said. "He attacked Tash!"

"Yes," Hoole agreed in a low voice. "But his presence also raises some intriguing questions. I am curious to know who is on this planet. If there are Rebels here, they could help us in our efforts to evade the Empire."

Zak was still suspicious. "Uncle Hoole, you're usually the one who warns us to keep out of trouble. Don't you think we should avoid this guy like a black hole?"

Hoole considered. "You have a point, Zak, but if we keep our eyes open we should be fine."

Before they left the Jedi ruins, Tash asked Hoole and Zak to examine the round room, wondering if they would feel the same thing she had. They did. Zak said it felt like the electric tingle of a scanner. Hoole merely shrugged.

Eyal led them out of the ruins. Although the layout of the place still confused Tash, Eyal seemed to have an excellent sense of direction.

"How do you know where you're going?" Tash asked him. Try as she might, she couldn't tell exactly where they were. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought the ruins were shifting around, making new paths and blocking old ones. But of course that was impossible.

"It just takes some getting used to," Eyal explained.

Instead of taking them back toward the prairie, from where they'd come, he led them in the opposite direction. As they exited the ruins, they found themselves near the river. To Tash's surprise, she saw that a bridge had been built across the river. It was simple, made of bilba tree wood, but it was a good, solid construction.

"I didn't think the Dantari built anything," she said.

"Oh, the Dantari didn't build this," Eyal said. "They never come here. I don't think they like the ruins, or the base."

The abandoned Rebel base rose up out of the grassland as if it had been put there by mistake. Located a short distance from the river, it had only five buildings-round, modern, brown domes that rose several stories high.

As they drew near, Tash and Zak heard sounds of activity. Voices were carried to them on the wind, as well as the sounds of hammering and drilling.

"I thought the Rebel base was abandoned long ago, before the Death Star even," Zak said as they crossed the bridge.

Eyal blinked. "What is the Death Star?"

"Are you kidding?" Zak answered. "I thought everyone had heard about the Battle of Yavin, and the Death Star. The Rebels destroyed it!"

Eyal shrugged. "We have been cut off from the rest of the galaxy for some time. In fact, that's why I'm bringing you to the base. I'm hoping you can help us get off this planet."

Hoole and the Arrandas quickly saw what Eyal meant by us. Not only was the Rebel base not abandoned, it was filled with people. All of them were dressed in jumpsuits that looked as if they'd come out of the same box. There were humans, and short, gill-faced Sullustans, and Bothans, and several other species Tash didn't recognize. They all seemed to be working hard, carrying bundles this way and that.

Tash noticed that all the activity revolved around one building in the center. As they approached, the Rebels all stopped and stared-except for one Sullustan, who trotted toward them. He was shorter than Tash and had large dark eyes and even larger ears.

"Eyal," he said in a thick accent. "Who are the strangers?"

"Hello, Dr'uun," Eyal replied. "I found them wandering in the old ruins. I thought our leader should meet them right away."

"You're right," Dr'uun said. "But he's away at the moment."

Eyal considered. "Should we wait?"

The Sullustan shook his head. "The leader wouldn't want any delays. If these people can help us, we should get started immediately."

Tash had no idea what they were talking about, and she could see that Zak was just as confused. She wanted to ask questions, but Hoole spoke first. "We would be happy to help in any way possible. But I do not know what we can do for you."

"Come with us."

Eyal and Dr'uun led them toward the central building. There were more stares, and a small crowd began to follow them until Eyal called out, "I know you're excited, but you all have duties to perform. Get back to work until our leader returns. He'll tell you everything you need to know about the new arrivals."

At the mention of their leader, the crowd of Rebels nodded, muttered, and returned to their duties, which seemed to involve scurrying around the base for no obvious reason.

Whatever it had been before, the central building had been turned into a giant aircraft hangar. The roof was high and the inside of the building totally hollowed out, making one enormous space. It wasn't empty, though.

Squatting in the middle was a spaceship. Or at least, what might have been a spaceship, if spaceships were made out of old scrap metal, bilba tree wood, and patches of woven grass. It was like a giant model of a star freighter, several times larger than their own ship, the Shroud. It was the kind of thing children might build in their backyard, only on a much bigger scale. It obviously wasn't real. So what Eyal said next caught the three newcomers by surprise.

“You can help us with this,” Eyal said. “Can you get our spaceship to fly?”

CHAPTER 7

Tash waited for Eyal to laugh-he had to be joking. But the Rebel continued to look at them seriously. Hoole raised an eyebrow-it was as close as her stone-faced uncle would ever get to looking surprised.

"That will not fly," Hoole told Eyal.

"That's true," Dr'uun said. "Especially if I don't get back to work. Eyal, make our visitors welcome, and come see me after you've talked." The Sullustan hurried toward the ridiculous starship and disappeared inside.

Eyal sighed. "I'm afraid you're right. We had several dismantled ships, and we put all the parts together. But we don't have a working repulsor unit to get the ship off the ground. And we couldn't get very far in deep space anyway, because we don't have a hyperdrive motivator."

Zak couldn't contain himself any longer. "Yeah, not to mention that your ship is made of wood and grass!" Eyal blinked.

He didn't seem to understand Zak's point.

A hint of suspicion entered Hoole's eye. "You are trying to leave the planet?"

"Of course," Eyal said. "We've been stranded here for a long time. Our leader says we need to get off Dantooine right away."

"Can't others in the Rebellion pick you up?" Tash asked. "Don't they know you're here?"

"Apparently not," Eyal admitted. "We have no communications equipment, and no one has arrived on Dantooine except you."

“How did you get here?” Tash asked.

Eyal blinked. He looked, Tash realized, as if he’d never considered the question before. “We were... we were left here.”

“You mean when the rest of the Rebels abandoned the base?” Zak asked.

Again Eyal paused. “Yes.”

Hoole considered. Tash could sense that he was bothered by the strange behavior of these Rebels. But he didn’t seem to think they were a threat. Finally, Hoole said, “If you need to get off the planet, we can help. We have a ship. It’s far too small to accommodate everyone. But we could take a few of you, and-“

“You have a ship!” Eyal shouted. “That’s perfect! Where is it?”

“In hiding,” Hoole explained. “We didn’t want to frighten the Dantari.”

“Could we reach it quickly?” Eyal asked.

“There is no need to go to it,” Hoole said. He pulled a small device from the folds of his robe. It was a flat, black rectangle with several buttons. “I can summon the ship with this remote. The autopilot is programmed to fly slowly and safely, but the ship could reach us in”-he paused to check the readout on the small remote’s computer screen-“in a little over a standard hour.”

A Sullustan trotted past them. “Hello, Eyal!” the Sullustan called out.

“Hello, Dr’aan!” Eyal called back as the Sullustan passed by.

Tash did a double take as the small Sullustan hurried away. “Did you see that?” she asked.

“What?” Zak asked.

“That Sullustan,” she sputtered. “He-He looked just like Dr’uun.”

Zak turned, but by that time the second Sullustan was out of sight. He shrugged. “Maybe all Sullustans look alike,” he said wryly. “Maybe all humans look alike to them.”

Tash ignored the joke. “Maybe it was the jumpsuit,” she muttered. “They’re all wearing the same uniform.”

She looked at Eyal as if to ask a question, but their guide was too absorbed by Hoole and his small remote.

Hoole entered a code into the remote, and watched as the screen showed him a series of signals. “The remote shows that all systems are functioning. The Shroud should be here in approximately two hours and forty minutes.”

Eyal looked extremely relieved. “This is the best news we’ve had. Will you excuse me? I need to tell some of the others.”

“Of course,” Hoole replied. “What should we do in the meantime?”

“Feel free to look around,” Eyal said. “Or you can walk back down to the river. It is pleasant there. I’ll be back shortly.” He hurried out of the building.

Hoole, Zak, and Tash exchanged glances. Hoole nodded for them to follow him, and they left the hangar. Hoole led them back toward the river, where they sat in the grass near the wooden bridge. Beside them, the wide river flowed quietly and peacefully. They were well out of earshot of the Rebels.

“Do you get the feeling these people are a few starships short of a fleet?” Zak said.

“At least one starship short,” Tash laughed, thinking of their ridiculous ship.

“I agree there is much to question,” Hoole said. “Starting with the fact that anyone is here at all. When I first heard mention of Dantooine and considered it as a place for us to hide, I learned that there was an abandoned Rebel base. However, the Rebels left because the Empire had discovered them. It is highly unlikely that they would use the base again once it had been exposed.”

“Although,” Tash replied, “it’s not such a bad idea. Why would the Empire come back to a place that was already abandoned? Maybe it was a good place for the Rebels after all.”

“But these Rebels?” Zak said skeptically. “Think about the Rebels we’ve met. Princess Leia, Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Wedge Antilles. They’re all as keen as laser beams. These people”—he gestured toward the Rebel base—“are, well, a little slow.”

“And would their fellow Rebels really have left them here?” Tash wondered.

Hoole shook his head. “I find it difficult to believe that they are part of the Rebel Alliance. They, however, seem to believe it, and we have no cause to argue with them.”

“So what do we do?” Zak asked.

“They have an earnest desire to leave the planet, and they are harmless enough,” the Shi’ido replied. “I see no reason to refuse them assistance.” Hoole looked at his niece. “Unless you have feelings that tell you otherwise, Tash?”

Tash tried to gather her thoughts. What was she feeling? “I don’t think so,” she said at last. “I mean, I do feel something, but I’m sure it has nothing to do with these

people. When Eyal talks, I believe him. I don't get any feelings in the Force, as I do when people are lying and planning to hurt us." She paused. "But when I was in the ruins, I felt something from the dark side, something I've only felt before around Darth Vader."

They had met Vader once. Tash and Zak had been his prisoners for a short time. Neither of them liked to think about it.

"I'd say that falls into the category of not good," Zak said.

"Do you have any idea why you got that feeling?" Hoole asked.

Tash shook her head. She couldn't bring herself to tell them the other part-that she had found herself reaching out to the dark side. All she said was, "I was trying to figure that out when Eyal grabbed me."

"Speaking of getting grabbed," Zak said, "I want to make sure no one gets grabbed by Maga. Uncle Hoole, Maga lured Tash into the ruins, hoping she'd get lost. You should have heard him laugh!"

Hoole's eyes darkened. "Yes, I'm afraid I was too forgiving of Maga. He poses an obvious danger. However, if we are to help these beings, we will not be staying on Dantooine much longer anyway."

Tash and Zak had mixed reactions to the news. Dantooine had been a refreshing break from their recent troubles, and neither one of them felt in any hurry to leave. Still, it obviously wasn't safe to remain near Maga any longer.

"We still have some time before the ship arrives," Hoole said. "I believe I would like to take Eyal up on his offer and look around. Shall we go back into the base?"

“Prime,” Zak said, jumping to his feet. “As long as you’re sure they’re not going to pull blasters on us, I want to find out just how crazy they are. Let’s move.”

“Actually, I’d rather not,” Tash replied. “You go ahead.”

Hoole paused. “It would be wiser to stay together.” Tash knew that if she tried to sort out her thoughts in the company of her uncle or her brother, she’d end up talking to them. And she wasn’t ready for that yet. “I have some things to think about.”

Hoole seemed to read her mind. “I would prefer that you not return to the Jedi ruins just yet.”

“I promise,” she said.

“In that case,” Hoole considered, “very well. The Dantari do not seem to come near the ruins, so you are safe from Maga. But please do not wander off.”

Tash promised again, and waved as Zak and Hoole departed.

Once she was alone, she let out a deep sigh. She realized that she’d been on edge since the moment she’d entered the Jedi ruins.

No, she thought, I’ve been anxious since before that. She’d been edgy since she’d used the Force in anger against Maga. Tash tried to remember her nightmare, but all she recalled was the cold, dreadful feeling of the dark side.

The moment Tash thought of the dark side of the Force, it seemed to reach out and surround her. Tash shivered as though a chill wind had washed over her. The sun lost some of its shine. The blue sky turned a bit darker. A gray mist settled around the edges of her vision. She stared ahead at the bridge, but it seemed clouded by fog. She blinked, but her vision would not clear.

I need to concentrate on something, she thought. I should practice with the Force.

Tash pulled the crystal pendant from inside her shirt. Despite the fog, the ruby-red gem flashed in the sunlight. Tash tried to focus on the pendant, imagining the Force connecting her to the tiny crystal.

Relax, she told herself. The Force will work when you're peaceful.

But Tash couldn't relax. The crystal pendant made her think of her mother, and this time, instead of the warm memories of the moment her mother had given her the pendant, all she could think of was her mother's death. Her mother was gone forever, wiped out, along with an entire planet, by the Empire.

An angry frown crossed Tash's face.

She hated the Empire.

Shaking the thought from her head, Tash held the pendant in the palm of her hand and refocused. She tried to remain calm, but all she could think about was how sad she was... and how terrible the Empire was... and how angry she was at all Imperials... and how she wished she could use the Force to destroy the Emperor forever.

The pendant leaped from her hand and flew through the air.

Tash watched in disbelief as the pendant fell into the grass. She had never been able to move anything-large or small-that far before.

Instinctively, she knew why.

It was the dark side. She had let herself get angry, even hateful, while thinking of the Empire. It had given her a strength she'd never had before.

The dark side.

Tash felt it call to her again. It was tugging at her. She felt it pull her toward the ruins... toward the room at the center of the Jedi fortress. Something was there. Waiting for her.

Tash tried to ignore the silent call by putting her mind on her pendant. She got down on her hands and knees in the grass to look for it.

Nearby, she heard footsteps on the bridge. She looked up. It was Eyal. He was passing her, walking across the bridge toward the ruins.

"Hi. Lost something?" Eyal asked.

"Yes, but I'll find it, thanks," she replied.

He nodded and walked on toward the base.

Tash stuck her nose back into the grass, searching for the pendant. It had to be here somewhere...

Tash heard footsteps on the bridge. She looked up.

It was Eyal. He was crossing the bridge, heading toward the ruins.

Again.

CHAPTER 8

While Tash was sitting on the riverbank, Hoole and Zak went back to the Rebel base. As before, they received quite a few stares but were otherwise ignored.

"They sure seem busy," Zak said as several Rebel personnel hurried past. "I wonder what they're doing."

"Perhaps word of our ship has spread," Hoole suggested, "and they are preparing for departure. I wonder if there is some sort of computer record stored here that we could look at."

"If there is, it would be in that building," Zak said, turning toward the closest of the five domes.

"How are you so certain?" the Shi'ido asked.

Zak pointed to a small shed beside the dome. Tubes ran from the shed into the dome wall. Both the shed and the tubes looked as if they hadn't been cleaned or repaired in years. "That's a climate control unit. Or at least what's left of one. Since computers need cool air, the Rebels probably pump air from there into the computer room."

Hoole nodded. "I forget how much you know about technology. Come."

They strolled over to the building. There was a doorway but no door, and they walked inside. No one seemed to mind. In fact, this particular building was almost empty. Unlike in the hangar, there were several floors above them, and many rooms on each floor. Fortunately, they did not have to search every room. The same tubes Zak had seen running into the building ran along the ceiling. Zak and Hoole simply followed the tubes down a dusty hallway and into a large room at the back.

The room was almost completely empty. They could see scuff marks on the floor indicating where computers had once stood, but most of them had been removed. Only a few remained, and these were heavily coated with dust and seemed to be inactive.

Hoole frowned. "It would appear this computer room is no longer in use."

Zak looked at one computer's control panel. "Maybe. But this was used recently. At least, it wasn't years ago." He pointed to several buttons that had been wiped free of dust. And the screen itself had been sloppily cleared, as though someone had wiped their hand across it.

Zak found the activation switch and flipped it on. The computer lights slowly faded up, and they heard a weak hum. "The battery power is fading," Zak said.

"Show me what you can access," Hoole requested.

Zak's fingers flew over the keyboard. "There's not much here. I guess if the Rebels abandoned this place, they erased all of the vital information. All that's left are a few personnel records. Names and profiles of some of the staff and work assignments. Boring stuff."

"Call up Eyal's name," Hoole said.

Zak did as he was asked. The computer seemed to work through the request slowly. Finally, a few lines of text appeared on the screen. As they read over the screen, Zak's jaw dropped and Hoole raised an eyebrow.

NAME: Eyal Shah

BIRTH PLANET: Corellia

AGE: 27

All the information on the screen matched what Eyal had told Tash.

But the being in the picture was totally different.

"Maybe it's an error," Zak said, looking at the picture of a total stranger. "This computer's old. The files could be corrupted."

"Perhaps," Hoole agreed. "There should be an original datadisk for each person, shouldn't there?"

"Yeah, a backup in case the computers fail." There was a cabinet below the computer terminal. Zak opened it and found a tray labeled PERSONNEL DATA DISKS. But it was empty. "So much for that." A hint of nervousness crept into his voice. "Uncle Hoole, what do you think is going on here?"

"Nothing to be concerned about. At least not yet," the Shi'ido replied. "Aside from the strange behavior regarding the starship, there is nothing here but a personnel record with the wrong picture attached. This is all explainable. But I think it is best to keep our eyes open."

Zak had stopped listening. He had turned to look at his uncle as Hoole spoke, but a moment later his eyes went wide. "Hey!" he yelled, and pointed over Hoole's shoulder. Hoole whipped his head around, but the room and the doorway were empty.

"What did you see?" the Shi'ido asked.

"I saw Tash," Zak replied. "I mean, I think it was Tash. Blond hair, braid. Except her clothes were different. She had on one of those jumpsuits the Rebels wear. She stopped in the doorway, then she ducked out as soon as I turned around."

Hoole frowned. "Disguising herself as a Rebel? I fear she has some sort of scheme. Run after her, Zak."

"What about you?"

Hoole pointed at the computer. "I want to compare any information in here with what I know of Dantooine and the Rebels. Just run after Tash and bring her back here. Don't get into any trouble yourself."

"Count on that!" Zak said, and rushed out of the room to get his sister.

Tash had watched Eyal cross the bridge for the second time. How in the galaxy could the same person have crossed the same bridge going in the same direction two times in a row?

Maybe he forgot something, she thought. Maybe I didn't see him turn around and go back, then cross the bridge again.

But she knew that wasn't right. She'd seen Eyal cross the bridge and head into the ruins.

Then she'd seen him do it again.

Was he twins?

But Dr'uun the Sullustan had had a twin. What was the chance of there being two sets of twins on a supposedly abandoned Rebel base?

Finding her pendant, Tash jumped to her feet and ran toward the base. Around her, the Rebels were still bustling to and fro, but she managed to stop one, a woman with curly golden hair, and ask if she'd seen any of the other visitors. The woman pointed toward the nearest building, then hurried on her way.

Tash ran to the building. It was dusty inside-so dusty that she noticed several sets of footprints on the ground. She followed them to a room where she found Hoole staring thoughtfully into a computer screen.

"Tash, there you are," Hoole murmured. "Where's Zak?"

"I don't know," Tash replied. "He was with you."

"No," Hoole answered. "He said he saw you standing in the doorway. He went to follow you."

Tash looked at her uncle as if he were crazy. "What do you mean?"

"There you are!" Zak said, hurrying back into the room. Then he stopped. "How did you change clothes so quickly?"

Tash gave him a blank stare. "Change clothes? What are you talking about?"

Zak told her what he'd seen.

"It wasn't me," Tash explained. "I was down by the bridge. Maybe there's a Rebel who looks like me."

"This is getting weird," Zak said. "I'm beginning to think that the Dantari were right to avoid this place."

"Perhaps," Hoole agreed. "But we are here now. Our only other option is to return to the Dantari camp, where we'd be forced to deal with Maga. I suggest that we simply stay here in this room until the ship arrives. Once on board, we will be safe."

Tash still felt the urge to return to the ruins. "Do we have to stay in here?"

"We do not seem to be in any danger here," Hoole said, "while Maga is a definite threat in the Dantari camp. Is it a problem to remain?"

Tash didn't like the idea of being so close to the ruins and the dark-side feeling she was getting, but Hoole was right. There were no better options. "No," she finally answered.

She plopped down on the floor of the computer room while Zak and Hoole continued to work at the one terminal. She didn't bother to look. She could tell from their conversation that there wasn't anything interesting.

Tash.

She felt something call to her.

Tash.

It didn't say her name exactly. It was more like a feeling of someone, or something, thinking of her. It was like feeling someone's eyes staring at your back.

Tash.

She stood up quietly. Zak and Hoole were still staring at the computer.

As quietly as she could, Tash slipped out of the
MOM.

It was a short walk over the bridge and into the ruins. The maze of walls and giant stones wasn't quite as confusing as before. She found her way to the center of the ancient fortress with only a few wrong turns and reached the short round tower.

The feeling of the dark side grew stronger. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the room. Once more, Tash felt as if she were being watched. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Something was here.

Tash was focused on her feelings now-on her sensitivity to the dark side. As she concentrated on the Force, she began to relax. But then

Wham! Someone struck her from behind.

Tash fell forward, sprawling on the dusty stone floor of the room. Whirling around, she looked up and saw a teenage girl with blue eyes and blond hair pulled back in a neat braid.

She looked into the face of her attacker.

It was her own face.

CHAPTER 9

Tash couldn't believe her eyes. It was her. For a moment she couldn't accept it. It had to be her imagination. Or maybe a hologram.

But the hologram was holding a rock in both hands. The other girl-the other Tash-raised the rock over her head and brought it crashing down.

At the last moment Tash rolled out of the way and the rock broke against the hard floor.

Her twin was trying to kill her!

Tash tried to scramble to her feet, but her twin was already attacking. The other girl shoved her backward, pinning her against the curved wall of the round room. The other Tash's fingers curled around her throat and started to squeeze.

Tash gagged as her air was cut off. She clutched at her attacker's hands, but the other Tash only squeezed harder. Desperately, Tash curled her hand into a fist and punched. She felt her fist make contact. The other Tash grunted and let go.

Tash slid along the wall, trying to stay out of reach of her attacker.

"Who-Who are you?" she gasped.

The other girl touched her jaw where Tash had hit her. Then she grinned. Although she was an identical copy, Tash had already seen a difference between herself and her mysterious twin. The other girl had a wicked gleam in her eye. She started toward Tash again without answering.

“Stay back!” Tash said. She didn’t know what to do. “I don’t want to fight. I need to know what’s going on.”

The other Tash laughed. “You won’t need to know once you’re dead!”

She lunged at Tash again. Tash jumped away and ran for the exit. Whoever, whatever this other Tash was, she fought like an animal. Tash needed to put some distance between them.

She ran down one of the passages between the ruined buildings, hoping to lose the other Tash in the maze of stone blocks. But she soon heard footsteps behind her. Whichever way she turned, the other Tash followed.

Tash kept cutting corners and running around the huge stone blocks. But instead of escaping her pursuer, she made a wrong turn.

A dead end rose up in front of her. One of the stone building blocks had fallen, blocking the path. It was too high to climb over. So were the walls on either side of the passage.

Tash whirled around to turn back, but found herself looking at her mirror image once again.

“Ha!” her twin laughed. “Nowhere to run.”

“Who are you?” Tash demanded.

Her twin laughed again. “Don’t you know, Tash? I’m you.”

“You’re not me,” Tash replied. “Whatever you are, you’re not me.”

“Oh, I’m you,” the other Tash said, stalking forward. “I’m the dark side you don’t want to let out. We’re the same right down to the last gene. But there isn’t room in this life for both of us. And since I’m stronger-you’ll just have to go.”

The evil Tash looked around and picked up another large rock. It was twice the size of her fist. She hefted it and smiled.

Tash knew this other Tash would kill her. It was willing to kill; it even wanted to kill. Tash was no match for that. She couldn't fight that way.

Time seemed to slow down as the other Tash inched forward. Tash thought about the words her evil twin had spoken. I'm the dark side you don't want to let out. Was that true? Was there something about the Jedi ruins that had shown Tash a reflection of her own dark side?

Tash glanced at the stones around her. She remembered her earlier amazement at the stones. Someone-a Jedi? - had used the Force to move these giant stones. Someone had used the Force to build this entire fortress. This evil Tash might be vicious and strong, but the real Tash had the Force, and the Force was stronger.

Tash took a deep breath. She called on the Force. Immediately she felt the touch of the dark side. It was waiting, willing to help her. She sensed that with the dark side she could wipe this impostor off the planet, erase her from the world in the blink of an eye.

No, Tash thought. I'm not like that. I won't be.

Tash pushed all thoughts of using the Force as a weapon from her mind. Instead, she thought of the Force as a shield. She had done this once before against a creature called Spore. Tash tried again now, imagining a protective screen like a ship's deflector shield all around her body. She felt the Force flow around her, and she knew it was working.

But the other Tash only smiled. Her eyelids fluttered up and down, and her eyes rolled back into her head. Tash wondered what she was doing.

Then she felt the dark side.

It smashed into her like a crashing wave. The dark-side power broke through her imaginary shield and struck her, throwing her off balance. Tash stumbled backward until she felt her back against the stone wall. She stared at her evil twin in disbelief.

The other Tash controlled the dark side of the Force, and she was stronger.

“Now,” the evil twin said, “you will die.”

CHAPTER 10

Quick as a light beam, the evil Tash hurled the stone.

Something—an instinct, or maybe even the Force—pulled Tash out of the way, and the rock cracked against the stone wall behind her. The evil twin reached out to grab Tash’s throat, but Tash ducked and slipped past her attacker.

Tash bolted out of the dead-end passageway.

“You can’t run!” the other Tash yelled. “I’ll find you!”

Tash didn’t listen. She ran as fast as she could, not thinking, not caring where she went as long as it was away from this evil creature.

This time, desperation and blind panic saved her. She ran so fast and so far through the ruins that the other Tash seemed to lose her. Tash could hear the evil twin yelling at her, but she was nowhere in sight.

Tash looked for an exit from the ruins. She had to tell Hoole and Zak. They had to leave this place immediately. She just had to get out of the ruins and run for the Rebel base.

Tash saw an opening in the crumbling walls and raced through it. But she was on the wrong side. Instead of the wide blue river and the bridge, Tash was looking at the prairie. She was on the far side of the ruins, the side where she’d come in earlier.

She paused. Going back through the ruins was out of the question. What about going around? That would take too much time.

That only left one direction: forward.

At least, Tash thought, I know where I can find some help.

As fast as her feet would carry her, she ran for the Dantari camp.

The camp was in shambles.

Tents had collapsed. Cooking pots had been overturned, contents spilled on the dusty ground. Near the center of the camp one of the Dantari had set up a wooden frame, a drying rack for animal skins. Now it lay broken, shattered in several pieces as though trampled by a panicked crowd.

There was not a single Dantari in sight.

“Hello?” Tash called out. But it was useless. There was no place to hide on the open prairie. If anyone had been around, she would have seen them.

“What happened here?” she said out loud.

Nearby, a flock of startled fabools flapped their way heavily into the air. Otherwise, there was no sound.

Tash had once watched some Dantari on a hunting party. She remembered how they tracked their quarry by its footprints, studying the tracks of various animals until they had chosen the one they wanted, then figuring out in which direction it had gone. She looked down at the ground, trying to study the footprints. At first it seemed useless. There were dozens, maybe hundreds, of prints of bare feet crisscrossing each other. That would be the Dantari. She spotted a few of her own, and the print of a boot she guessed was Zak’s.

Then she spotted another footprint. This one was much larger, at least the size of someone like Uncle Hoole. But Hoole didn’t wear boots, which meant someone else had been in the camp.

One of the Rebels?

Tash walked around, looking for more clues, but found nothing. She could make no sense of what happened. She was still walking around, staring at the ground, when a huge figure rose up out of the grass in front of her. She stifled a cry.

It was Maga.

The Dantari pointed a thick finger at Tash. "You are to blame!"

CHAPTER 11

Tash was too exhausted and bewildered to respond. She had no idea what Maga meant. All she knew was that he had tried to kill her-or at least he had hoped she would become lost or injured in the Jedi ruins. Since then, her entire world seemed to have turned upside down. Tash wanted to scream and yell at Maga.

She held back. She knew it wouldn't do any good. Maga would not understand. Besides, there was a wild look in his eyes and she didn't want him to become violent.

As calmly as she could, she said, "What are you talking about?"

"You came here!" Maga thundered. "You brought the other humans. You brought the man with no face!" Man with no face? What was Maga talking about? She wanted to sit down in the dust and cry, but she couldn't. She had to stay focused.

"I haven't been back to camp since I went into the ruins, Maga," she said firmly.

"You lie. With my own eyes I saw you. You brought the man with no face. The elders welcomed him because he was with you. Then he took them all prisoner!"

Tash swallowed. "Someone took all the Dantari prisoner?"

"Your friends! The other humans and the dark man with no face."

Tash groaned. If Maga said that one more time she was going to scream.

"It wasn't me, I swear," she said as calmly as she could. "Maga, you told Zak there was something strange about those Jedi ruins."

"The place of fallen rocks," the Dantari said.

"Right, the place of fallen rocks," she agreed. "Well, things have been strange ever since we went in there. I was attacked by someone who looks just like me. That must be the person who helped kidnap your people." She blinked. "Why weren't you captured?"

Maga scoffed. "I am the garoo, wise man of my people. It is my job to know things. I did not trust the others from the beginning. But no one would listen to me. They believed only you." He spat that last word like a curse.

"It wasn't me," Tash repeated. Her voice was almost a whisper.

Once, in school, Tash had been accused of cheating on an exam. She knew she was innocent, but her teacher had been so sure of her guilt that Tash had almost begun to doubt herself.

She had that feeling again now, only it was worse, because someone who looked like her actually was committing these acts.

Tash felt a pang of guilt. Even if her mysterious evil twin was causing the trouble, Tash knew she was partly to blame. Because of Tash and her uncle, the Dantari had stopped respecting their tribal wise man.

"When the elders would not hear my warning, I left camp in anger," Maga explained. "Then I saw the strangers attack. The dark man with no face, he had power. Greater than a garoo. Greater than you or Hoole. He captured many."

"Where did they go?" Tash asked.

“Some of my people fled. The strangers chase them. Hunt them.” Maga’s brow wrinkled. “You ask like you do not know. You were here.”

“I wasn’t here,” she insisted. “You have to believe me, Maga,” she pleaded. “You told Zak there was something dangerous about the Jedi ruins. What do you know?”

Maga’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I know many things. Wisdom passed down from garoo to garoo. This keeps my people safe.”

“Please tell me,” she said again. “What do your garoo ancestors tell you about those ruins?”

Maga stared at her as though his dark eyes could see right into her mind. For the second time, Tash saw past the anger that had built up between them. This time she saw why he had been chosen as garoo. She could see his mind at work, judging her words, judging her expression, reaching an intelligent decision. He wasn’t using the Force or any other power, but he was probing her just the same, using only his wits. She realized that she had to stop thinking of him as less intelligent just because his people wore skins and hunted with primitive weapons.

“Garoo learn to see,” Maga said. “Learn to judge truth by looking at eyes, hearing words. I think you are telling the truth.”

He paused a moment to gather himself.

“Long ago,” he began, “in the time of the garoo four before me, offworlders came here in flying machines.”

“Was that when the Rebels built their base?” she asked.

“No, before. Many seasons before that. Then there was only place of fallen rocks. These offworlders flew there. They had great power. Like you, only greater. They searched. They went away. After that, strange things happen.”

“What things?” she asked.

Maga shook his head. “The garoo stories are not clear. Sometimes Dantari vanish in the place of fallen rocks. Sometimes one Dantari enters, but two leave.”

Tash’s eyes widened. So the ruins did have something to do with her evil twin!

Maga continued. “After several seasons, these strange things do not happen. But the garoo forbid Dantari to enter the fallen rocks again. Our tribe camped away from fallen rocks. Then no bad things happen. Even when other offworlders came to build their stone camp, the place of fallen rocks was silent. But then, last season, when the Dantari camped here, it happened again.” He pointed to the sky. “Ships came down. They landed at the place of fallen rocks: And after that, all was different.”

“How?” Tash asked.

“No Dantari go to rocks anymore, so nothing like before,” Maga answered. “But soon, offworlders appear in old stone camp.”

“You mean at the Rebel base? People flew there?” Maga shook his head. “No. No ships come. But offworlders appeared. Where from? Even the garoo does not know. The man with no face came first. He tried to trap the Dantari, but Dantari escape into fields where he cannot find us. Then other strangers appear.”

Tash took a moment to sort things out. The Jedi ruins were thousands of years old. But some time in the more recent past, people with “great power”- Tash knew they must have been Jedi-came to the ruins for a while, then left. After that, the Rebels came and went. And then, less than a year ago, more offworlders had come. Soon after that, Rebels started filling the old base again.

Obviously, activity near the ruins triggered something- Tash didn't know if it was the Force or some hidden technology-that was causing these weird happenings. But what? And why?

"I need Uncle Hoole," she said. "Maga, will you come with me to the Rebel base? My uncle is there."

Maga took a step back. "No. My people do not cross the river. And I must search for any that escaped."

"But-"

"Do not question the garoo," Maga said proudly. "I must take care of my people." With that, he turned and trotted off. She watched him for a moment, amazed at how quickly and quietly he moved his large body through the tall grasses.

Tash turned toward the river. Crossing the river meant crossing the bridge. And that meant she might run into her dark-side self again. But she had to risk it.

Tash approached the bridge cautiously. The ruins were to her right, and they seemed deserted. But on the far side of the bridge, a crowd had gathered. There were quite a few Rebels standing on the open ground between the bridge and their base, crowding around Uncle Hoole.

Tash made her way through the crowd toward her uncle. One of the people she bumped into was Eyal.

"What's going on?" she said.

"Your uncle says that your ship is making its approach," Eyal replied. "It should be here in a moment.

We are very excited. The timing is perfect. Our leader is on his way back in from his collections."

"Great," Tash said. "Excuse me."

She pushed her way deeper into the crowd until she found Hoole. The Shi'ido was scanning the sky, waiting for the remote-controlled Shroud to appear.

"Uncle Hoole, you've got to listen to me," she said. "There's something very wrong with this place--"

"I know," Hoole replied softly. "But there is nothing we can do but get aboard the ship as fast as possible. I did not want all these people around, but they insisted on following me."

"Where's Zak?" Tash asked, realizing he was missing.

"That I do not know," her uncle replied. She saw a wrinkle on his forehead, and knew what it meant. Hoole was worried. "I could not locate him. But once the ship arrives we will use its sensors to find him."

"Is it almost here?" asked a voice Tash recognized. It was Eyal. But she had just seen him on the far side of the crowd!

"Where did you come from?" she asked.

"Over there," he said, pointing away from the bridge.

"Didn't I just see you by the bridge?" she demanded.

Eyal shook his head. "It couldn't have been me."

Tash was bewildered. How could Eyal be in two places at once? "But I just--"

"There it is," Hoole said, pointing up. A silvery gleam appeared in the sky, growing larger. At the same time, the distant whine of sublight engines reached their ears.

"Well timed!" Eyal said. "Our leader is just arriving." He pointed back to the bridge. Over the heads of the crowd, Tash could see a long line of people marching toward them from the far side of the river. They were marching in single file. The leader was dressed in dark clothing, and even from

this distance, Tash could tell that the others were Dantari. Her stomach tightened into a knot.

“Just a few more seconds,” Hoole muttered. He was holding the remote control in his hands, watching its readings as the ship descended.

“Uncle Hoole, there’s something wrong here,” she started to say.

“Almost here,” Hoole muttered, almost to himself. The ship was nearly on top of them. Its landing gear lowered, and it descended slowly toward the ground. The crowd parted to give it plenty of room. Only a few hundred feet to go.

“This is a great day!” Eyal said. “Our leader will finally be able to get off this planet!”

“Uncle Hoole, look!” Tash said, her voice rising in terror.

They both looked back at the bridge. Now that the marchers were closer, Tash could see why they marched in such a straight line. They were all bound at the neck, one after the other, by a long rope. Tash knew they were the Dantari of Maga’s tribe, and she could see that they were prisoners.

But that wasn’t what terrified her.

The man in the dark clothing who led the line of captives was clearly visible now.

It was Darth Vader.

CHAPTER 12

Darth Vader was here.

On Dantooine.

As soon as he crossed the bridge, several of the Rebels hurried to take control of the Dantari prisoners. Vader himself strode forward, his dark cape swirling behind him. Tash was frozen. All she could do was stare at Vader's breath mask. It reminded her of a skull.

The dark man with no face, Maga had said.

Of course.

"At last," the Dark Lord of the Sith boomed, "a ship to take me off this accursed world."

The spell over Tash seemed to break. "Uncle Hoole. The ship!" she shouted.

Hoole, who had apparently been just as stunned to see Vader, realized what Tash meant. Raising his remote control, Hoole punched in a command.

"Stop him!" Vader ordered, and a dozen hands grabbed at Hoole. But they were too late. The Shi'ido had managed to enter a new command, and the Shroud reversed direction just a few meters above the ground. It began to rise and, turning slowly in its place, the ship began to fly away.

"No!" Vader bellowed. "My ship!"

The Dark Lord lunged forward. His followers scattered to let him through. Something caught Tash's eye as Vader stormed forward. The Dark Lord's appearance was different. She didn't know what it was, and she had no time to think as the Dark Lord reached Hoole and snatched at the remote control. Hoole struggled with him briefly, but Vader

wrenched the control pad from his hands. The Dark Lord raised it toward the departing ship and punched the keypad. Nothing happened.

“It’s encoded!” Vader roared. From behind his mask he snarled at Hoole. “Give me the code.”

“No,” Hoole replied.

In a smooth, swift motion, Vader drew his lightsaber and ignited it with a loud thrummm! He held it over his head, ready to strike the Shi’ido down. “The code.”

Hoole stiffened. Tash could see that he wanted to move but he seemed to be stuck in place, as though held there by Vader’s will.

“No,” the Shi’ido repeated.

Vader struck.

Tash screamed as the lightsaber came down in a flashing arc. The light blade passed cleanly through Hoole’s midsection and came out the other side.

Hoole winced. Then he opened his eyes and looked down. He touched the spot where the lightsaber had passed through him.

He was untouched.

It was at that moment that Tash realized what was bothering her about Vader. It was his armor. It looked similar to the armor that Vader wore, but it didn’t seem to function. Like the makeshift starship, it was a cheap imitation.

“Tash, run!” the Shi’ido yelled. A moment later he shape-shifted into the form of a bantha.

The power of Hoole’s voice set Tash’s feet in motion. She shoved her way through the crowd of Rebels, who were focused on the bantha that had appeared among them.

Breaking free of the mob, she ran across the bridge and toward the only place she knew to hide.

The Jedi ruins.

She didn't care if she saw her dark-side self again. Her evil twin was nothing compared to Vader. She only hoped that Hoole could escape as easily. Tash heard a few voices call after her, but she had a head start. She reached the outer ring of stones and entered the ruins.

Tash meant to lose herself in the confusing maze of the abandoned fortress, but her feet seemed to carry her automatically to the center of the ruins. The round building was in front of her before she knew it. Knowing the room was empty, Tash started to turn away, looking for a better hiding place, when voices drifted toward her. She ducked inside the building.

Pressing herself against the wall near the door, Tash caught her breath and tried to think. She was alone. Zak had vanished, and Hoole was either hiding or captured by these so-called Rebels. And Vader was here.

But what had happened to Vader's lightsaber? Why hadn't it cut Hoole in half?

Tash knew the answer. The saber was a fake. She'd seen the light beam pass right through Hoole without hurting him. It wasn't a real saber-it was a mocked-up version, just like the ridiculously mocked-up starship these castaways were building.

It was obvious to Tash that these people were impostors. They weren't real Rebels-they couldn't be. But if they were lying to her, why hadn't she felt it in the Force? In the past, she'd often gotten a sinking feeling in her stomach when people were lying to her and meant to do her or her family harm. Why hadn't the Force warned her about these strangers?

Thinking of Eyal and the others, Tash knew the answer. They believed they were Rebels. Whatever he really was, Eyal thought he was working for the Rebellion. She had seen the honesty in his eyes when he spoke. Almost, she thought, the way Maga saw the honesty in my eyes when I spoke.

So these stranded beings thought they were Rebels, but really weren't.

Why do they think they are, though? Tash wondered. Did Vader brainwash them? But that wouldn't explain where they came from. Maga had said "the man with no face"- Vader-had appeared first, then the others. But they hadn't come in ships.

Could Vader have made them somehow? Created them, using the dark side of the Force?

No, she decided. That isn't possible.

But he could have made them some other way. Maybe they weren't really alive. Maybe they were androids of some kind. That would explain why she'd seen several copies of the same person. And it would also explain why she couldn't tell if they were lying. Maybe they were programmed to believe they were Rebels. If Vader was building androids of some kind, it might even explain why Tash had seen a copy of herself.

It was the best answer Tash could come up with. But it didn't solve all her riddles.

For instance, why would Vader carry a fake lightsaber? And how had the second most powerful being in the galaxy become stranded on a barren planet?

Tash heard voices.

She looked around for a stick or a stone, anything she could use as a weapon.

That was when she noticed the crack in the floor.

It started on the spot where her evil twin had dashed the stone. The rock had shattered, but it had also left its mark on the floor. There was a crack about one meter long.

Not a crack. A line. A very thin, very straight line. The impact of the rock hadn't made this line. She was surprised she hadn't noticed it before, but without the broken stone to draw attention to that particular spot on the floor, it was hardly visible.

Tash could see that it was a door. Dropping to her knees, she felt around for some sort of lever. The line was too small for her fingers to fit into, so she ran her fingernail down the length of the line. At the very end she felt something click.

A section of the floor sank, revealing a stairway leading down into darkness. Tash took it.

When she'd gone a few steps, the stone slid back into place. For a moment she was blinded by the darkness, but as her eyes adjusted, she realized there was dim light below. Tash crept down the stairs, counting as she went. When she reached the twenty-fifth step, she knew she was at the bottom.

She was in a long, narrow chamber that was almost a tunnel. The chamber walls were lined with vats filled with bubbling green fluid. They reminded her of the bacta tanks doctors used to heal injured people, but something told her these weren't bacta tanks.

Tash sensed movement.

She crouched, trying to hide in the shadows as something passed nearby. It was a droid of some kind. It had a small triangular head with two lenses for eyes. Its head swiveled on a long, thin neck attached to a squat body that rolled on wheels. The machine had several mechanical

arms. She could tell by its rickety movements that it was very old. The droid almost passed her by. Then it stopped, turned, and rolled toward Tash, but it didn't threaten her. The droid's eyes lit up in a light blue color as it sent some sort of scanning beam onto Tash's arm.

"Genetic material analysis," the droid said to itself. "This sample has already been harvested. Vats two-two six through two-four-one."

The droid then looked up at Tash, and another blue beam settled onto her forehead. When it did, Tash felt the same electrical sensation she'd felt when she first entered the room above. She was being scanned. "Mind scan in progress. This brain pattern has already been harvested."

The droid then lost interest and turned away.

Tash followed the droid into the room. What did it mean by harvested?

She looked at the nearest vat. It was number 222. Tash walked down the row until she found number 226. She looked into the tank filled with green, bubbling slime. There was something bobbing inside.

She leaned over to get a closer look, and saw a small figure curled up like a baby, floating in the liquid. Its back was to her so that all she could see were its shoulders and a thick mane of hair. But then the figure bobbed in the bubbling goo and rolled toward her. She saw two familiar-looking eyes, wide open, staring at her through the slime-bath.

Tash had seen those eyes in the mirror every day of her life.

Tash was again staring at herself.

CHAPTER 13

Clones.

Tash was in a room full of cloning tanks. And this tank, and the next, and the one after that, and maybe others, were full of clones of Tash herself

“How can that be?” she whispered to herself. She knew she was right. She’d once learned about cloning from an Ithorian named Fandomar. Cloning technology was possible. Scientists could take DNA from anything-blood or hair or a few flakes of skin-and use the genetic code inside to grow an exact copy of the original person. But it took years to let the clone grow, and Tash had only been on Dantooine for a few weeks!

“Query?”

Tash nearly jumped. The droid had come up behind her. It must have heard her speak.

“Query?” the droid asked again.

“Urn, yes,” she said. “How can these clones be grown so quickly?”

The droid paused. “Information on rapid cloning process is restricted.” The droid turned away.

Rapid cloning. Obviously Vader had developed some sort of quick cloning method that allowed him to grow clones not in years, or even months or days, but hours! But why was Vader here?

Tash had a thousand questions, but she knew she would get no response from the droid. While it obviously wasn’t programmed to guard against intruders, it wasn’t going to be helpful, either.

She looked around for anything that might prove useful. But aside from the cloning tanks and the droid, there wasn't much else in the room. Just a container full of flight suits. Tash guessed that when the real Rebels had vacated the base, they'd left their laundry behind. Now Vader was using it to clothe his clone army.

She was about to turn away from the container when she had an idea. Quickly, she pulled out a flight suit that would fit her, shucked off her clothes, tossed them aside, and slipped into her new outfit.

Just in time. Stone ground against stone at the top of the stairs. Tash scurried into the shadows beside the staircase and held her breath.

Two Rebels came down. They were identical, clones of the same person. "There's no way she could have found her way down here," said the first clone.

"The leader ordered us to check everywhere," said clone number two.

"Fine. Then ask the droid if it's seen anything," said the first clone.

"Why? All that droid'll do is scan us and say it already has our genetic material."

"Ask it anyway."

While they were bickering, Tash slipped out of the shadows and hurried up the stairs just before the trapdoor closed. She was back in the round room.

Tash poked her head outside. She could hear a few distant voices, but nothing nearby. She guessed that the clones had swept through the ruins right on her heels. When they couldn't find her, they'd fanned out onto the prairie, hoping to track her down.

As quietly as possible, Tash made her way through the maze of the ruins. She needed to form a plan, and to do that she needed someplace to hide, someplace where she could think. Suddenly she heard steady, unhurried footsteps approaching around a nearby corner. She pressed herself into the shadow of a fallen stone and listened as the footsteps grew closer.

A tall figure appeared, dressed in a long robe, with a concerned look on his gray face.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash said in an excited whisper. She jumped out of the shadows and raced toward him.

"Tash," Hoole said calmly.

"Thank the Force," she said. She collapsed into his arms. Hoole caught her and held her on her feet. "I'm so glad you got away!"

Hoole looked down at her. "I didn't get away. At least, the original Hoole didn't." His grip tightened. "And neither will you."

CHAPTER 14

Hoole was a clone, too!

Tash tried to jerk her arms free, but the clone Hoole's grip was too strong.

"Don't bother struggling," the clone said. "Or I'll shape-change into a creature strong enough to crush you like a blumfruit."

Tash stopped struggling. "Please, let me go."

"No. Come with me." The clone started to drag her into the ruins.

The clone spoke like Hoole. It even had his inflection. If it was that much like Hoole, maybe she could reason with it.

"Uncle Hoole," she said. "Please, it's me, Tash. You don't have to do what Vader says. Think a minute!"

The clone Shi'ido looked at her with disdain. "Do not be foolish. I am Hoole, but not the Hoole you know. Our leader has taken care of that. I am everything that is strong about Hoole, with none of his petty weaknesses. I am invincible."

Just as he finished the word, something hard slammed down on his skull and the Hoole clone dropped to the ground like a sack of nerf wool. As he fell, Tash turned to see who had sneaked up behind them.

"Zak!"

Her brother stood holding a chunk of stone block in his hand and grinning from ear to ear. "That'll teach Vader," Zak joked. "I like Uncle Hoole, but one's enough to deal with."

"Where were you?" Tash asked.

“Caught,” her brother explained. “I found some computer records that told me what was going on, and Vader’s clones grabbed me before I could tell Uncle Hoole. The real one, that is.” He tapped the unconscious clone Hoole with his toe. “But I guess you and Uncle Hoole caused some commotion near the bridge. When everyone started chasing you, I was able to get free.”

“Have you seen the real Uncle Hoole?” she asked.

“No,” Zak answered. “But I hope he escaped.”

“We’ve got to find him!” Tash said.

“First things first,” Zak said. He pulled something out of his pocket and held it out for Tash.

“The remote control for the ship!” Tash cheered.

Zak answered, “Yep. You call the Shroud. I’m going to see if I can find anything useful in this clone’s pockets.”

“Right,” Tash said. She took the remote control from Zak’s hands. She knew the security code. Hoole had given it to both of them just to be safe. She punched in the first few digits.

Then she stopped.

“Zak?” she said.

“Yeah?” her brother answered. He was busy searching through the pockets of the clone Hoole’s robe, finding nothing.

“Why didn’t you just call the ship after you escaped?”

Zak stopped his searching and looked up. “I wanted to find you and make sure you were all right. You know, good brother stuff”

“You could have found me more easily with the scanners on board the Shroud,” Tash pointed out.

Zak scratched his head. "I guess you're right. I didn't think about it."

Tash clenched her teeth. Since when did Zak not think about using technology?

Tash handed the remote activator back to Zak. "Why don't you call the ship?"

Zak stared down at the remote without taking it. "Why? You could have done it by now."

"No," she insisted. "You do it."

Zak sighed and looked at her as if she were a disobedient child. "Oh, well, we'll just have to do this the hard way."

As he spoke, several dozen figures stepped out of the shadows cast by the huge stones and appeared from around corners. Tash looked at them and swallowed a startled cry. Looking back at her were dozens of images of herself, and dozens of versions of Zak.

An army of clones.

As one, the massed clones surged forward.

Just as she had when the earlier clone hurled the rock, Tash felt herself move without thinking. Instead of running, she jumped up onto a stone wall to her left. Somehow she found a foothold and scrambled to the top. But as she did, she lost her grip on the remote activator, and it clattered back down to the ground.

"No!" she said, but she couldn't stop. Already some of the clones were trying to follow her up the wall.

Tash tried to lower herself down the other side as she heard a Tash clone say, "She won't get far without her ship. Spread out! Let's find her."

Hanging from the edge of the wall, Tash looked down. The ground seemed far away. How had she jumped so high?

Hurry! she told herself. The clones would be coming around the end of the wall at any moment.

But Tash couldn't make herself let go. The ground seemed as far away as the stars. Steeling herself, she promised she would count to three, then let go.

But she didn't have to. The wall was old and decayed by weather. Before she could loosen her grip, a whole section of the top gave way. Tash fell, hitting the ground hard. She felt gravel and stone rain down on her. She felt larger stones batter her shoulders. She felt something heavy slam into her head.

Then she didn't feel anything at all.

Tash woke with a sneeze. Every time she tried to breathe, dust filled her nose. And as she woke, she realized just how hard it was to breathe at all.

She opened her eyes. Darkness surrounded her. She was lying down, but something heavy lay on top of her. With effort, she pushed herself up to a sitting position and felt a mound of sand and gravel slide off her arms and down into her clothes. Her head rang, and she felt a lump throbbing behind her ear.

Near her head lay a small chunk of stone. And only a few centimeters in front of her face sat another chunk, much bigger and very jagged.

She had fallen off the wall when it collapsed. The debris had followed and one of the stone chunks had knocked her out. If it had been the larger piece... She didn't want to think about it.

Tash climbed to her feet, using the wall for support. Twilight was approaching. This had to be the longest day of her life.

She was covered in dust, and she could feel more sand sliding down the inside of her clothes. The clothes she wore startled her. Why was she wearing this jumpsuit? Where were her own clothes? She couldn't remember changing... but her head felt as if it would explode, and she couldn't think very clearly.

Tash listened. For a moment she heard nothing. No sounds of pursuit, no shouting voices. All was quiet.

Then she heard the crying. It came faintly at first, then more loudly. Walking on tiptoes, Tash followed the sound. Slowly, cautiously, she peeked around a corner.

She saw herself sitting on a chunk of stone, her knees drawn up to her chest, sobbing. This Tash wasn't wearing a jumpsuit. She was wearing Tash's own white overshirt and trousers.

What was going on here?

Tash thought she ought to run, but she was too weak from her fall. If the clones were going to capture her at this moment, there wasn't much she could do about it.

Instead, she staggered toward the other Tash. "Why are you crying?" she asked.

The other Tash jumped as though she'd been stung. As soon as she saw Tash, she backed away, pleading, "Don't hurt me; please don't hurt me!"

Tash shook the cobwebs out of her head. "I'm not going to hurt you. Tell me why you're crying."

The other Tash sobbed, "Because they're going to find me."

"Who?"

"The clones," the other girl answered.

Tash blinked. "But you're a clone."

“No, I’m not,” the other girl said, “I’m the real Tash Arranda!”

CHAPTER 15

"You're not the real Tash," Tash said to her twin.

"Of course I am," the other girl said. "Don't you think I'd know if I were a clone?"

"I guess you don't know," Tash said, "because, I'm sorry to tell you, I'm the real Tash."

The other girl sobbed. "Don't be ridiculous. Look at you."

Tash shrugged. "We look alike."

"But your clothes," the other Tash insisted. "You're wearing a jumpsuit just like the rest of them. And I'm wearing my own clothes."

Tash scowled. What was happening? The blow to her head was making the last few minutes all run together.

"There she is!" someone yelled.

Tash turned around to see a horde of Arranda clones charging at them. It was too late to run. All she could do was brace herself against the mob.

But all the Zak and Tash clones parted and flowed around her, descending on the Tash who sat on the rock. The crying Tash let out a shriek, then vanished behind a pile of bodies.

It was over in a few seconds. Tash barely had time to register the swarming clones before they backed away from their victim.

Tash saw herself lying, unmoving, on the ground. There was no life in her. Tash let out a strangled yell and backed away in horror. It was like a nightmare, seeing her own body dropped into the dust.

One of the Zaks looked at her, then at one of the Tashes. "Could we have gotten the wrong one?" he asked.

"The clothes," another Zak groaned. "We forgot about the clothes."

Tash didn't wait to hear the answer. She was off and running again.

If it hadn't been for the confusing design of the original Jedi fortress, Tash would have been captured in the first few minutes. But there were so many twists and turns, so many dead ends caused by toppled stones, that one wrong turn took her pursuers down a completely different path. Still, they kept up the chase. Now and then one of the clones would spot her down a corridor, but she was able to stay one step ahead, climbing over a wall or ducking between two fallen pillars, and slip away. She was trying to make her way to the edge of the ruins, but every time she reached the edge, one of her enemies would spot her, forcing her back into the maze.

Tash ran, but her steps began to slow. The throbbing in her head was subsiding, but the memory of the other Tash lingered. Why had the other Tash claimed to be the real thing? It was ridiculous, of course. Tash knew who she was. Yet the other girl had seemed certain. And she was wearing the right clothes.

Tash tried to remember changing her clothes. Hadn't she put on a jumpsuit? Maybe. Or maybe not.

Once Tash opened her mind to doubt, the confusion of the day poured in. She allowed a terrible thought to creep in. Am I a clone?

"Ridiculous," she said out loud.

That's what the other clone said, too.

“But I’m not a clone,” she insisted. “Besides, all the clones are loyal to Vader. I’m not.”

Maybe the cloning process is imperfect, the doubting part of herself replied. Maybe you’re an imperfect clone.

Tash tried to push the doubt from her mind. She was who she was. Nothing could change that. But the clones seemed to feel exactly the same way.

Tash stopped. She heard voices approaching, but she didn’t move. Would it matter if she were a clone? Wouldn’t she be the same person?

No, she realized. A clone wouldn’t have her experiences, her life. A clone wouldn’t feel the way she felt, wouldn’t know what it was like to lose a mother and father.

At the thought of her mother and father, Tash put her hand to her chest. She felt something hard and firm beneath her fingertips.

Her pendant.

Tash pulled at the chain around her neck until the pendant slid free of her jumpsuit. Vader could clone her body. He could even scan her mind. But he couldn’t copy everything. Not Tash’s love for her parents. No clone could feel that way.

In a split second, Tash recalled her earlier wish to talk with her parents, to ask them how she would know her true self. Now she knew what they would have told her. Emotions like love and kindness and caring-the same feelings that allowed her to use the light side of the Force-would help her see herself clearly.

But Tash’s resolution came a little too late. Vader’s clones had found her.

Zaks and Tashes surrounded her. Tash saw instantly that flight was impossible. So she didn't run. She tucked the pendant back into her jumpsuit. Then she charged full speed into the mob of clones.

CHAPTER 16

Tash plunged into the of the clone army. She pushed her way through until she was in the very middle of the crowd.

Then she grabbed the nearest clone Tash by the wrist and shouted, "I've got her! I've got her!"

"Good work!" one of the Zaks yelled.

"Huh?" said the other Tash, trying to pull away.

"Help me! She's a fighter!" Tash screamed. Several clones grabbed at the captured Tash clone.

"All right!" said a Zak clone. "Let's get her back to the leader. He'll want to question her with the others."

The cloned Tash protested, but her struggles only convinced the others that she was their target. They grabbed her arms and legs and lifted her off the ground. As she kicked and fought with them, they carried her out of the ruins.

Tash followed, hiding her smile.

The small clone army hurried across the bridge and into the Rebel base. Tash followed them up to the central building, the one that housed the mock starship.

Inside, Tash saw that two pilot chairs had been pulled out of the ship and set up on the floor. Zak and Uncle Hoole had been strapped into these chairs. Both of them were dressed in clone jumpsuits. Their own clothes, Tash realized, must have been taken by clones. In front of each of them stood a droid similar to the one Tash had seen in the cloning chamber. Vader stood over the two droids, making adjustments to their circuits.

One of the Zak clones approached Vader. "My lord, we've caught the other one."

Vader looked up from his work. "I don't need her. I've decided to use a mindscan to get the information I need. Dispose of her."

The clones nodded and turned away. The captured Tash clone redoubled her struggles, but more hands grabbed her. In the commotion, the real Tash slipped behind the landing gear of the derelict starship to watch.

"You have given me an invaluable gift," Vader said to Zak and Hoole. "The cloning technology is a powerful tool. With it I can create an instant army of clones. The mindscan that accompanies the cloning process allows me to instantly imbue each clone with a personality. But at first I had little to work with. Only the handful of DNA samples I could scrape together from this abandoned station. They were only skin and hair samples, with no mindscans to accompany the genetic growth. The result was a race of idiots. I left them to their own devices. I had tried several times to capture Dantari from which to make clones, but they proved too elusive. And then you arrived."

Hoole struggled against his bonds. Vader turned to him. "This is your last warning. If you attempt to shape-change, I'll crush the boy with a single thought."

Hoole became still. Vader continued. "Now you have provided me with your DNA and a complete mindscan. With similar scans of the boy and girl, I was able to clone the girl, and that clone allowed me to lure the Dantari into a trap. With the Dantari DNA, I can build a race of powerful soldiers and slaves."

Hiding behind the landing gear, Tash realized what had happened. The cloning machinery was set up beneath the round room. Their minds were scanned when they entered

the room, and the mindscan was stored by the droids. Then, somehow, Vader had acquired samples of their DNA. She didn't know how he'd done it, but it would have been easy. With the mindscan and the genetic material, Vader had created his clones.

"Now all I need," the Dark Lord said, "is your ship. Then I will be able to leave this accursed planet. I want the code to your remote activator."

"We won't tell you," Zak said defiantly.

"I don't intend to ask," the Dark Lord said. "I will take the information. A simple adjustment to the mindscanners of these processing droids should make them nearly as effective as the probe on a torture droid. And even more painful."

Vader flipped a switch on each droid. Blue beams of light shot from the droids' faces and fell on Zak and Hoole. Both captives immediately winced in pain and fought against the straps that held them down.

Tash knew she had to do something. But she also knew that Vader could squash her like a bug. Maybe if she moved fast enough, she could surprise him

She never had a chance to find out. A dark figure suddenly stepped out of the shadows. The figure had broad shoulders and carried a stone ax. Tash recognized him immediately.

"Offworlder!" Maga bellowed. "Free my people!"

Vader laughed. "Another primitive savage for my labor camps."

"I am the garoo of my people," Maga growled, advancing toward the Dark Lord of the Sith.

“You are an insect,” Vader replied. He raised one hand, and Tash felt the dark side of the Force churn outward. Maga was hurled through the air and slammed against the wall. Growling, the Dantari stubbornly climbed to his feet.

“You are strong,” Vader said. “This should prove interesting.” He took a step toward Maga and raised his hand again. Again, Maga was hurled like a rag doll across the room.

Tash saw her chance. She bolted forward, reaching the two mindscanning droids in a few steps, and shut them down with a quick motion.

“Tash!” Zak said weakly. “Prime...”

“Is Vader distracted?” Hoole demanded.

“Yes,” Tash replied, seeing him with Maga in his grip.

Instantly, Hoole’s body seemed to melt. The straps that held him tight went limp as the Shi’ido transformed into a small monkey-lizard and slipped out of the bonds. By the time Tash had freed Zak, Hoole had recovered his own shape. Vader was still toying with Maga.

“Come on!” Tash said.

“The remote activator,” Hoole whispered.

“Looking for this?”

They all looked up. Standing before them was another Hoole, holding the small black datapad that would summon the Shroud.

“Give me that,” the real Hoole said threateningly.

“I’m afraid not,” said the clone Hoole. “This belongs to Hoole. And I am Hoole.”

“We shall see,” the real Hoole said.

The two Hooles surged toward one another, but they moved so quickly that Tash could hardly follow. Her uncle shifted into the shape of a many-horned lizard, while the other Hoole transformed into some sort of giant snake. But by the time they clashed, each of them had morphed two or three more times, until the two combatants were a quivering mass of shrieking, shape-changing flesh.

Tash was awestruck. She had never seen her uncle so enraged, nor had she ever seen two Shi'ido fight. No wonder Hoole always remains so calm, she thought.

"Tash," Zak said urgently.

"What?" she asked. "I'm trying to watch, so we know which Hoole is which. "

"I think we have bigger problems," Zak rasped. "Look."

She followed his gaze to the entryway. There, in the fading light of the long afternoon, stood another Dark Vader.

CHAPTER 17

Unlike the Vader they had already met, this Vader's armor was real. And he was accompanied by two stormtroopers in white armor. Vader strode forward. His black face mask swiveled, taking in the scene for a moment. Then he turned to his troopers.

"You two," he said. "I want all these prisoners taken alive. Set your blasters for stun." Then Vader turned back to the Arrandas.

"You," he said, recognizing Zak and Tash. "You children seem determined to interfere in my affairs. I shall make sure that never happens again." Tash and Zak both started to back away, but Vader held up one finger and they both froze, held in place by the power of the dark side.

Vader glanced at the two Hooles locked in mortal combat. "Enough," the Dark Lord commanded.

Tash felt ripples of the dark side extend outward and grasp the two Shi'ido. They were dragged apart as though by invisible hands. "I see the mystery of the Jedi ruins has been

discovered.

Cloning

technology. Interesting," the Dark Lord mused. "I shall have to--"

Vader stopped. His black mask was no longer pointed toward Zak or Tash or either of the two Hooles. He had seen his clone.

Without a word, Vader let his dark power fall away from his prisoners as he focused all his attention on the other

Vader.

The other Vader sensed his twin's attention. He forgot about Maga and allowed the battered Dantari to collapse to the floor. The two Vaders squared off in the center of the huge room. Tash sensed the power of the dark side swirling around them like an invisible mist.

The sheer power of the two Dark Lords meeting was irresistible, and Tash felt herself drawn to it like a moth to a flame.

"A clone of me," the real Vader growled. "You must be destroyed."

"I am. Darth Vader!" the cloned Vader said. "You cannot defeat me."

The clone Vader lunged forward, surprising the real Vader with a physical assault.

But Vader slapped his opponent's hands away. At the same time, a container in one corner of the room rose of its own accord and hurtled toward the Vader clone. The clone ducked away just in time.

As the two Vaders circled each other, Tash tried to keep track of them. One, she knew, wore imitation armor, probably built from scrap metal lying around the Rebel base. But in the dim light of the hangar, it was difficult to tell which was which.

The two stormtroopers seemed to agree. They stood still, awestruck, and one of the Hooles sensed this. Shifting into the form of a wampa ice beast, he swiped one giant paw across the side of the trooper's head, knocking him out and sending his blaster rifle clattering across the room. As the other trooper turned, surprised to see a monster appear out of nowhere, the other Hoole caught him from behind. Shifting into a dewback's shape, he whipped his thick tail

around, sending the trooper sprawling. His blaster clattered across the ground, stopping right at Tash's feet.

She picked it up and pointed-at two identical Hooles.

"Tash, this may be our only chance," one of the Hooles said. "I have the remote. Let's go."

"Do not listen to him, Tash!" the other Hoole said. "He is the clone."

"Zak?" Tash said, looking for help. She kept pointing the blaster at one Shi'ido and then the other.

Her brother shook his head. "I don't know what to do. But we'd better do it fast. One of those Vaders will win, and then he's coming after us."

One of the Hooles said, "I did not have the remote activator. He did. I'm the real Hoole."

"No," said the other. "I took it from him. I am the real Hoole."

"What do we do?" Zak asked. "How do we tell them apart?"

Tash stared at them both. The two Hooles looked exactly alike, their long, gray faces staring at her with dark, stern eyes. She knew that the mindscan would have given the clone Hoole most, if not all, of the real Hoole's memories, so she couldn't test him that way.

A large figure loomed behind her. Tash's heart skipped a beat, thinking one of the Vaders was after her. When she turned, however, she saw the bruised figure of Maga. "I must free my people," he said weakly.

"They're locked in the computer room," Zak said. "We heard the clones talk about it. It's the building closest to the bridge."

Maga gave a faint nod and staggered toward the door.

“Wait!” Tash said. She recalled how Maga had stared at her, judging her. “Maga, please. Help us. Which Hoole is the real one?”

Maga shrugged. “You are the garoo of your tribe,” he said to Tash. “Learn to see. Learn to hear.” He limped out of the room.

“Tash, we are wasting time,” one of the Hooles said. “Give me the blaster. Then we can get the remote activator and leave this place.”

“Shoot him, Tash,” said the other. “The Vaders will not keep each other busy for long.”

The two Vaders were still fighting. It was as if a storm had erupted inside the room. Both were using the dark side to hurl empty cargo containers, pieces of equipment, even parts of the ship, at one another. The force of their battle would soon bring the building down. The fight wouldn’t last much longer.

Tash remembered the two clones of herself that she’d met. Both had known everything she had known. But they were still different from her. One had been angry, almost evil. The other had appeared frightened and defeated. The real Tash had been bothered by the sense of the dark side, but the first clone must have been totally absorbed by it. Later, Tash had been frightened by the army of clones, but the second clone had been petrified.

So they weren’t exactly like her. They couldn’t have the same feelings. They hadn’t had the same experiences, just memories of those experiences. The feelings attached to them were absent.

“There’s no way to tell you apart,” she said, raising the blaster. “I’ll just have to shoot you both.”

“What?” one of the Hooles shouted. “No!”

That Hoole lunged forward, and Tash fired. On Vader's orders, the troopers had set their blasters on stun, and the stunbolt slammed into that Hoole, dropping him to the ground.

The other Hoole raised an eyebrow.

Tash grinned. "Uncle Hoole?"

"Of course," he said. He bent down and picked up the remote activator still clutched in the other Hoole's hands. Zak was impressed. "How did you know?"

Tash shrugged. "Clones don't really understand feelings that well. The real Hoole would have known I couldn't shoot him, but the clone wouldn't know that. I knew he would believe my threat, and try to stop me."

Thrrummm!

Behind them, a lightsaber had activated. Tash turned in time to see the two Vaders locked together, their hands grappling with the hilt of a single lightsaber. Muscles strained. Vibrations of the Force swirled around them like wind in a thunderstorm. Suddenly, one of the Vaders twisted, throwing the other off his feet. The standing Vader raised the lightsaber and stalked forward.

"Let's get out of here," Tash said.

They left the room just as the triumphant Darth Vader brought his saber crashing down.

EPILOGUE

In the darkness, Tash, Zak, and Hoole lay hidden in the grass. Night had fallen over Dantooine, and stars filled the sky. A low whine filled the air as the Shroud, responding to Hoole's remote activator, approached. It was moving slowly, and keeping low to the ground to avoid Imperial scanners. They were far from the Rebel base by now, but they could still see bright lights shining there. Vader's troops had set up huge glowpanels to light their investigation.

"Will they find us?" Zak asked.

"I do not think so," Hoole replied. "Whatever Vader came here for, I do not think he was expecting a battle, or a search. Besides, with all the Dantari and the clones running around the area, the Imperials would have a lot of ground to cover, just to find the three of us."

Maga had freed the rest of his tribe. Generations of tradition had told him to avoid the ruins, but Maga could not abandon his people. Like a true leader, he had faced his fear, helping Tash and the others in the process.

As Zak, Tash, and Hoole fled the Rebel base, they'd seen the Dantari hurrying across the bridge and out onto the prairie. A few of the clones had tried to stop them, but without the guidance of their leader, they were powerless.

"Where'd the cloning technology come from?" Zak asked.

"It was here all the time, hidden beneath the ruins,"

Tash explained. She told them the story Maga had told her, about offworlders with power who had visited the ruins.

Hoole considered. "There was a great deal of cloning activity in the past. Perhaps the Jedi were trying to bring it

under control. When Dantooine was abandoned, the equipment was left behind.”

Zak shook his head. “But cloning technology takes years. These clones were made at hyperspeed.”

“It was the mindscan,” Tash guessed. “Remember the weird feeling we all had the first time we entered the round room? We were being scanned. Later, I heard the droids in the lab saying that my mindscan had already been harvested. The scans must have allowed the clones to be grown quickly and programmed with instant memories.”

“Except for the Rebel clones,” Hoole added, “for which no scans were available.”

“Okay, so now we know how the Vader clone made clones,” Zak said. “He just scraped up skin samples, hair, anything he could find from the Rebel base, and from us. But how did the Vader clone get cloned in the first place?”

Hoole shrugged. “We’ll never know.”

The Shroud touched down and the hatch opened. “Let’s get out of here,” Tash said.

They hurried on board the ship.

Vader had traveled back and forth from the Rebel base to the Jedi ruins several times, piecing together the clues to this mystery. It was obvious to him that the ancient Jedi had done experiments with cloning, and that some of their machinery had been left behind.

He knew what Zak, Tash, and Hoole could not. He remembered his previous visit to the ruins, the defensive blasters, and his wounds. Some of his blood must have spilled in the round chamber. The genetic maintenance droids, reactivated by the activity in the room, had been attracted by the proximity of fresh DNA. They’d gathered up

a blood sample and used it to create a Vader clone. This clone had then gone on to create others.

That mystery was easily solved. But the two human children and the Shi'ido puzzled Vader more. They were unusual, those three. They had a talent for getting in the way. Vader had met them once before, and they'd slipped through his fingers. Now they had escaped him a second time. He would make sure that did not happen again.

Vader stood on the bridge between the base and the ruins, watching his stormtroopers work. They were gathering up all the clones they could find. The Rebel clones, with their limited mental abilities, would be nearly useless. The clones of the children and the Shi'ido would be more interesting. They would be studied before they were destroyed.

The cloning equipment itself he planned to take aboard his ship. The mindscanners were obviously flawed, creating imperfect replicas. His own clone, with its false armor and lightsaber, was proof of that. The mindscanned clones seemed unable to distinguish between reality and mere image. But perhaps they could be improved.

He knew the Emperor would find it interesting.