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# Star Wars: Survivor's Quest

Timothy Zahn

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## **About the Book**

***A dangerous mission to salvage a piece of Jedi past threatens to make Luke and Mara Jade Skywalker history. . .***

After fifty years, the remains of Outbound Flight - a pioneering Jedi expedition viciously destroyed by the alien warlord Thrawn - have been found on the planet Nirauan. The beings who reside there wish to turn over to the New Republic the remnants of the doomed mission. Accepting the gesture will mean a long voyage into the treacherous cluster of stars where the thousands of souls aboard the Outbound Flight vessel met their grim fate.

Embarking on the strange and solemn journey, Luke and Mara Jade Skywalker are unaware that the gravest danger lies within the derelict walls of Outbound Flight itself. As the marooned hulk yields up stunning revelations and unexpected terrors, Luke and Mara find all they stand for - and their very existence - brutally challenged. The ultimate test will be surviving the deathtrap carefully laid by foes who are legendary for their ruthlessness . . . and determined to complete the job Thrawn began: exterminating the Jedi.

Also by Timothy Zahn

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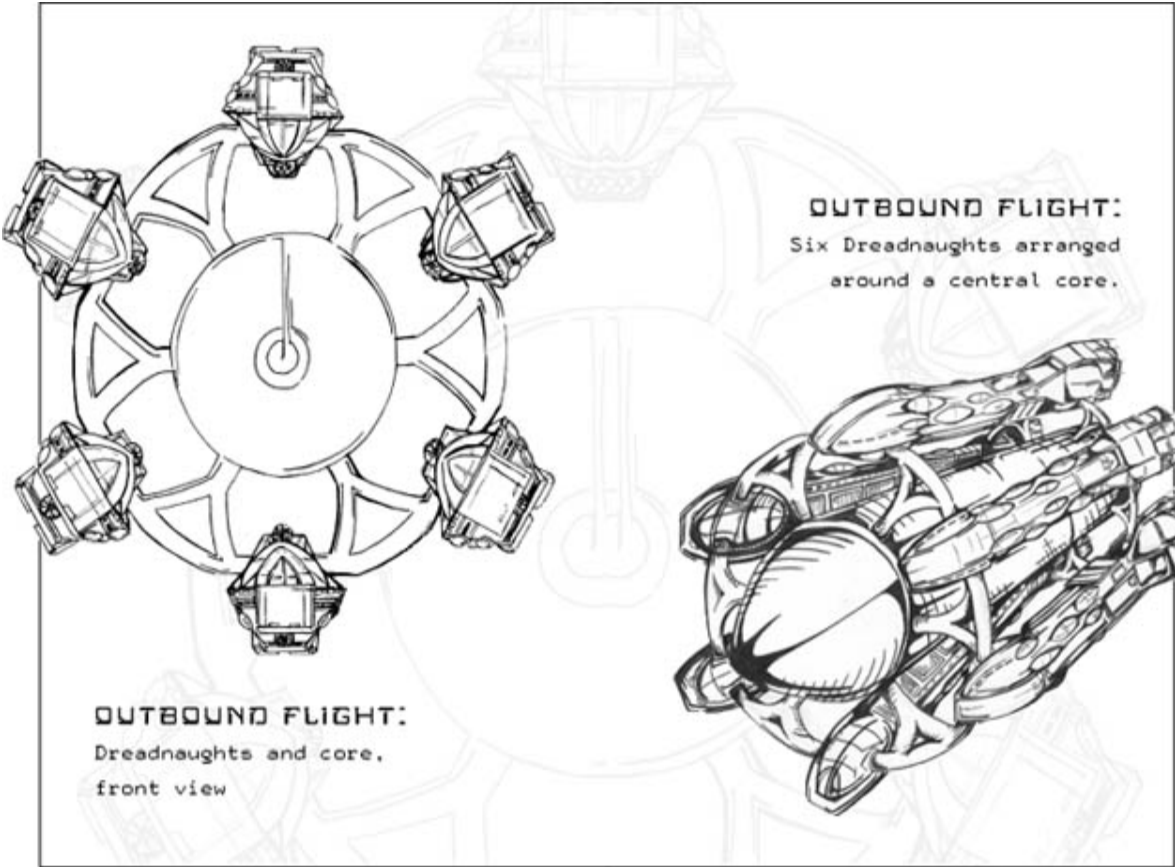
**SURVIVOR'S  
QUEST**

**TIMOTHY ZAHN**

**C**

Century · London

*For Vader's Fist:  
The Fighting 501<sup>st</sup>*



**OUTBOUND FLIGHT:**

Six Dreadnaughts arranged  
around a central core.

**OUTBOUND FLIGHT:**

Dreadnaughts and core,  
front view



# CHAPTER 1

THE IMPERIAL STAR Destroyer moved silently through the blackness of space, its lights dimmed, its huge sublight engines blazing with the urgency of its mission.

The man standing on the command walkway could feel the rumble of those engines through his boots as he listened to the muttered conversation from the crew pits below him. The conversation sounded worried, too, as worried as he himself felt.

Though for entirely different reasons. For him, this was a personal matter, the frustration of a professional dealing with fallible beings and the capriciousness of a universe that refused to always live up to one's preconceived notions as to what was fitting and proper. An error had been made, possibly a very serious error. And as with all errors, there would likely be unpleasant consequences riding in its wake.

From the starboard crew pit came a muffled curse, and he stifled a grimace. None of that mattered to the Star Destroyer's crew. Their worries stemmed solely from their performance, and whether they would be facing a pat on the back or a boot in the rear at journey's end.

Or possibly they were merely worried about the sublight engines blowing up. On this ship, one never knew.

He shifted his attention downward, his gaze leaving the grandeur of the starscape and coming to rest on the bow of the Star Destroyer stretching out more than a kilometer in

front of him. He could remember the days when the mere sight of one of these ships would send shivers up the spines of the bravest of fighters and the most arrogant of smugglers.

But those days were gone, hopefully forever. The Empire had been rehabilitated, though of course many within the New Republic still refused to believe that. Under Supreme Commander Pellaeon's firm guidance, the Empire had signed a treaty with the New Republic, and was no longer any more threatening than the Bothans or the Corporate Sector or anyone else.

Almost unwillingly, he smiled as he gazed along the Star Destroyer's long prow. Of course, even in the old days of the Empire, this particular ship would probably have inspired more bewilderment than fear.

It was, after all, hard to take a bright red Star Destroyer very seriously.

From behind him, audible even over the rumble of the engines, came the sound of clumping boots. "Okay, Karrde," Booster Terrik grunted as he came to a halt at his side. "The comm's finally fixed. You can transmit whenever you want."

"Thank you," Talon Karrde said, turning back toward the crew pits and trying hard not to blame Booster for the state his equipment was in. An Imperial Star Destroyer was a huge amount of ship to take care of, and Booster never had nearly enough personnel to do the job right. "H'sishi?" he called. "Go."

[Yes, Chieftain,] the Togorian called back from the comm board, her fur fluffing slightly as her clawed fingers touched the keys. [Transmission complete. Shall I begin alerting the rest of the network now?]

"Yes," Karrde said. "Thank you."

H'sishi nodded and returned her attention to the board.

With that, Karrde knew, he'd done all he could for the moment. Turning again to face the stars, he folded his arms

across his chest and tried hard to cultivate his patience. "It'll be all right," Booster murmured from beside him. "We'll be around this star in half an hour and be able to jump to lightspeed. We can be in the Domgrin system in two standard days, tops."

"Assuming the hyperdrive doesn't break down again." Karrde waved a hand. "Sorry. I'm just—you understand."

"Sure," Booster said. "But relax, all right? This is Luke and Mara we're talking about, not some fresh-hatched Neimoidian grubs. Whatever's going on, they're not going to be caught flat-footed."

"Maybe," Karrde said. "Though even Jedi can be surprised." He shook his head. "But that's not the point, is it? The point is that I messed up. I don't like it when that happens."

Booster shrugged his massive shoulders. "Like any of the rest of us do?" he asked pointedly. "You have to face the facts, Karrde, and Fact Number One is that you simply can't know everyone who works for you anymore."

Karrde glared out at the mockingly cheerful red ship stretched out in front of him. But Booster was right. This whole thing had gotten completely out of hand.

He'd started out modestly enough, merely offering to provide timely information to the leaders of the New Republic and Empire so that both sides could be assured that the other wasn't plotting against them. And for the first couple of years everything had gone just fine.

The trouble had come when the various planetary and sector governments within the New Republic had woken up to the benefits of this handy service and decided they wanted aboard, too. After the near civil war that had broken out over the Caamas Document, Karrde hadn't really felt like turning them down, and with permission from his clients on Coruscant and Bastion he'd gone ahead and expanded his operations.

Which naturally meant expanding his personnel as well. In retrospect, he supposed, it had only been a matter of time before something like this happened. He just wished it hadn't happened to Luke and Mara. "Maybe not," he told Booster. "But even if I can't handle everything personally, it's still my responsibility."

"Ah," Booster said knowingly. "So it's your pride that's hurt, is it?"

Karrde eyed his old friend. "Tell me, Booster. Has anyone ever told you you're truly irritating when you try to be sympathetic?"

"Yeah, the subject's come up once or twice," Booster said, grinning. He slapped Karrde's back. "Come on. Let's go down to the Transis Corridor and I'll buy you a drink."

"Assuming the drink dispensers are working today," Karrde murmured as they headed back along the command walkway.

"Well, yeah," Booster conceded. "Always assuming that."

. . .

AS CANTINAS WENT, MARA JADE SKYWALKER THOUGHT AS SHE SIPPED her drink, this was definitely one of the strangest she'd ever been in.

Part of that might simply have been due to the locale. Here in the Outer Rim, culture and style weren't exactly up to the standards of Coruscant and the rest of the Core Worlds. That might explain the gaudy wall hangings juxtaposed with ancient plumbing woven around modern drink dispensers, all of it set against a background decor consisting mainly of polished droid parts dating back to before the Clone Wars.

As for the unbreakable mugs and the heavy, stone-topped table she was seated at, the smoothed-over blaster scars in the walls and ceiling were more than enough explanation. When the patrons dived under the tables in

the middle of a firefight, they would want those tables to afford them some protection. And they wouldn't want to find themselves sitting on bits of broken crockery, either.

There was no rationale at all, of course, for the very loud, very off-key music.

A brush of air touched her shoulder, and a heavysset man appeared from behind her, pushing his way through the milling crowd. "Sorry," he huffed as he circled the table and landed his bulk back in the seat across from her. "Business, business, business. Never lets up for a minute."

"I suppose not," Mara agreed. He didn't fool her for a second; even without Force sensitivity she would have spotted the furtiveness hidden behind the noise and bustle. Jerf Huxley, master smuggler and minor terror of the Outer Rim, was up to something unpleasant.

The only question was how unpleasant he was planning for that something to be.

"Yeah, it's crazy out here," Huxley went on, taking a noisy swallow of the drink he'd left behind when he hurried off on the mysterious errand that had taken him away from their table. "'Course, you know all that. Or at least you used to." He eyed her over the rim of his mug. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing," Mara said, not bothering to erase the smile that had caught the other's attention. "I was just thinking about what a trusting person you are."

"What do you mean?" he asked, frowning.

"Your drink," Mara said, gesturing to his mug. "You go away and leave it alone with me, and then you just come back and toss it down without even wondering if I've put something in it."

Huxley's lips puckered, and through the Force Mara caught a hint of his chagrin. He hadn't worried about his drink, of course, because he'd had her under close surveillance the whole time he was gone. He also hadn't intended for her to know that. "All right, fine," he said,

banging the mug back onto the table. "Enough with the games. Let's hear it. Why are you here?"

With a man like this, Mara knew, there was no point in glaze-coating it. "I'm here on behalf of Talon Karrde," she said. "He wanted me to thank you for your assistance and that of your organization over the past ten years, and to inform you that your services will no longer be required."

Huxley's face didn't even twitch. Clearly, he'd already suspected this was coming. "Starting when?" he asked.

"Starting now," Mara said. "Thanks for the drink, and I'll be on my way."

"Not so fast," Huxley said, lifting a hand.

Mara froze halfway to her feet. Behind Huxley, blasters had abruptly appeared in the hands of three of the men who had hitherto been minding their own business at the bar. Blasters that were, not surprisingly, pointed at her. "Sit down," he ordered.

Carefully, Mara eased back into her chair. "Was there something else?" she asked mildly.

Huxley gestured again, more emphatically this time, and the off-key background music shut off. As did all conversation. "So that's it, is it?" Huxley demanded quietly. In the sudden silence, even a soft voice seemed to ring against the battered walls. "Karrde's going to toss us aside, just like that?"

"I presume you read the news," Mara said, keeping her voice calm. All around her, she could sense the single-minded animosity of the crowd. Huxley had apparently stocked the place with his friends and associates. "Karrde's getting out of the smuggling business. Has been, for the past three years. He doesn't need your services anymore."

"Yeah, *he* doesn't need," Huxley said with a sniff. "What about what *we* need?"

"I don't know," Mara said. "What *do* you need?"

"Maybe you don't remember what it's like in the Outer Rim, Jade," Huxley said, leaning over the table toward her.

“But out here, you don’t split things three ways against the ends. You work for one group, period, or you don’t work at all. We burned our skyarches behind us years ago when we started working for Karrde. If he pulls out, what are we supposed to do?”

“I expect you’ll have to make new arrangements,” Mara said. “Look, you had to have known this was coming. Karrde’s made no secret of the direction he’s been taking.”

“Yeah, right,” Huxley said contemptuously. “Like anyone believed he’d really go straight.”

He drew himself up. “So you want to know what we need? Fine. What we need is something to tide us over until we can get back in the business with someone else.”

So there it was: a simple and straightforward pocket-shake. Nothing subtle from this bunch. “How much?” she asked.

“Five hundred thousand.” His lip twisted slightly. “In cash credits.”

Mara kept her face expressionless. She’d come here prepared for something like this, but that number was way beyond reason. “And where exactly do you expect me to get this little tide-me-over?” she asked. “I don’t carry that much spending money on me.”

“Don’t get cute,” Huxley growled. “You know as well as I do that Karrde’s got a sector clearinghouse over on Gonmore. They’ll have all the credits there we need.”

He dug into a pocket and produced a hold-out blaster. “You’re going to call and tell them to bring it to us,” he said, leveling the weapon at her face across the table. “Half a million. Now.”

“Really.” Casually, keeping her hands visible, Mara turned her head to look behind her. Most of the cantina’s nonsmuggler patrons had already made a quiet exit, she noted, or else had gathered into groups on either side of the confrontation, staying well out of the potential lines of fire. Of more immediate concern was the group of about

twenty humans and aliens who had spread themselves out in a semicircle directly behind her, all of them with weapons trained on her back.

All of them also showing varying degrees of wariness, she noted with a certain malicious amusement. Her reputation had apparently preceded her. “You throw an interesting party, Huxley,” she said, turning back to face the smuggler chief. “But you don’t really think you’re equipped to deal with a Jedi, do you?”

Huxley smiled. A very evil smile. A surprisingly evil smile, actually, given the circumstances. “Matter of fact, yeah, I do.” He raised his voice. “Bats?”

There was a brief pause. Mara reached out with the Force, but all she could sense was a sudden heightened anticipation from the crowd.

Then, from across the room ahead and to her right came the creak of machinery. A section of floor in a poorly lit area at the far end of the bar began to rise ponderously toward the ceiling, revealing an open-sided keg lift coming up from the storage cellar below. As it rose, something metallic came into view, its shine muted by the patina of age.

Mara frowned, trying to pierce the gloom. The thing was tall and slender, with a pair of arms jutting out from the sides that gave it a not-quite-humanoid silhouette for all its obvious mechanical origins. The design looked vaguely familiar, but for those first few seconds she couldn’t place it. The lift continued to rise, revealing hip-bone-like protrusions at the base of the object’s long torso and a trio of curved legs extending outward beneath them.

And then, suddenly, it clicked.

The thing was a pre-Clone Wars droideka—one of the destroyer droids that had once been the pride of the Trade Federation army.

She looked back at Huxley, to find that his smile had widened into a grin. “That’s right, Jade,” he gloated. “My very own combat droideka, guaranteed to blast the stuffing



out of even a Jedi. Bet you never expected to see one of *those* here.”

“Not really, no,” Mara conceded, running a practiced eye over the droideka as the lift reached the top and wheezed to a halt. It had arrived fully open in combat stance, she noted, instead of rolled into the more compact wheel form used to move into position. That could mean it wasn’t able to maneuver anymore.

Did that mean its guns wouldn’t track, either? Experimentally, she leaned back in her seat.

For a moment nothing happened. Then the droideka’s left arm twitched, its twin blasters shifting angle to match her movement.

So the weapons could indeed track, though they appeared to be under someone’s manual control instead of a central computer’s or anything on board the droideka itself. In the dim lighting, she couldn’t tell whether or not its built-in deflector shield was functioning, but it almost didn’t matter. The thing was armed, armored, and pointed straight at her.

Huxley was right. Even the Jedi of that era had gone out of their way to avoid fighting these things.

“But of course I should have,” she continued, turning to face Huxley again. “This place is littered with old droid parts. Stands to reason someone would have scraped together enough pieces to make a reasonable copy of a droideka to scare people with.”

Huxley’s eyes hardened. “You try something cute and you’ll see how good a copy it is.” He looked over at the group of casual observers to his right, and his eyes locked on someone in the crowd. “You—Sinker!”

A kid maybe sixteen years old stepped out from a knot of older men. “Yes, sir?”

Huxley gestured toward Mara. “Get her lightsaber.”

The kid goggled at Mara. “Get—uh—?”

“You deaf?” Huxley bit out. “What are you afraid of?”

Sinker made as if to speak, looked furtively at Mara, swallowed visibly, then stepped hesitantly forward. Mara kept her face expressionless as she watched him approach, his nervousness increasing with each step, until he was visibly shaking as he stopped beside her. "Uh ... I'm—I'm sorry, ma'am, but—"

"Just take it!" Huxley bellowed.

In a single desperate motion Sinker ducked down, unhooked her lightsaber from her belt, and scampered backward with it. "There," Huxley said sarcastically. "That wasn't so hard, now, was it?"

"Wasn't so useful, either," Mara said. "You think that's all it takes to stop a Jedi? Taking her lightsaber?"

"It's a start," Huxley said.

Mara shook her head. "It's not even that." Looking over at Sinker, she reached out with the Force.

Abruptly, the lightsaber ignited in his hand.

Sinker's startled squeak was mostly lost in the *snap-hiss* as the brilliant blue blade blazed into existence. Rather to her surprise, he didn't drop the weapon and run, but held gamely on to it. "Sinker, what the frost are you doing?" Huxley snapped. "That's not a toy."

"I'm not doing it," Sinker protested, his voice running about an octave higher than it had been before.

"He's right," Mara confirmed as Huxley drew in another bellow's worth of air. "He's not doing this, either."

She reached out to the lightsaber again, making it weave back and forth in Sinker's grip. The kid wove back and forth with it, hanging on with the grim air of someone who's found himself astride an angry acklay with no idea how to get off.

The rest of the crowd was probably feeling much the same way. For those first few seconds there had been a mad scramble by everyone near Sinker to get out of range of the weapon bobbing in his hands like a drunken crewer. They had mostly stopped moving now, though a few of the

smarter ones had decided it was time to get out entirely and were making tracks for the exits. The rest were watching Sinker warily, ready to move again if necessary.

“Knock it off, Jade,” Huxley snarled. He wasn’t smiling anymore. “You hear me? Knock it *off*.”

“And what do you plan to do if I don’t?” Mara countered, continuing to swing the lightsaber even as she kept an eye on Huxley’s blaster. The others wouldn’t shoot her without orders or an immediate threat, she knew, but Huxley himself might forget what his goals and priorities were here.

It was a risk worth taking. With every eye in the cantina on Sinker and his disobedient lightsaber, no one was paying the slightest attention to the droideka standing stolid guard across the room.

Not the droideka, and certainly not the barely visible tip of brilliant green light stealthily slicing a circle through the lift floor around its curved tripod feet.

“I’ll blast you into a million soggy pieces, that’s what I’ll do,” Huxley shot back. “Now, let him go, or I’ll—”

He never finished the threat. Across the room, with a sudden creaking of stressed metal, the lift floor collapsed, dropping the droideka with a crash back into the cellar.

Huxley spun around, screeching something vicious.

The screech died in midcourse. From the direction the droideka had disappeared, a black-clad figure now appeared, leaping up from the cellar to land on the edge of the newly carved hole. He lifted the short cylinder in his hand to salute position, and with another *snap-hiss*, a green lightsaber blade blazed.

Huxley reacted instantly, and in exactly the way Mara would have expected. “Get him!” he shouted, stabbing a finger back toward the newcomer.

He didn’t have to give the order twice. From the semicircle of gunners behind Mara erupted a blistering staccato of blasterfire. “And *you*—” Huxley added over the

noise. He lifted his blaster toward Mara, his finger tightening on the firing stud.

Mara was already in motion. Rising halfway out of her chair, she grabbed the edge of the stone-topped table and heaved it upward. A fraction of a second later Huxley's shot ricocheted off the tabletop now angled toward him, passing harmlessly over Mara's head to gouge yet another hole in the ceiling behind her. Mara heaved the table a little higher, and Huxley's eyes abruptly widened as he realized she intended to drop its full weight squarely into his lap, pinning him helplessly into his chair and then crushing him to the floor.

He was wrong. Even as he scrambled madly to get out of his chair and away from the falling table before it was too late, Mara kicked her own chair back out of her way. Using her grip on the table edge as a pivot point, she lifted her feet and swung herself forward and downward.

With a lighter table, the trick wouldn't have worked, and she would have simply landed on her rear in front of her chair with the table in her lap. But this one was so massive, with so much inertia, that she was able to swing under the edge now falling backward toward her, land on the floor beneath where it had been standing, and get her hands clear before the edge crashed into the floor behind her.

This put the heavy tabletop neatly between her and the twenty-odd blasters that had been trained on her back.

Huxley, still completely off stride, had time for a single yelp before Mara lunged forward, slapped his gun hand aside with her left hand, and then grabbed a fistful of his shirt and hauled him down into cover with her. Her right hand snaked up her left sleeve, snatched her small sleeve gun from its arm holster, and jammed the muzzle up under his chin. "You know the drill," she said. "Let's hear it."

Huxley, his eyes on the edge of terror, filled his lungs. "Huxlings! Cease fire! Cease fire!"

There was a second of apparent indecision. Then, around the room, the blasters fell quiet. "Very good," Mara said. "What's part two?"

Huxley's lip twisted. "Drop your weapons," he growled, opening his hand and letting his own blaster fall to the floor. "You hear me? Drop 'em."

There was another brief pause, then a dull clatter as the others followed suit. Mara stretched out with the Force, but she could sense no duplicity. Huxley had caved completely, and his gang knew better than to try to second-guess his decisions. Keeping her blaster pressed under his chin, she got to her feet, hauling Huxley up with her. She gave each of the half-sullen, half-terrified gang members a quick look, just to make it clear what rash heroics would cost, then turned to the man in black as he walked up to her. "So didn't you see that droideka before Huxley lifted it up here?" she asked.

"Oh, I saw it," Luke Skywalker acknowledged, closing down his lightsaber but keeping it ready in his hand.

"And?"

Luke shrugged. "I was curious to see whether it still worked. Did it?"

"We didn't get a complete field test," Mara said. "It didn't look very mobile, and I'd guess its tracking is on manual instead of automatic. But it probably fires just fine."

"Fired," Luke corrected. "It's going to need a little reworking."

"That's okay," Mara assured him, sliding her sleeve gun back into its concealed holster. "Huxley's people will have some time on their hands."

She gave Huxley a push away from her, letting go of his shirt. He staggered slightly but managed to maintain his balance. "Here's the deal. Before I leave, I'll credit twenty thousand to your account. Not because Karrde owes you anything at all, but simply as a thanks for your years of service to his organization."

“Karrde’s a little softhearted that way,” Luke added. “Yes, he is,” Mara agreed. “I, on the other hand, am not. You’ll take it, you’ll be happy with it, and you will never even *think* about making trouble for any of us again. Clear?”

Huxley had the look of a man chewing droid parts, but he nodded. “Clear,” he muttered.

“Good.” Mara turned to Sinker and held out her hand. “My lightsaber, please?”

Bracing himself, Sinker walked toward her, the lightsaber still humming in his grasp. He offered it to her at arm’s length; taking it, she closed down the blade and hung it back on her belt. “Thank you,” she said.

Across the room, the door slid open, and a young man darted in. He got two steps before everything seemed to register, and he faltered to a confused halt. “Uh ... Chief?” he called, looking at Huxley.

“This better be important, Fisk,” Huxley warned.

“Uh ...” Fisk looked around uncertainly. “It’s—I just got a signal in for someone named Mara. It was from—”

“It was from Talon Karrde,” Luke cut in. “He wants Mara to contact him aboard the *Errant Venture* as soon as possible at—” He narrowed his eyes as he gazed across the room at the boy. “—in the Domgrin system.”

Fisk’s mouth was hanging slightly open. “Uh ... yeah,” he breathed. “That’s right.”

“Yes,” Luke said, almost offhandedly. “Oh, and it came in under the Paspro-five encrypt. That’s the one that starts out usk-herf-enth—well, you know the rest.”

The kid’s jaw was hanging even lower now. Blinking once, he nodded.

“We’d better get going then,” Mara said. She started to step around the table, then paused. “Oh, and by the way,” she added, looking back at Huxley. “It’s not *Jade* anymore. It’s *Jade Skywalker*. This is my husband, Luke Skywalker. The Jedi Master. He’s even better at this stuff than I am.”

"Yeah," Huxley muttered, eyeing Luke. "Yeah, I got the message."

"Good," Mara said. "Good-bye, Huxley."

She and Luke headed toward the door through a wide path that magically opened up for them through the crowd. A moment later, they were out in the cool evening air.

"Very impressive," she commented as they headed down the street toward the spaceport and the waiting *Jade Sabre*. "When did you start being able to pull details like that out of other people's minds?"

"It's easy enough when you know how," Luke said with a straight face.

"Uh-huh," Mara said. "Let me guess. Karrde sent you the same message?"

Luke nodded. "I got it in relay from the ship while I was poking around the storage cellar."

"That's what I thought," Mara said. "And so when the opportunity presented itself, you couldn't resist playing the Omniscient Jedi trick."

Luke shrugged. "It never hurts for these fringe types to have a little healthy fear of Jedi."

"I suppose not," Mara agreed hesitantly.

Luke looked sideways at her. "You don't agree?"

"I don't know," she said. "Something about it bothers me. Maybe because Palpatine always ruled through fear."

"I see your point," Luke admitted. "But this isn't quite the same. It's more like putting the fear of justice into them. And of course, I would never pull anything like this with regular people."

"I know," Mara said. "And it should help keep Huxley in line. I suppose that's what counts."

She waved an impatient hand. "Never mind. I'm just feeling the weight of my past, I guess. So what exactly was this message from Karrde?"

"Basically just what I said in there," Luke told her. "We're to meet him and Booster at Domgrin as quickly as

we can get there.”

“And he sent it to the *Sabre* and Huxley’s people both?”

“Apparently so.” Luke shook his head. “He must really be anxious to talk to us if he’s doubling up messages this way.”

“I was just thinking that,” Mara said. “And that’s not like him. Unless,” she added thoughtfully, “there’s some crisis brewing.”

“Isn’t there always?” Luke asked dryly. “Come on, let’s get these funds of yours transferred and get out of here.”



## CHAPTER 2

THE BRIGHT RED Star Destroyer was waiting silently in the distance as Luke brought the *Jade Sabre* out of hyperspace. "There it is," he said, nodding at the curved forward canopy. "What do you think?"

"I'm picking up some mining and transport ships in the area," Mara said, peering at the long-range scanner. "We'd better get a little closer if we don't want eavesdroppers."

"You want to take us in, or shall I?"

"I'll do it," Mara said. Taking a quick look at the monitors, she got a grip on the control stick and pushed it forward. Luke leaned back in his seat, hunching his shoulders once to stretch tired muscles, and watched his wife work.

*Wife.* For a moment he listened to the word as it bounced around his brain, marveling at the sound of it. Even after nearly three years of marriage there was something that felt strange and awesome about the whole concept.

Of course, it had hardly been three years the way normal couples counted time. Even Han and Leia, who'd dealt with crisis after crisis early in their marriage, had at least been fighting those battles at each other's side. In Luke and Mara's case, his responsibilities at the Jedi academy and her need to disengage herself in an orderly fashion from the intricate workings of Talon Karrde's

organization had kept them apart almost as much as they'd been before their wedding. Their moments together had been few and precious, and they'd had only a handful of the longer periods of togetherness that Han had once privately referred to as the breaking-in period.

That was in fact one of the reasons Luke had suggested he accompany Mara on this particular trip. She would still be working, of course, meeting with groups of Karrde's current and former associates. But between meetings he'd hoped they would be able to spend some decent stretches of time together.

It had actually worked pretty well. Up until now.

"I trust you've already noticed how strange this is," Mara said into his musings. "Even if we push the *Sabre* for all she's worth, we're at least a week away from Coruscant. Whatever this new crisis is, we're too far away to be of any use to anyone."

"Especially since I made it clear to Leia at the start that we weren't supposed to be disturbed unless it was a flat-out invasion," Luke agreed. "Of course, if this isn't Leia, it only leaves one possibility."

"Two, actually," Mara corrected. "And I'd certainly hope Karrde knows better by now than to flag us for anything trivial."

"Leia and Karrde make two," Luke said. "Who's this third option?"

She threw him a sideways look. "We're meeting Karrde aboard the *Errant Venture*, remember?"

Luke made a face. "Booster."

"Right," Mara said. "And Booster might *not* know better. If he doesn't, shall we make a pact right now to make sure he does before we leave this system?"

"Deal."

She threw him a slightly evil smile and returned to her piloting.

Luke turned back to the canopy, smiling out at the stars. Despite all the time they'd spent apart, he and Mara had a distinct advantage: They were both Jedi. And because of that, they shared a mental and emotional bond that was far deeper than most couples were able to forge in an entire lifetime together. Deeper and stronger even than anything Luke had experienced in his doomed relationships with Gaeriel Captison or the long-departed Callista.

He still remembered vividly the moment that bond had first appeared, hammered into existence as the two of them fought those combat droids deep under the fortress their old adversary Grand Admiral Thrawn had set up on the planet Nirauan. At the time Luke had thought it was nothing more than a temporary melding of their minds created by the heat and pressure of a life-and-death situation. It was only afterward, when the battle was over but the bond remained, that he'd realized it had become a permanent part of their lives.

Even then, he hadn't completely understood it. He'd assumed that it had sprung forth complete; that in those few hours it had brought the two of them into as deep an understanding of each other as it was possible to have. But in the three years since then, he'd come to realize that he had just barely scratched the surface. Mara was far more complex a human being than he'd ever suspected. As, in fact, he himself was.

Which meant that, Jedi or not, Force-bond or not, there was going to be more for them to learn about each other for a long time to come. In all likelihood, a lifetime's worth of time. He was very much looking forward to the journey.

And yet, at the same time, he couldn't help but feel a small twinge of uncertainty. His marriage to Mara felt *right* to him, in every respect ... but hovering in the background behind all their happiness and success was the distant echo of Yoda's stories of the old Jedi Order during Luke's training on Dagobah.

Specifically, the part about Jedi keeping themselves out of precisely this kind of love relationship.

He hadn't given those teachings much weight at the time. The Empire was in control of the known galaxy, Darth Vader was breathing down the Rebel Alliance's collective neck, and all his thoughts were focused on his own survival and the survival of his friends. When Han and Leia had gotten married, Leia having Force skills hadn't seemed like a big deal. She was certainly strong in the Force, but she hadn't progressed nearly far enough in her training to call herself a Jedi.

But it was different with Luke. He *had* been a Jedi when he'd asked Mara to marry him. True, their chances of survival at the time had been somewhat uncertain, but that hadn't affected the sincerity of his proposal or the depth of his feelings toward her. And despite these occasional twinges, he'd certainly found peace in his decision and in their subsequent marriage.

Could Yoda have been wrong about how Jedi relationships were supposed to work? That was the easiest answer. But that would mean the entire Jedi Order had been wrong about it. That didn't seem likely, unless on some level all of them had lost the ability to hear the Force clearly.

Could that particular dictum have ended with the fall of that particular group, then? Yoda had also said something about the Force having been brought back into balance, though he'd been somewhat vague about the details. Could this have rendered that part of the Jedi Code no longer applicable?

He didn't have the answers. He wondered if he ever would.

"Okay, they're on us," Mara announced, leaning back in her seat. "Got an antenna swiveling for a tight beam. I've been wondering how far away a Star Destroyer's sensors could pick us up."

Luke forced his thoughts back to the situation at hand. "Though with the *Errant Venture* you always have to allow for malfunctions," he reminded her.

"True," she agreed. "Sometimes I think of that ship as one massive red warning light."

"It's certainly bright enough." Luke shook his head. "I am never, *ever*, going to get used to that color."

"I kind of like it," Mara said. "Especially given where it came from."

"You mean Booster strong-arming General Bel Iblis to refit and repaint?"

"I was thinking of the paint itself," Mara said. "Did you know the New Republic bought all of it from Karrde?"

Luke blinked. "You're kidding. Did Bel Iblis know?"

"Don't be silly," Mara said with a lopsided smile. "You know Bel Iblis. He'd have had a fit on general principles if he'd known Karrde had made any money on this deal. No, Karrde played it all very cool and through at least three intermediaries and a dummy corporation. I don't think even Booster knows."

"Trust me, he doesn't," Luke said. "Corran once told me that one of Booster's great joys in life these days is telling people how he managed this whole thing without any help or interference from the great Talon Karrde. I wonder what he'd say if he knew that was Karrde's paint on his hull."

"I know what *Karrde* would say," Mara warned. "Both before *and* after he nailed my hide to the hull. One of *his* great joys is watching Booster strut around blissfully unaware of the ways he's dipped in and out of the old pirate's life over the years."

Luke shook his head. "They're a matched pair. You know that?"

"Don't tell them that, either," Mara said. There was a beep from the board. "Okay, here we go. Encrypt Paspro-nine ..."

She touched a few keys. There was a second beep, and suddenly the comm display lit up with Karrde's familiar face.

He wasn't smiling.

"Mara; Luke," he greeted them, his voice as grim as he looked. "Thank you for coming so promptly. I'm sorry I had to drag you out here like this, away from your schedule. Especially you, Luke; I know how much you went through to free up time for this."

"Don't worry about it," Mara said for both of them. "The trip was getting a little routine anyway. What's up?"

"What's up is that I've lost a message," Karrde said bluntly. "Four days ago my sector relay post at Comra picked up a transmission, marked urgent, and addressed to you, Luke."

Luke frowned. "Me?"

"So the chief of the station says," Karrde replied. "But that was about all he got. Before he or anyone else could pass it on down the line, it vanished."

"You think it was stolen?" Luke asked.

Karrde's lips compressed briefly. "I know it was stolen," he said. "We even know the name of the man who stole it, because when the message disappeared from the station, so did he. Have you ever heard of anyone by the name of Dean Jinzler?"

"Doesn't sound familiar," Luke said, searching his memory. "Mara?"

"No," Mara said. "Who is he?"

Karrde shook his head. "Unfortunately, I don't know, either."

"Wait a second," Mara said. "This is one of *your* people, and you don't know everything there is to know about him?"

The corner of Karrde's lip twitched. "I didn't know everything about *you* when I hired you, either," he pointed out.