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RULE OF TWO

BOOK 2 OF THE DARTH BANE SERIES

DREW KARPYSHYN

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Darth Bane: Path of Destruction

Darth Bane: Rule of Two

Darth Bane: Dynasty of Evil

The Old Republic: Revan

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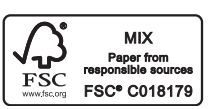
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To my parents,
Ron and Viv, and my younger sister, Dawn

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For more than forty years, novels set in a galaxy far, far away have enriched the *Star Wars* experience for fans seeking to continue the adventure beyond the screen. When he created *Star Wars*, George Lucas built a universe that sparked the imagination and inspired others to create. He opened up that universe to be a creative space for other people to tell their own tales. This became known as the Expanded Universe, or EU, of novels, comics, videogames, and more.

To this day, the EU remains an inspiration for *Star Wars* creators and is published under the label Legends. Ideas, characters, story elements, and more from new *Star Wars* entertainment trace their origins back to material from the Expanded Universe. This Essential Legends Collection curates some of the most treasured stories from that expansive legacy.

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DARTH BANE

RULE OF TWO

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PROLOGUE

DAROVIT MADE HIS stumbling way through the bodies that littered the battlefield, his mind numb with grief and horror. He recognized many of the dead: some were servants of the light side, allies of the Jedi; others were followers of the dark side, minions of the Sith. And even in his dazed stupor, Darovit couldn't help but wonder which side he belonged with.

A few months earlier he'd still gone by his childhood name, *Tomcat*. Back then he'd been nothing more than a thin, dark-haired boy of thirteen living with his cousins Rain and Bug back on the small world of Somov Rit. They had heard rumblings of the never-ending war between the Jedi and the Sith, but they never thought it would touch their quiet, ordinary lives . . . until the Jedi scout had come to see Root, their appointed guardian.

General Hoth, leader of the Jedi Army of Light, was desperate for more Jedi, the scout had explained. The fate of the entire galaxy hung in the balance. And the children under Root's care had shown an affinity for the Force.

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At first Root had refused. He claimed his charges were too young to go off to war. But the scout had persisted. Finally, realizing that if the children did not go to the Jedi, the Sith might come and take them forcibly, Root had relented. Darovit and his cousins had left Somov Rit with the Jedi scout and headed for Ruusan. At the time, the children had thought it was the beginning of a grand adventure. Now Darovit knew better.

Too much had happened since they'd all arrived on Ruusan. Everything had changed. And the youth—for he had lived through too much in the past weeks to be called a boy anymore—didn't understand any of it.

He'd come to Ruusan full of hope and ambition, dreaming of the glory that would be his when he helped General Hoth and the Jedi Army of Light defeat the Sith serving in Lord Kaan's Brotherhood of Darkness. But there was no glory to be found on Ruusan; not for him. And not for his cousins.

Rain had died even before their ship touched down on Ruusan. They'd been ambushed by a squadron of Sith Buzzards only seconds after they broke atmosphere, the tail of their vessel shorn off in the attack. Darovit had watched in horror as Rain was swept away by the blast, literally ripped from his arms before plunging to an unseen death hundreds of meters below.

His other cousin, Bug, had died only a few minutes ago, a victim of the thought bomb, his spirit consumed by the terrible power of Lord Kaan's final, suicidal weapon. Now he was gone. Like all the Jedi and all the Sith. The thought bomb had destroyed every living being strong enough to wield the power of the Force. Everyone except Darovit. And this he couldn't understand.

In fact, nothing on Ruusan made any sense to him. Nothing! He'd arrived expecting to see the legendary Army of Light he'd heard about in stories and poems: heroic Jedi defending the galaxy against the dark side of the Force. Instead he'd wit-

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nessed men, women, and other beings who fought and died like common soldiers, ground into the mud and blood of the battlefield.

He'd felt cheated. Betrayed. Everything he'd heard about the Jedi had been a lie. They weren't shining heroes: their clothes were soiled with grime; their camp stank of sweat and fear. And they were *losing*! The Jedi whom Darovit had encountered on Ruusan were defeated and downtrodden, weary from the seemingly endless series of battles against Lord Kaan's Sith, stubbornly refusing to surrender even when it was clear they couldn't win. And all the power of the Force couldn't restore them to the shining icons of his naïve imagination.

There was movement on the far edge of the battlefield. Squinting against the sun, Darovit saw half a dozen figures slowly making their way through the carnage, gathering up the fallen bodies of friend and foe alike. He wasn't alone—others had survived the thought bomb, too!

He ran forward, but his excitement cooled as he drew close enough to make out the features of those tasked with cleaning the battlefield. He recognized them as volunteers from the Army of Light. Not Jedi, but ordinary men and women who'd sworn allegiance to Lord Hoth. The thought bomb had only taken those with sufficient power to touch the Force: Non-Force-using folk like these were immune to its devastating effects. But Darovit wasn't like them. He had a gift. Some of his earliest memories were of using the Force to levitate toys for the amusement of his younger cousin Rain, when they were both children. These people had survived because they were ordinary, plain. They weren't special like he was. Darovit's survival was a mystery—just one more thing about all this he didn't understand.

As he approached, one of the figures sat down on a rock, weary from the task of gathering the dead. He was an older man, nearly fifty. His face looked drawn and haggard, as if the grim task had sapped his mental reserves along with the phys-

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ical. Darovit recognized his features from those first few weeks he'd spent in the Jedi camp, though he'd never bothered to learn the old man's name.

A sudden realization froze Darovit in his tracks. If he recognized the man, then the man might also recognize him. He might remember Darovit. He might know the young man was a traitor.

The truth about the Jedi had disgusted Darovit. Repulsed him. His illusions and daydreams crushed by the weight of harsh reality, he'd acted like a spoiled child and turned against the Jedi. Seduced by easy promises of the dark side's power, he'd switched sides in the war and thrown himself in with the Brotherhood of Darkness. It was only now that he understood how wrong he'd been.

The realization had come upon him as he'd witnessed Bug's death—a death for which he was partly responsible. Too late he had learned the true cost of the dark side. Too late he understood that, through the thought bomb, Lord Kaan's madness had brought devastation upon them all.

He was no longer a follower of the Sith; he no longer hungered to learn the secrets of the dark side. But how could this old man, a devoted follower of General Hoth, know that? If he remembered Darovit, he would remember him only as the enemy.

For a second he thought about trying to escape. Just turn and run, and the tired old man still catching his breath wouldn't be able to stop him. It was the kind of thing he'd once done all the time. But things were different now. Whether it was from guilt, maturity, or simply a desire to see it all end, Darovit didn't run away. Whatever fate awaited him, he chose to stay and face it.

Moving with slow but determined steps, he approached the rock where the man was sitting, seemingly lost in thought. Darovit was only a few meters away when the man finally glanced up to acknowledge him.

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There was no glint of recognition in his eyes. There was only an empty, haunted look.

"All of them," the man mumbled, though whether he was talking to Darovit or himself wasn't clear. "All the Jedi and all of the Sith . . . all gone."

The man turned his head, fixing his vacant stare on the dark entrance to a small cave nearby. A chill went through Darovit as he realized what the man was talking about. The entrance led underground, through twisting tunnels to the cavern deep beneath the ground where Kaan and his Sith had gathered to unleash the thought bomb.

The man grunted and shook his head, dispelling the morbid state he had slipped into. Standing up with a weary sigh, his mind was once more focused on his duty. He gave Darovit a slight nod but otherwise paid him no further heed as he resumed the macabre task of rolling the corpses in cloth so they could be collected and given honorable burials.

Darovit turned toward the cave. Again, part of him wanted to back away and run. But another part of him was drawn to the black maw of the tunnel. Maybe there were answers to be found inside. Something to make sense of all the death and violence; something to help him see the reasons behind the endless war and bloodshed. Maybe he'd discover something to help him grasp some purpose behind everything that had happened here.

The air grew steadily cooler the deeper he descended. He could feel a tingling in the pit of his stomach: anticipation mixing with a sick sense of dread. He wasn't sure what he'd find once he reached the underground chamber at the tunnel's end. More bodies, perhaps. But he was determined not to turn back.

As the darkness enveloped him, he silently cursed himself for not bringing along a glow rod. He had a lightsaber at his belt; getting his hands on one of the fabled weapons was one of the temptations that had lured him over to the Sith. But

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even though he'd betrayed the Jedi just to lay claim to it, in the darkness of the tunnel, he no longer felt any desire to ignite it and use its light to guide him. The last time he'd drawn it had resulted in Bug's death, and the memory had tainted the prize he had sacrificed everything to gain.

He knew that if he turned back, he might never gather enough courage to make the trip down again, so he pressed on despite the darkness. He moved slowly, reaching out with his mind, trying to draw on the Force to guide him through the lightless tunnel. Even so he kept tripping over the uneven ground, or stubbing his toes. In the end he found it easier just to run one hand along the rocky wall and use it to guide himself.

His progress was slow but steady, the tunnel floor becoming steeper and steeper until he was half climbing down it in the darkness. After half an hour he noticed a faint light emanating from far ahead, a soft glow coming from the distant end of the passage. He picked up his pace, only to trip over a small outcropping of stone jutting up from the rough-hewn ground. He fell forward with a cry of alarm, falling and tumbling down the sharp slope until he came to rest, bruised and battered, at the tunnel's end.

It opened into a wide, high-ceilinged chamber. Here the dim glow that had drawn him forward was reflected from flecks of crystal embedded in the surrounding stone, illuminating the cavern so he could see everything clearly. A few stalactites still hung from the roof high above; hundreds more lay smashed on the cavern's floor, dislodged when Kaan had detonated the thought bomb.

The bomb itself, or what remained of it, hovered a meter above the ground in the very center of the cavern—the source of the illumination. At first glance it appeared to be an oblong, metallic orb four meters from top to bottom, and nearly three meters across at its widest point. Its surface was a flat, dusky silver that projected a pale radiance but at the same time devoured all light reflected back to it by the crystals trapped in the surrounding walls.

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Rising to his feet, Darovit shivered. He was surprisingly cold; the orb had sucked all the warmth from the air. He took a step forward. The dust and debris crunching below his foot sounded flat and hollow, as if the thought bomb were swallowing not just the heat of the cavern, but the noise as well.

Pausing, he listened to the unnatural silence. He couldn't hear anything, but he definitely felt something. A faint, thrumming vibration running through the floor and up into his body, a steady, rhythmic pulse coming from the orb.

Darovit held his breath, unaware he was doing so, and took another tentative step forward. When nothing happened he let the air escape from his lungs with a long, soft sigh. Gathering his courage, he continued his cautious approach, reaching out a hand but never taking his eyes from the sphere.

He drew close enough to see dark bands of shadow slowly twisting and turning beneath the shimmering surface, like black smoke trapped deep within the core. Two more steps and he was close enough to touch it. His hand trembling only slightly, he leaned forward and pressed his palm against the surface.

His mind exploded with wails of pure anguish; a shrieking cacophony of voices rose from the orb, all the victims of the thought bomb screaming out in torment.

Darovit wrenched his hand free and staggered back, dropping to his knees.

They were still alive! The bodies of the Jedi and Sith had been consumed by the thought bomb, crumbling into dust and ash, but their spirits had survived, sucked into the vortex at the heart of the bomb's blast only to be imprisoned forever.

He had only touched the surface for the briefest of seconds, but the keening of spirits had nearly driven him mad. Trapped inside the impregnable shell, they were condemned to an eternity of endless, unbearable suffering. A fate so horrible that Darovit's mind refused to fully grasp the implications.

Still hunched over on the ground, he clasped his head in his hands in a gesture of helpless futility. He'd come here seeking

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answers and explanations. Instead he'd found an abomination against nature itself, one from which every part of his being instinctively recoiled.

"I don't understand . . . I don't understand . . . I don't understand . . ."

He muttered the phrase over and over again, huddled on the ground, rocking slowly back and forth on his heels and still clutching his head in his hands.

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1

Peace is a lie. There is only passion.
Through passion, I gain strength.
Through strength, I gain power.
Through power, I gain victory.
Through victory, my chains are broken.

The Code of the Sith

Darth Bane, the only Sith Lord to escape the devastation of Kaan's thought bomb, marched quickly under a pale yellow Ruusan sun, moving steadily across the bleak, war-torn landscape. He was two meters tall, and his black boots covered the ground in long, sweeping strides, propelling his large, powerfully muscled frame with a sense of urgent purpose. There was an air of menace about him, accentuated by his shaved head, his heavy brow, and the dark intensity of his eyes. This, even more than his forbidding black armor or the sinister hook-handled lightsaber dangling from his belt, marked him

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as a man of fearsome power: a true champion of the dark side of the Force.

His thick jaw was set in grim determination against the pain that flared up every few minutes at the back of his bare skull. He had been many kilometers away from the thought bomb when it detonated, but even at that range he had felt its power reverberating through the Force. The aftereffects lingered, sporadic bursts shooting through his brain like a million tiny knives stabbing at the dark recesses of his mind. He had expected these attacks to fade over time, but in the hours since the blast, their frequency and intensity had steadily increased.

He could have called on the Force to keep the pain at bay, cloaking himself in an aura of healing energy. But that was the way of the Jedi, and Bane was a Dark Lord of the Sith. He walked a different path, one that embraced suffering, drawing strength from the ordeal. He transformed the pain into anger and hate, feeding the flames of the dark side until his physical aspect seemed almost to glow with the fury of a storm it could barely contain.

The terrifying image Bane projected contrasted sharply with the small figure that followed in his wake, struggling to keep up. Zannah was only ten, a waif of a girl with short, curly blond hair. Her clothing was simple and plain to the point of being rustic: a loose-fitting white shirt and faded blue coveralls, both torn and stained from weeks of continuous wear. Anyone who saw her scampering along after Bane's massive, black-clad form would have been hard-pressed to imagine she was the Sith Master's chosen apprentice. But looks could be deceiving.

There was power in the child. He'd seen ample proof of that at their first meeting, less than an hour earlier. Two nameless Jedi were dead by her hand. Bane didn't know all the details surrounding their deaths; he had arrived after the fact to find Zannah crying over the body of a bouncer, one of the

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telepathic, green-furred species native to Ruusan. The still-warm corpses of the Jedi had been sprawled beside her, their heads lolling at grotesque angles atop broken necks.

Clearly the bouncer had been the child's friend and companion. Bane surmised that the Jedi must have inadvertently killed the bouncer, only to meet a similar fate when Zannah exacted her revenge. Unaware of her power, they'd been caught off guard when the child—driven by mind-numbing grief and pure, abject hatred—had unleashed the full fury of the dark side on the men who'd slain her friend.

They were victims of cruel misfortune: in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet it would have been inaccurate to call their deaths pointless. In Bane's eyes, at least, their sacrifice had allowed him to recognize the young girl's potential. To some the series of events would have seemed preordained, as if the hapless Jedi had been inexorably drawn to their grim end with the sole purpose of uniting Bane and Zannah. No doubt there were even those who would profess that fate and the dark side of the Force had conspired to present the Master with a suitable apprentice. Bane, however, was not one of them.

He believed in the power of the Force, but he also believed in himself: He was more than just a servant of prophecy or a pawn of the dark side, subject to the whims of an inevitable, inescapable future. The Force was a tool he had used to forge his own destiny through strength and cunning. He alone among the Sith had truly earned the mantle of Dark Lord, which was why he alone among them still lived. And if Zannah was worthy of being his apprentice, she would eventually have to prove herself, as well.

He heard a grunt behind him and turned back to see that the girl had tumbled to the ground, falling in her haste to try to keep up with the relentless pace he'd set. She glared at him, anger etched across her features.

"Slow down!" she snapped. "You're going too fast!"

Bane clenched his teeth as a fresh bolt of pain ripped

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through his skull. "*I* am not going too fast," he replied, keeping his voice even but stern. "*You* are going too slow. You must find a way to keep up."

She scrambled to her feet, swatting at the scuffed knees of her overalls to wipe away the most obvious traces of dirt. "My legs aren't as long as yours," she replied crossly, refusing to back down. "How am I supposed to keep up?"

The girl had spirit. That had been clear from the moment of their first meeting. She had recognized Bane instantly for what he was: one of the Sith, sworn enemy of the Jedi, a servant of the dark side. Yet she had shown no fear. In Zannah, Bane had seen the potential for the successor he needed, but she had obviously seen something she wanted in him, too. And when he had offered her the chance to be his apprentice, to study and learn the ways of the dark side, she hadn't hesitated.

He wasn't yet certain why Zannah had been so eager to ally herself with a Lord of the Sith. It could have been a simple act of desperation: She was alone, with nowhere else to turn for her survival. Or maybe she saw the dark side as a path to vengeance against the Jedi, a way to make them all suffer for the death of her bouncer friend. It was even possible she had simply sensed Bane's power and lusted to claim it as her own.

Whatever her true motivations, Zannah had been more than willing to swear fealty to the Sith and her new Master. However, it was neither her spirit nor her willingness that made her worthy of being his apprentice. The Dark Lord had chosen her for one reason, and one reason only.

"You are strong in the Force," he explained, his voice still betraying no hint of emotion or the agony he endured. "You must learn to use it. To call on its power. To bend it to your purpose. As you did when you killed the Jedi."

He saw a flicker of doubt cross her face. "I don't know how I did that," she muttered. "I didn't even mean to do it," she continued, suddenly uncertain. "It just sort of . . . happened."

Bane detected a hint of guilt in her voice. He was disap-

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pointed, but hardly surprised. She was young. Confused. She couldn't truly understand what she had done. Not yet.

"Nothing *just happens,*" he insisted. "You called upon the power of the Force. Think back to how you did it. Think back to what happened."

She hesitated, then shook her head. "I don't want to," she whispered.

The girl had already endured immeasurable pain and suffering since her arrival on Ruusan. She had no wish to revisit those awful experiences. Bane understood; he even sympathized with her. He, too, had suffered during his childhood, a victim of countless savage beatings at the hands of Hurst, his cruel and abusive father. But he had learned to use those memories to his advantage. If Zannah was to become the heir to the dark side's legacy, she had to confront her past. She had to learn how to draw upon her most painful memories. She had to transform and channel them to allow her to wield the power of the dark side.

"You feel sorry for those Jedi now," Bane said, his voice casual. "You feel regret. Remorse. Maybe even pity." The easy tone fell away quickly as his voice began to rise in both volume and intensity. "But these are worthless emotions. They mean nothing. What you need to feel is anger!"

He took a sudden step toward her, his right fist clenched before him to punctuate his words. Zannah flinched at the unexpected movement, but didn't retreat.

"Their deaths were not an accident!" he shouted as he took another step forward. "What happened was not some mistake!"

A third step brought him so close that the shadow of his massive frame enveloped the girl like an eclipse. She cowered slightly but held her ground. Bane froze, blocking out the pain in the back of his skull and reining in his fury. He crouched down beside her and relaxed his clenched fist. Then he reached out slowly with his hand and placed it gently on her shoulder.

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"Think back to what you felt when you unleashed your power against them," he said, his voice now a soft, seductive whisper. "Think back to what you felt when the Jedi murdered your friend."

Zannah dropped her head, her eyes closed. For several seconds she was still and silent, forcing her mind to relive the moment. Bane saw the emotions crossing her face: grief, sorrow, loss. Beneath his massive hand on her frail shoulder, she trembled slightly. Then, slowly, he felt her anger begin to rise. And with it, the power of the dark side.

When the girl looked up again her eyes were open wide; they burned with a fierce intensity. "They killed Laa," she spat. "They deserved to die!"

"Good." Bane let his hand fall from her shoulder and took a step back, the hint of a satisfied smile playing across his lips. "Feel the anger. Welcome it. Embrace it.

"Through passion, I gain strength," he continued, reciting from the Code of the Sith. "Through strength, I gain power."

"Through passion, I gain strength," she said, repeating his words, responding to them. "Through strength, I gain power." He could sense the dark side building within her, growing in intensity until he could almost feel its heat.

"The Jedi died because they were weak," he said, taking a step back. "Only the strong survive, and the Force will make you strong." As he turned away, he added, "Use it to keep up. If you fall behind again, I will leave you here on this world."

"But you still haven't told me what to do!" she shouted after him as he marched away.

Bane didn't reply. He'd given her the answer, though she didn't know it yet. If she was worthy of being his apprentice, she'd figure it out.

He felt a sudden surge of power rushing toward him, concentrated on the heel of his left foot as she tried to trip him up to slow him down. Bane had braced himself for some kind of reaction the moment he'd turned his back on her. He'd pushed her to the edge; he'd have been disappointed if she had done noth-

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ing. But he'd been expecting a broader, more basic assault—a wave of dark side energy meant to hurl him to the ground. A focused strike against a single heel was much more subtle. It showed intelligence and cunning, and though he was ready for it, the strength of her attack still surprised him.

Yet even with as much power and potential as Zannah had, she was no match for a Dark Lord of the Sith. Bane drew upon his own abilities in the Force to absorb the impact of her attack, catching it and amplifying its strength before firing it back at his apprentice. The redirected blow struck Zannah in the chest, hard enough to knock her to the ground. A grunt of surprise escaped her lips as she landed hard on her backside.

She wasn't injured; Bane had no intention of harming her. The constant beatings inflicted on him by his father throughout his childhood had helped transform Bane into what he was today, but they had also caused him to hate and despise Hurst. If this girl was to be his apprentice, she had to respect and admire him. He could not teach her the ways of the dark side if she was not willing—even eager—to learn from him. The only thing Hurst's beatings had ever taught Bane was how to hate, and Zannah already knew that lesson.

He turned back and fixed his cold gaze on the girl still sitting on a hard, bare patch of dirt. She glared back up at him, furious at the way he had humiliated her.

"A Sith knows when to unleash the fury of the dark side," he informed her, "and when to hold back. Patience can be a weapon if you know how to use it, and your anger can fuel the dark side if you learn how to control it."

She was still fuming with rage, but he saw something else in her expression now: a guarded curiosity. Slowly she nodded as the meaning of his words became clear, and her expression softened. Bane could still feel the power of the dark side within her; her anger was still there, but she had hidden it below the surface. She was nursing it, feeding it for a time when she could unleash it.

She had just learned her first lesson in the ways of the Sith.

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And she was wary of him now—wary, but not afraid. Just as he wanted. The only thing he needed her to be afraid of was failure.

He turned away from her again and resumed his march, suppressing a shudder as a fresh phalanx of blades carved their way through his thoughts. Behind him he felt Zannah gather the Force once more. This time, however, the girl directed it inward, using it to refresh and rejuvenate her exhausted limbs.

She sprang up and scurried after him, moving almost effortlessly at a full run. He quickened his pace as his apprentice fell into step beside him, easily able to keep up now that she was propelled by the awesome power of the Force.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"The Sith camp," he answered. "We need supplies for the journey."

"Are the other Sith there?" she wondered. "The ones the Jedi were fighting?"

Bane realized he hadn't yet told her what had happened to Kaan and the Brotherhood.

"There are no other Sith. There never will be, except for us. One Master and one apprentice; one to embody the power, the other to crave it."

"What happened to the others?" she wanted to know.

"I killed them," he replied.

Zannah seemed to think about this for a moment before shrugging indifferently. "Then they were weak," she said with simple conviction. "And they deserved to die."

Bane realized he had chosen his apprentice well.

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2

THE GREAT WARSHIP of Lord Valenthyne Farfalla—leader of the Jedi Army of Light since the loss of General Hoth—maintained a slow orbit high above Ruusan's surface. Fashioned so that her exterior resembled an ancient sailing barge, the vessel had an archaic elegance, a grandeur that some felt was a sign of vanity unbecoming in a Jedi.

Johun Othone, a young Padawan in the Army of Light, had once shared that opinion. Like many of Hoth's followers, he had initially regarded Lord Valenthyne as nothing but a prancing fool concerned only with brightly colored shimmersilk shirts, the long flowing curls of his golden hair, and the other trappings of garish and gaudy fashion. Yet in battle after battle against the Brotherhood of Darkness, Farfalla and his followers had proved their worth. Slowly, almost grudgingly, Johun and the rest of Hoth's troops had come to admire and even respect the man they once had scoffed at.

Now General Hoth was gone, destroyed along with the Sith in their final confrontation, and in his absence it was Lord Va-

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lenthyne who had taken up the banner of leadership. Following Hoth's orders, Farfalla had organized the mass evacuation of Ruusan before the detonation of the thought bomb, saving thousands of Force-sensitive Jedi and Padawans from its devastating effects by loading them onto the ships of his orbiting fleet.

It was mere chance that Johun had ended up here on the *Fairwind,* Valenthyne's flagship. The vessel was large enough to hold a crew of over three hundred comfortably, but crammed into the hold with nearly five hundred other evacuees, the young man was anything but comfortable. They were packed in so tightly, it was difficult to move; Jedi Masters, Jedi Knights, and Padawans were pressed shoulder-to-shoulder.

The other ships were just as full. In addition to the Jedi, the vast majority of the non-Force-sensitive troops who had joined Hoth's cause had also been taken offworld. One of the ships had even been loaded up with several hundred prisoners, the non-Sith followers of Lord Kaan who had quickly surrendered to the Jedi when their dark leader had abandoned them to embark on his final mad plan to destroy the Jedi. There wasn't any real danger for these ordinary soldiers; the thought bomb only affected those most attuned to the Force. But in the haste to evacuate it had been simpler to just take everyone.

Here on Valenthyne's personal galleon, however, Johun recognized nearly every face. He had fought beside them for many months, through ambushes, skirmishes, and full-scale battles. Together they had borne witness to death and bloodshed; tasted glorious triumph and endured crushing defeat. Each of them had seen many foes—and too many friends—die as they had waged a seemingly endless campaign against the forces of the dark side.

Now, as they huddled together in this ship, the war was finally over. Victory was theirs at last. Yet every being aboard wore a grim and somber mask. The extinction of the Sith had come with a terrible price. There was no doubt about what had happened, no hope that any of the Jedi still down on the

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surface had survived. Orbiting high above Ruusan, they had been safely outside the blast radius of the thought bomb. But through the Force they had heard the agonized screams of their fellow Jedi as their spirits were torn apart and swept up in the swirling vortex of dark side energy. Many of the survivors had wept openly. Most simply endured the suffering in stoic silence, reflecting on the sacrifice others had made.

Johun—like Farfalla and virtually every other member of the Army of Light—had volunteered to stay behind with General Hoth. But the general had refused. Knowing that those who stayed with him faced certain death, he had ordered all but a hundred of his Jedi followers off the world. None of the Padawans had been allowed to remain. Yet even though he was only following orders, Johun couldn't help but feel he had betrayed his general by fleeing the planet.

Across the densely packed hold he could just make out Farfalla, his bright red blouse standing out like a beacon among the sea of mostly brown-clad bodies. He was organizing the rescue parties that would be shuttled back down to Ruusan's surface to deal with the aftermath of the thought bomb, and Johun was determined to be among them.

It was difficult to move through the mass of Jedi, but Johun was small and slight. He was nineteen, but he had yet to fill out, and with his slender build, fair skin, and shoulder-length light blond hair—twisted into a tight braid, as was the custom for a young Jedi still in training—he looked at least two years younger. It could be frustrating to be mistaken for a kid, but now, as he twisted and slithered through the throng, he was grateful for his slim physique.

"Lord Valenthyne," he called as he drew near. He raised his voice further to be heard above the din. "Lord Valenthyne!"

Farfalla turned, trying to pick out the owner of the voice from the wall of bodies and faces, then gave a nod of recognition as the young man finally burst into view. "Padawan Johun."

"I want to join the rescue teams," Johun blurted. "Send me back down."

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"I'm afraid I cannot do that," the Jedi Master replied with a sympathetic shake of his head.

"Why not?" Johun demanded. "Do you think I'm too young?"

"That is not—" Farfalla began, but Johun cut him off.

"I'm not a kid! I'm nineteen—older than those two for sure!" he insisted, waving his hand in the direction of the nearest rescue team: a group consisting of a middle-aged man with a short beard, a woman in her twenties, and two boys in their early teens.

"Be aware of your anger," Farfalla cautioned him, his voice stern.

Johun was about to reply, but instead bit his tongue and merely nodded. There was no point in getting upset; that would not convince Lord Valenthyne to let him go along.

"Your age has nothing to do with my decision," the older Jedi explained once he was assured that Johun had brought his emotions under control. "Fully a third of our forces are younger than you."

It was true, Johun realized. The mounting casualties of the Ruusan campaign had forced the Army of Light to accept younger and younger recruits into its ranks. His youth was not the issue; there had to be some other explanation. But instead of asking why he could not go, Johun simply remained silent. Patience would win him more from General Hoth's successor than incessant, thoughtless questions.

"Take a closer look at who I am sending down," Farfalla instructed. "These are brave volunteers, valuable allies in our battle against the Sith. But none of them is attuned to the Force."

Surprised, Johun took a second look at the shore party as they made their final preparations. The woman had dark skin and short black hair, and the Jedi realized he had met her once before. She was a Republic soldier named Irtanna, and she had joined their cause a little over a standard year earlier. It took him a moment longer to place the others, until he noticed the

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resemblance between the bearded man and the two teenagers. They were natives of Ruusan. The man was a farmer named Bordon who had fled before the advancing armies of Lord Kaan during the latest Sith offensive. The two boys were his sons, though Johun couldn't recall their names.

"We do not know the full extent of the thought bomb's effects," Farfalla continued. "There may be aftershocks that could harm or even kill a Jedi or Padawan. That is why you cannot go."

Johun nodded. It made sense; Valenthyne was just being cautious. But sometimes it was possible to be too cautious. "There are other risks on the surface," he noted. "We don't know that all the Sith are dead. Some of them may have survived."

Farfalla shook his head. "Kaan had some spell, some power, over his followers. They were enthralled to his will. When he led them down into the cave, they all followed him willingly. He had them convinced they could survive the thought bomb if they united their power . . . but he was wrong."

"What about the Sith minions?" Johun pressed, unwilling to let the matter drop. Like the Jedi, the Sith had their share of followers who were not attuned to the Force: soldiers and mercenaries who had allied themselves with the Brotherhood of Darkness. "We didn't capture them all," the young Padawan pointed out. "Some of them fled the battle. They'll still be down there."

"That's what this is for," the woman soldier assured him, patting the blaster on her hip. She gave a fierce smile, her gleaming white teeth contrasting sharply with her dark complexion.

"Irtanna knows how to take care of herself," Farfalla agreed. "She's seen more combat than you and me put together."

"Please, Lord Valenthyne," Johun begged, dropping to one knee. A vain and foolish gesture, but he was desperate. He knew Farfalla was right, but he didn't care. He didn't care

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about logic or reason or even the dangers of the thought bomb. He just couldn't sit by doing nothing! "Please! He was my Master."

Farfalla reached out with his hand and placed it tenderly on Johun's forehead. "Hoth warned me that his decision to send you away would not rest easily on your shoulders," he said softly. "But your Master was a wise man. He knew what was best for you, as do I. You must trust my judgment in this, even if you do not fully understand it."

Removing his hand from the young man's brow, the new leader of the Army of Light took Johun by the arm and helped him to his feet.

"Your Master made a great sacrifice to save us all," he said. "If we give in to our emotions now, if we allow ourselves to come to needless harm, then we dishonor what he has done. Do you understand?"

Johun nodded, a Padawan acquiescing to the greater wisdom of a Jedi Master.

"Good," Farfalla said, turning away to focus his attention on one of the other rescue teams. "If you want to help, give Irtanna a hand loading up their supplies."

Johun nodded again, though Farfalla didn't notice. He was already gone, whisked away by the responsibilities of his position.

Working in silence, Johun helped load the last few supplies into the shuttle: field kits filled with rations and water capsules; medpacs in case they came across any wounded; electrobinoculars and a sensor pack for scouting and recon; glow rods for when night fell. And, of course, spare power packs for the blasters Irtanna and the others carried in case they encountered any surviving minions from Kaan's army.

"Thank you," Irtanna said once they were done.

Trying to appear casual, Johun took a quick look around. Farfalla was nowhere to be seen.

"Did you want to fly us down, or should I?" he asked her. The words were easy, but as he said them he reached out with

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