

STAR WARS



STAR WARS: THE NEW JEDI ORDER
THE APPRENTICE
BY ELAINE CUNNINGHAM

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STAR WARS GAMER 8

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Jaina Solo adjusted the restraints on the copilot chair and leaned forward, eager for her first glimpse of Gallinore. The small Hapan freighter glided smoothly out of hyperspace, and star lines compressed into brilliant points of light-- a beautiful sight, but one that could have marked nearly any destination. Then the ship banked sharply to starboard, and a soft green haze bloomed against the darkness of space.

Mist clung to the deeply forested planet, and the slanting rays of the rising sun lent the humid atmosphere a luminous, verdant glow. Lowbacca let out a low, poignant moan that mingled appreciation and longing.

"It does look a bit like Kashyyk," Jaina agreed, naming the Wookiee's homeworld.

She glanced back at her companions. Lowbacca had always been thin by Wookiee

standards, but their recent captivity had left him positively gaunt, and his ginger-hued fur was dull and patchy. Tenel Ka was thinner, too, and her dark green flight suit clung to her too-slender form. Her long reddish hair was carefully plaited in the many-braided fashion of a Dathomiri warrior, but with one difference: She'd swept her hair over to one side to hide the raw patch left when a Yuuzhan Vong inquisitor had yanked out one of her braids. Jaina quickly averted her eyes from this reminder of their shared ordeal. Her own scars were of a different sort.

Her gaze shifted to the man in the pilot seat. Kyp Durron could add about a dozen years to her eighteen. The long, careless waves of brown hair were threaded with silver, and faint lines collected at the corners of his green eyes-- lines that suggested easy smiles and shared laughter. Kyp had the sort of face that inspired camaraderie and confidence, and probably would have even without the added charisma of his formidable Jedi powers. One thing was certain: People followed Kyp. Jaina intended to figure out why.

The mists of Gallinore swirled up to receive their ship. Jaina shifted impatiently in her seat. Her fingers itched for the feel of the controls, and she briskly scrubbed one hand against the leg of her flight suit as if that could erase the urge to take over. Kyp was a Jedi Master, however, and-- more importantly-- a Master who'd asked Jaina to be his apprentice. For Jaina, sitting in the copilots' chair was one way of taking this notion for a test flight.

Part of her wanted to reject his offer out of hand. Kyp Durrón had been a dubious figure before the war started, before he'd undertaken his rogue crusade against the Yuuzhan Vong invaders. His forays were highly controversial, and his passionate advocacy of aggressive tactics brought discord to every Jedi gathering, whether he attended or not.

But at some level, Jaina sensed that she and Kyp were already flying on the same vector. She couldn't argue against either his philosophy or his methods. She just wasn't sure she wanted to hand over the controls.

Kyp peered at the unbroken expanse of green rushing up toward their ship. 'Thenavicomputer confirms our landing coordinates, but I don't see anything down there that looks like a city.'

Tenel Ka glanced up from the datapad she'd been studying throughout most of the trip. 'Dimitoris difficult to see from above. The city is constructed mostly of green marble and all the streets are lined with tall trees. Even the landing docks are paved with multicolored stone, making them indistinguishable from meadowland until you are almost upon them.'

'Makes you wonder what they've got to hide,' Kyp observed, slinging a quick, pointed glance at Jaina.

'Gallinore is a lawful world, closely affiliated with the government of Hapes,' Tenel Ka returned gravely. Her gaze shifted to Jaina. 'I'm more concerned about our purposes than theirs. We are landing shortly. Shouldn't

you tell us why we've come?"

Jaina conceded with a nod. "Let me see your lightsaber."

The warrior woman frowned in puzzlement, but she removed the weapon from her belt and handed it over.

Jaina turned the unusual lightsaber over in her hand, running her thumb over the strange carvings Tenel Ka had meticulously etched into the yellowed ivory handle. "A rancor's tooth," she observed. With a flick of her thumb she unleashed a stream of brilliant, turquoise light-- a strangely iridescent hue, one that, on close inspection, held dancing motes in every color of the visible spectrum. "You used rainbow gems for the focusing crystals, right? From Gallinore?"

"Fact," Tenel Ka confirmed.

"These 'gems' are actually living creatures, yet you were able to use them in a Jedi lightsaber -- just as Anakin attuned the Yuuzhan Vong's lambent crystals to his. I've read that the rainbow gems, like many of the unique lifeforms on this world, were bioengineered."

Understanding dawned on the warrior woman's face. "This similarity leads you to hope the scientists of Gallinore can help you understand the _Trickster_, " she concluded, naming the living ship that Jaina and Zekk had stolen

from a Yuuzhan Vong worldship.

"That's the plan." Jaina switched off her friend's Jedi weapon and handed it back.

They fell silent as Kyp made voice contact with the dock officials. He passed along the authorization codes and deftly maneuvered the ship down through layers of clouds. The three younger Jedi rose immediately, leaving him to power down the controls.

The ramp unfolded, and Jaina walked down and gazed around the docks with interest. She could see why this place was nearly invisible from above.

A stiff breeze stirred the thick, landbound clouds that filled the open docks and clung to the trees in the city beyond. Tall, swaying branches moved in and out of sight like timid forest animals. The docking bays were teeming with pilots, mechanics, and dock officials, all clad in flight suits fashioned from mottled shades of green. They, too, seemed to move in and out of the mists in random patterns. Some odd optical quirk made their movements appear nearly identical to that of the swaying foliage.

Even so, workers immediately converged on any newly landed ship, using stout little hover sleds to maneuver it into a docking bay covered by a tall, camouflaged canopy. It was hard to believe that Gallinore's sun could burn off the sheltering morning clouds before reaching its zenith. Jaina squinted up at the brightest patch of fog, noting the sun's position with dismay.

She'd have to work fast.

'The customs building,"Tenel Ka said, nodding toward a low, green structure. 'City officials will be expecting us there." She set her shouldersback, in the manner of a warrior preparing to do battle, and set offat a brisk pace.

A fleeting grin touchedJaina's lips as she imagined the 'diplomatic meeting" that would follow.Tenel Ka was a princess ofHapes , the dominate worldin theHapes Cluster, but she was here as a warrior to exhort others toprepare for the coming conflict. AtJaina's suggestion, all of the visitingJedi exceptLowbacca were dressed in green flight suits identical tothose worn by theGallinorians . She'd suggested this as a means of honoringlocal custom, of creating an impression of unity.Tenel Ka had been pleasedwith this notion, and she didn't ask ifJaina had had other reasons forwanting to blend in.

Kypcame down the ramp and checked the hatch leading into the cargo hold. TenelKa glanced over at the older Jedi. Although the expression on her face didnot change or her pace alter, disapproval rolled off her in waves.

Jainasteped into theDathomiri warrior's path and faced her down. 'All right, let's have it."

TenelKa stopped and regardedJaina with a cool, gray-eyed stare. 'I

understand your desire to learn from Gallinore's scientists. But why is Kyp Durron with us? Surely you're not considering his offer of apprenticeship."

"Maybe I should. Kyp is an exceptionally powerful Jedi." Jaina paused for a brief, humorless smile. "He'd have to be. The only reason he's still alive is that people who mattered believed that his talent overbalanced his past crimes."

Tenel Ka lifted one red-gold brow. "It is not like you to be cynical."

"Practical," Jaina corrected. "Kyp Durron knows things I don't. I could learn from him."

"Fact. That's what concerns me."

Jaina blew out a frustrated sigh and put down her best card-- an endorsement powerful enough to clinch arguments and bring conversations to a dead stop. "Master Luke trusts him."

"Do you?" Tenel Ka shot back. "Can you, after what he did at Sernpidal?"

The blunt reminder hit Jaina like a punch to the gut. Not long ago, Kyp had used the Force to convince Jaina that enemy shipyards hidden among the fragments of the dead world Sernpidal were building super weapons. Kyp had manipulated her, using the Solo name and Jaina's personal reputation as a Rogue Squadron pilot to convince New Republic forces to join in the attack.

That deception still stung, as did the knowledge that Rogue Squadron, largely at her instigation, had attacked a civilian target.

She tried to dismiss all this with an impatient shrug. "The mission was a success. The destruction of the Vong's new world ship strengthened the Republic position."

"Perhaps," Tenel Ka allowed. "Yet I wonder if your willingness to attack Sermpidal had as much to do with vengeance as tactics."

A Wookiee howl of protest preempted Jaina's retort. Lowbacca stepped up to Jaina's side, his long arms folded over his chest and his black eyes narrowed. He huffed out a few curt, indignant phrases. Some of the nuances of the Wookiee language might have escaped Tenel Ka, but his meaning was clear enough to bring a faint flush to her cheeks.

She inclined her head. "I apologize, my friend. I meant no disrespect to your uncle Chewbacca's honor, or to the life debt you assumed in his name. His sacrifice on Sermpidal would indeed be diminished by vengeance." The look she sent at Jaina was pointed, but not as sharp as it might otherwise have been.

Kyp strode over to the trio. His gaze slid over them, lingering on Lowbacca's defensive stance. "What did I miss?"

'We're just getting ready to split up,"Jaina said, mindful of the possible doublemeaning her words held-- and certain thatKyp would pick up on the nuance. 'TenelKa has some sort of diplomatic meeting toattend, and Lowie andI will go to the research center."

'I see. I'll stay with the ship and keep an eye on things."

'That should not be necessary,"Tenel Ka observed. 'Dimitoris a lawful city."

'All the more reason I should stay here,"Kyp said in a dry tone. A glint enteredhis eyes and he turned his most charming smile onTenel Ka. 'Or perhapsI misunderstood.Were you inviting me to join you?"

The warrior's eyes widened, and for a moment her formidable composure faltered. Before she could formulate a suitably tactful refusal,Kyp sent hera mocking wink and then strode off toward their ship.

Jainalifted a hand to her lips to conceal a smirk. Of course the Jedi Master had sensed the discord between the two young women, and he'd enacted thissmall, teasing vengeance onJaina's behalf. His support amused and warmedher, even though she recognized the manipulation that prompted it. For whatever reason,Kyp wanted to take over her training. She intended to seejust how far he'd go to meet this particular objective.

She waited untilTenel Ka left with a pair of city officials, then she

turned grateful eyes to her genuine supporter. Lowbacca acted as a buffer between Jaina and her other friends. Tenel Ka was not the only young Jedi who followed Jaina but did not entirely trust her. No one questioned the Wookiee's integrity, however, and his continued support of Jaina helped mitigate their concerns.

'I don't know what I'd do without you,' she said sincerely.

Lowbacca's brief, disgruntled response brought a grin to Jaina's face. 'If Em Teede was still around, he'd probably translate that as 'Master Lowbacca respectfully suggests that without his intervention, you might inadvertently enter targeting coordinates that focus your weapons upon vital portions of your own anatomy.' I'll bet you really miss that little droid.'

The Wookiee let out an unmistakably derisive chuff.

Jaina tucked her arm through his. 'Me either,' she agreed.

Jaina and Lowbacca wove through the mist-laden maze of green marble buildings to the sprawling research district. A letter from Ta'a Chume, Tenel Ka's grandmother and the former Queen Mother of Hapes, earned them full cooperation and unquestioned access to the facility. Within moments, Lowbacca was seated before a terminal, his furry digits flying as he sifted

through computerized records of the Gallinore research, searching for anything that might provide a link between a technology that he and Jaina could understand, and the secrets of the _Trickster_, their stolen Vong ship.

But apparently even Ta'a Chume's influence was not enough to grant them unsupervised access to this information. A dark-haired young woman wearing a technician's white tunic and a perpetually worried expression stayed nearby to "help" them. Jaina waited until the tech's comlink beeped, then bent over and rested her chin on the Wookiee's shoulders.

"Can you get me a reading on the layout and security?" she said softly.

Lowbacca growled a question. In response, Jaina sent him mental images of their recent battle in the Yuuzhan Vong worldship, flashed back to him the terror and uncertainty of fighting their way through the unknown. A knowledge of the worldship's layout might have made a difference, might have saved some of the lives lost in that terrible place. A soft, whirring moan escaped the Wookiee as he acknowledged their shared loss, and the prudence of Jaina's precaution.

She straightened up and turned to the technician. "I need to speak with Sinsor Khal. Can you show me where I might find him?"

A peculiar expression crossed the young woman's face, but she pulled out her comlink again and relayed Jaina's request. Lowbacca deftly affixed a holocube to an output terminal and transferred the requested data. This he

surreptitiously passed to Jaina .

In moments an armed escort arrived and guided her through a maze of pristine whitehalls. They left her before a large door, nodded toward a palm reader mounted beside the door, and left at a much faster pace than that which had brought them here.

Jaina shrugged, then placed her hand against the device. The door irised open. She ducked through into a large room, one crowded with so much equipment, all of it in such disarray, that for a moment Jaina suspected she was viewing the result of a head-on collision between two large ships. The doors snapped shut behind her with a clang like that of a prison door.

She crept through the room, surveying it as she might a battlefield. When she knew all she needed, she slipped out the way she'd come and retraced her steps through the corridors, finally making her way back to their ship.

Kypa waited her in the hold, his lean face grim and his eyes holding no trace of the sly humor he'd turned against Tenel Ka. He nodded toward their shared secret-- the Hapan prisoner hidden in the hold, kept in a Force-induced trance so deep that the two other Jedi couldn't perceive the presence of a fifth person aboard ship.

'Let's hear it,' he said without preamble.

'You know that this man is a YuuzhanVong collaborator,' Jaina began, 'and that he attacked Tenel Ka, a member of the Hapan royal family. That's a capital crime on Hapes. If we hadn't helped him escape, he would have been executed.'

Kyp shifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug. 'Jedi are sworn to protect all living things, yet I find myself strangely unable to shed tears on his behalf.'

'The Vong gave him a coral slave implant,' she went on. 'This is a communication and control device. I want to have it removed, tested, and modified. Ultimately I want to hit the YuuzhanVong with their own weapons.'

Interest sparked in the Jedi Master's eyes. Jaina activated the holocube, and a shining model of the building's layout took shape, floating in the air between them. 'Lowbacca's good. He got me this without anyone realizing what he was doing. He can just as easily remove any records from the system. We get this man in, we get out, we erase our footsteps. Lowbacca can wipe anyone off the security records we don't want to leave there, and rumor has it that you've had practice removing unwanted memories from people.'

She glanced expectantly at Kyp. He nodded for her to continue. 'Here's the lab, down in this lower level. I've already been there. These plans have all the details we need, but I wanted to see the layout with my own eyes and get a feel for it through the Force. Here's what I think we should do.'

Kyp listened intently to her plan, his expression inscrutable. His eyes flickered, once, when she concluded her proposal by noting, 'You asked me to be your apprentice. This is where it starts.'

He leaned against the wall and folded his arms. 'You have a high opinion of your value.'

'That's the asking price.' Jaina spread both hands and gave him her best imitation of her father's trademark smirk. 'Do you want me or not?'

For a long moment the two Jedi locked stares. 'You know we could never speak of this, not to anyone,' Kyp said.

'Who would I tell?' she retorted. 'Uncle Luke?'

He lowered his head in a slow nod, holding her gaze. 'All right, then. Let's get it done.'

It took both Jedi to wrestle their prisoner into a green flight suit, even though he was still deep in stasis. The Hapan was a big man, at least a head taller than Kyp and heavily muscled. He was enough trouble as deadweight; Jaina figured he'd be much worse awake. His recent fight with Tenel Ka had

revealed considerable skill in the Hapan kickboxing style. Two Jedi could certainly handle him, but not without drawing unwanted attention.

Finally the task was done. Jaina sat back on her heels and tucked a stray wispy of brown hair behind one ear. 'I say we transport him like this. Put him on a repulsor sled.'

Kyp shook his head. 'Three of us walking away from the ship wouldn't draw much notice. Two walking and one floating-- that's likely to raise some questions. Plus, the ventilation tunnels are light and heat sensitive. The sled doesn't generate much heat, but the control lights might be enough to tip off the sensors.'

'I could reset the controls.'

'Sure, but that would take time. I doubt we've got much to spare.'

Jaina conceded with a nod. She watched intently as Kyp placed a hand on the man's temples. She felt the Jedi Master reach out into the prisoner's mind, feel him use the Force to peel back the shields holding him in torpor.

The big man came awake suddenly, thrashing and sputtering like a man drowning in a sea of nightmares. His eyes focused on Jaina, and he abruptly fell still and silent. Memory flickered in them, and then a searing flash of panic--hers had been the last face he'd seen before an invisible fist seized his mind and crushed it into darkness and silence.

The Hapan hauled himself to a sitting position and scuttled away, crab-walking backward as he put as much distance between himself and the young Jedi as possible. 'Why?' he demanded in a dry, raspy tone.

Jaina knew precisely what he meant. Why had his escape from the prisons of Hapes been arranged? Why were his two compatriots allowed to continue the escape, while he was kept behind? Why had he been mind-controlled and stashed in the hold of some ship?

She sent him a reassuring smile. 'Princess Tenel Ka has issued a conditional pardon. She understands the Yuuzhan Vong implant might have prompted you to attack her. We've brought you to Gallinore to have it removed. Afterward, if you'll recant your desertion, and if a Jedi inquiry shows that you're free of any further treasonous intent, your pardon will take full effect.'

'Why?' he repeated in a stronger tone.

'We're trying to win back deserters, especially those who might possess valuable information about the Yuuzhan Vong. Hapes needs all the good pilots it can get.'

Wary blue eyes searched her face as the man weighed her claim. 'And the other two men? The pirates who escaped with me?'

"They'll be picked up before they leave Hapes's atmosphere. Since we're circumventing Hapan law, we've got to keep this quiet until we know for sure that the effort is worthwhile. Your friends' get-away ships will be reported as destroyed. That way, if they don't rehabilitate, they'll already be listed as dead."

Jaina lifted one eyebrow, underscoring the choices before him. She deliberately made her story grim enough to be plausible and added a powerful nudge of Jedi persuasion. After a moment the man accepted his 'reprieve' with a nod. The two Jedi helped him to his feet and flanked him as they headed toward the pilot refresher facility.

"We're going in through the ventilation tunnels," Jaina explained as they slipped into a dimly lit side corridor.

They stopped before a large, circular hatch. Kyp caught her wrist as she reached for the controls. "Wait. The light in this hall could trigger an alarm."

He drew his lightsaber and swept it in a shining arc toward the ceiling lights. They flared sharply and then blinked out, leaving the hall in darkness.

Immediately a profound chill swept through Jaina. She reached out for their prisoner with a hand that suddenly was heavy and numb. Her fingers closed around the Hapan's wrist. His skin felt cold to the touch.

'What is this?' he demanded thickly. 'What's happening?'

'I have to lower our body temperature to match the air temperature in the tunnels,' Kyp responded. 'It might not be comfortable, but it's necessary.

Move slowly, keep alert. Remember, if we're caught, the Gallinore officials will send you right back to that Hapan prison.'

'I copy,' the man mumbled.

Jaina eased the door open and hauled herself into the tunnel. The rounded passageway was just big enough to crawl through, and it sloped downward. As Jaina pulled herself along, she quickly became grateful for the decline. The tunnels were cold, and her chilled limbs felt sluggish and unresponsive.

Finally the tunnel leveled out, and an almost imperceptible bluish glow dawned at the end. Jaina picked up her pace. The tunnel opened into a rounded corridor big enough to allow them to walk upright. She rolled out, reveling in the soft light. The tunnel was still painfully cold, but after the utter darkness of the side tunnels, the faint diffused light felt oddly reassuring. She stepped aside to allow the Hapan to emerge. The big man crawled out and stretched, then rolled his shoulders to loosen cramped muscles.

He fell into step with the two Jedi, walking nearly as quietly as his

much-smaller captors. Jaina reached out with the Force, trying to measure his mood and intentions. She picked up a high level of anxiety, but under the circumstances that seemed reasonable.

They moved silently through a maze of tunnels, counting off side tunnels and drainage shoots, following the pattern that Kyp had committed to memory. Finally the Jedi Master pointed to a hatch on the far wall. "That's it," he said softly.

Without warning, the Hapan dropped to the floor and executed a quick leg sweep. His attack was unbelievably quick-- would have been even if he hadn't been chilled to near-immobility. Kyp went down, and his tumble gave Jaina time to stumble back a couple of paces. The prisoner completed the spin and came up in one fluid movement.

He pivoted to one side, brought his knee up and snapped off a quick kick. Instantly Jaina fell back into lessons learned during her brief apprenticeship with Mara Jade. Recognizing the feint, she ducked under the first high kick. She pivoted hard toward the kickboxer, timing her momentum to his second kick and slamming her stiffened forearm against the sensitive tendon just below the bunched muscle of his calf.

The jolt of impact was not nearly as hard as she'd expected. Too late, Jaina recognized the double feint. The Hapan's third, powerful kick caught her off balance and sent her flying.

Jaina hit the rounded wall and rolled down. She came up on one knee, too cold and too angry to feel the pain that would certainly come later. The kickboxer advanced, sweeping one stiffened leg up high for a powerful downward chop.

Instinctively Jaina threw out one hand toward her attacker. Dark lightning flared from her fingertips. Jagged, eerily dancing tendrils caught the Hapan, lifted him, and then hurled him across the tunnel.

Once before Jaina had unleashed Force lightning. This time it came more easily-- but once summoned, it was harder to dispel. Streaks of dark energy edged with searing blue-violet shadows poured from her, pinning the writhing, struggling man against the tunnel wall.

She was dimly aware of another power falling like a shadow on her dark and brilliant rage. The lightning ended with an abrupt, audible sizzle as Kyp seized her wrist. He spun her around to face him.

For a moment she simply stared at the Jedi Master, stunned at her own actions and not at all sure whether they would meet with condemnation or approval.

Kyp broke off first. She tracked his gaze up at the ceiling, and noticed the faint hiss coming from dozens of small round openings. "The flash set off the sensors," he said curtly. "Let's get him out."

They hauled the dazed Hapan to his feet and started toward the hatch. A wall of durasteel suddenly slammed down into their path, sealing off the tunnel. Jaina spun in time to see a similar wall fall behind them. The hiss rose in volume, and suddenly a stream of cold, acrid-smelling fluid poured from the valves.

A swift flood of coolant poured into the locked-off tunnel, knocking Jaina's feet from under her and sending her spinning down into the churning fluid. She went under briefly and came up spitting out a mouthful of the bitter stuff.

Something seized her foot and yanked her under again. Jaina flailed about until her hand grazed some metallic hold on the rounded wall. She seized it and struggled to pull away from her attacker. She hauled herself upward, found another handhold. Up she went, rising toward the ceiling by slow, painful centimeters. The coolant numbed her, and her lungs ached and burned. Her struggle ceased abruptly, and she shot upward. Her head broke the surface, and for a few moments all she could do was gasp in air and cling to her cold metal perch.

Jaina looked around for Kyp. He'd found a similar handhold. To her surprise, his free arm was looped under the Hapan's chin, keeping him afloat in a rescuer's hold. She'd assumed that the big man had been trying to pull her under, but realized at a glance that he was in condition to continue his attack.

The coolant level continued its swift rise, and the powerful spray coming from above made breathing difficult and speech impossible. Jaina slanted a glance toward the ceiling. The fluid would soon reach the top. If they didn't find a way out soon, they'd drown.

Kyp caught her eye and looked pointedly toward her left-- toward the unseen force that had tried to pull her under. Jaina noted the vortex rising to the surface, spreading toward them. A drainage tunnel, most likely.

The Jedi Master let go, deliberately releasing himself and his charge into the powerful spiral. Jaina took a long, deep breath and followed.

Down she fell, whirling through the cold and darkness. Her tumbling descent slowed as the wall narrowed, and then diffused light rushed toward her through the tumbling water. Silhouetted against it were the dark, tumbling shapes of Kyp and their prisoner. Then, suddenly, both men stopped.

Jaina continued to hurtle forward. She made out the regular shape of a metal grate, and then a heartbeat later she slammed headlong into it.

Coolant continued to surge through the narrow tunnel, pinning her to the grate like a mynock stuck to an accelerating starfighter. She struggled to free herself, but the force of the rushing fluid was just too great.

She felt Kyp's touch through the Force, and then she was sliding to one side of the grate, moved by a psychic shove more powerful than the swift-flowing stream. The flare of Kyp's lightsaber darted toward the hatch, and the lock gave way.

The three of them tumbled out, falling into a wide, shallow tank. Jaina struggled to the side and hauled herself over. She tumbled to the floor-- and came to a stop just short of several pairs of booted feet.

Strong hands seized her and dragged her upright. Inner warmth flooded through Jaina in a sudden wash of power, and her chilled limbs awoke to a thousand sharp prickles of pain. She clung to the guard's wrists, certain that she'd fall if he let her go. Though every instinct prompted her to fight, Jaina focused on the struggle within. She was perilously close to losing consciousness. If she did, then all would be lost.

A bright flare of light filled the room, a burst of power that shattered Jaina's faltering concentration. She slid to the floor, no longer supported by the guard, and let the darkness claim her.

The dull humming in Jaina's ears rose swiftly to a shrill wail and then dissipated in a sharp, sudden burst. She sat up abruptly, feeling dazed and disoriented. After a moment, she remembered her mission, and the bruising tumble that had brought them this far.

She looked around. The Hapan had recovered consciousness. He leaned heavily against the now-empty coolant tank, eyeing her with undisguised horror. Jaina's gaze quickly slid away from the accusing stare. Four guards lay sprawled across the floor. Kyp Durrón knelt by one of them, rhythmically pumping the man's chest with both hands. The guard's body suddenly jerked, and the bluish color began to fade from his face.

The Jedi Master rose to his feet and extended a hand to Jaina. She took it and let him pull her up. "Wow," she said, gazing at the Force-blasted guards. "Who did this, you or me?"

"We've got to keep moving," Kyp said, ignoring her question. "The longer this takes, the slimmer our chances of walking out of here."

Jaina nodded. "Before we go, I need you to show me how to wipe away memories. They can't remember they saw us here."

When he did not respond, she continued her argument. "The scientist is a political prisoner. Secrecy is vital, not only so we can get our prisoner where he needs to go, but also to stave off more reactionary response to the Jedi."

Kyp held his silence for a few moments. "No."

'No?" she repeated, incredulous. 'You said yourself that no one can know about this."

'And I hold to that. But I'll do it myself."

She lifted one brow in challenge. 'What's the matter? Not the sort of lessons you had in mind?"

'An apprentice should learn from a Master, not repeat his mistakes."

'This is no different from the little Jedi mind tricks that every Jedi uses without a twinge of guilt," she argued. 'You're just better at it than most. If I'd wanted to become a singer of ballads, I'd be traveling with Tionne. You want to win the war against the Yuuzhan Vong . That's why we're here. Show me."

The Jedi Master let out a profound sigh. He grimaced as if steeling himself for an unpleasant task, then dropped to one knee. 'Watch, feel and follow," he instructed, and then reached out to one of the prisoners.

Jaina felt the older Jedi's power reach into the man's mind. Kyp formed the image of a morning-misted sun, barely visible above the forest horizons of Gallinore-- about the time, Jaina recalled, that they had landed. With smooth, cool strokes, Kyp swept away the memory from that moment to this. He eased away, like a thief creeping from a plundered home.

Slowly Kyp broke the contact with the fallen guard and lifted his eyes to hers. His face was still pale from the chilling tumble, and the deep shadows beneath his eyes made them look vividly green. The power in them, though fading, was both eerie and compelling. 'Now you.'

Jaina nodded and reached out to another guard. But instead of envisioning the morning sun, she focused upon an image of a chronometer. Slowly she forced it into backward motion, stripping away moments from a man's life.

When the task was done, she looked to the Jedi Master. He studied her for a moment, his expression unreadable. 'You have a knack for this,' he said at last. 'Good control. Very precise. You take that one, I'll do the other. Let's get this over with.'

In moments they were back on their way to Sinsor Khal's lab. Jaina placed her hand on the palm reader, and the door slid open. A small, thin man glanced up from his work. At first glance there was nothing particularly unusual about him. His sandy hair was neatly groomed, and his beard short and trimmed. He wore a red lab coat marked with a few dark spots.

'Professor Khal?' Jaina inquired.

'I am he. And you'd be Ta'a Chume's young protege,' he said easily.

'Welcome.'

He came forward, one hand extended in greeting. At close range she noted the faint, coppery scent emanated from the red garments, and realized that the color was chosen for practicality, or perhaps camouflage. This was a man who dealt in blood, and his red lab coat served the same purpose in this venue that the green flight suits did above.

Jaina took Sinsor Khal's hand, noting as she did that the scientist was not much taller than she. She could look him directly in the face without tipping back her head-- an unusual experience for the small young woman.

The scientist did not return her scrutiny. In fact, his eyes never settled on her or the two men behind her. Obviously he was aware of them, but he seemed strangely detached. Most people would have commented on their wet clothes, their disheveled appearance. Curious, Jaina reached out through the Force. There was little to read. Sinsor Khal was strangely closed to her.

The only perception she could pick up was a neutral curiosity, devoid of almost any emotional flavoring and far different from any human response she'd encountered before. They were not persons but specimens, perhaps?

She quickly withdrew her hand and gestured toward the tall Hapan. "This man has the implant."

"Just put him over there," he said, gesturing.

"There" was a long table, bordered with a small gutter and slanted downward slightly toward a pair of drains.

Kyp turned a dubious stare toward Jaina. "It'll be fine," she asserted.

The prisoner didn't share her optimism. The struggle to get him onto the table ended abruptly when Sinsor Khal placed a small blaster-shaped weapon against the man's shoulder and pressed the trigger. The Hapan slumped over the table.

"Now then," the scientist announced. "All set for a quick vivisection and a general tune-up. A figure of speech," he added cheerfully, as if he perceived the storm cloud frown gathering on Kyp's face.

Jaina and Kyp worked together to shift the big man onto the table. As she straightened, hands to the small of her aching back, Jaina felt a flash of mental power, a force of mind weirdly similar to that of a Jedi. She whirled toward it and stared directly into Sinsor Khal's face. The scientist was looking at her, really looking, with an intensity that suggested he saw things most people could never fathom.

"I know you," he observed.

Jaina shook her head. "From what Ta'a Chume said, you were already a guest of Gallinore's government when I was learning to walk. I've never been to Gallinore before."

An odd smile slipped onto Sinsor Khal's face. He held his hand out, palm up. A small, sharp tool rose from the tray and settled down into his grasp with practiced ease. Jaina's jaw fell, but the scientist hardly seemed to notice his own feat.

"I didn't say we'd met," the failed Jedi specified. "I said I know you."

Kyp started forward. Jaina placed one hand on his arm. "We've got to get back," she said softly. "We still have some work to do to make sure there's no record of our passing."

After a moment, Kyp nodded agreement. They left their prisoner in Sinsor Khal's dubious care and retraced their steps through the corridors, seeking out all those they'd encountered. The older Jedi insisted on doing most of the work. Jaina was content to let him do as he willed. She'd stretched her Force powers to new levels today, and the scientist's words echoed through her thoughts like mocking laughter. She could not ignore them, could not deny them-- not considering the task still before her.

Finally Kyp returned to the ship, leaving Jaina to deal with Lowbacca. As she entered the research center, all the chill and pain of the tunnels seemed to come back to her, centering in a cold lump in the pit of her stomach.

Lowbacca was still seated at the terminal, his furry face engrossed. The dark-haired tech had grown bored of her assignment and sat wearily at another workstation. A faint smile touched Jaina's lips. The Wookiee loved

computers. He probably had scant perception of the hours that had passed since his arrival. In a way, that made her task easier.

Jaina came up behind him and leaned down, resting her chin on his shoulder. Her eyes drifted shut, and she drew in a long, steady breath. The familiar, musty scent of Wookiee fur filled her senses. She reached out through the Force and for a moment savored the solid, loyal presence that was Lowbacca. The only friend who truly trusted her, the only Jedi who looked at her and saw the Jaina she once had been.

She stealthily slipped him a holocube. The Wookiee quickly transferred the needed information and returned it to her. When he slipped it into her hand, she caught his big paw and clung to it for a moment. He tipped his head to one side and slanted a curious look back up at her. His nose wrinkled at the scent of coolant that clung to her nearly-dry flight suit.

'Long story,' she said softly. 'I need you to get into the security records. I was never there. Make that happen.'

The Wookiee nodded and erased her footsteps with a few deft movements. When a satisfied grunt announced his success, Jaina reached out through the link between them and brought to mind an image of a Wookiee sun dial. Slowly, inexorably, she forced the shadows to deepen.

A few moments later, Jaina straightened up and turned toward the tech.

Puzzlement and then concern swept the woman's thin face. Suddenly Jaina was aware of the damp tracks of tears on her cheeks. She wiped them away, as she'd wiped the past few hours from Lowbacca's memory.