

LEGENDS

STAR WARS

LAST OF THE JEDI



A TANGLED WEB

 SCHOLASTIC



CHAPTER ONE

He hadn't seen Palpatine since he was seventeen. Ferus Olin remembered a pale, soft-spoken man with a sharp political mind. Chancellor Palpatine always had an air of deference to all, despite his considerable power in the Senate.

But things had changed.

He was the Emperor now . . . and his power had turned sinister.

Ferus was shocked. Palpatine's face had sunken into itself, his cheeks collapsed, his eyes hollowed. He wore a concealing hood, but it couldn't hide his newly grotesque appearance. The whites of his eyes had turned yellow, and his skin was deeply furrowed.

No wonder he no longer appeared on the HoloNet for official pronouncements.

Obi-Wan Kenobi had told him that Palpatine was a Sith. That he had fought in a battle with Mace Windu

and had defeated him, but the effort of it had left him horribly scarred. Ferus hadn't known what to expect, but this was worse than he could have possibly imagined. He could feel the dark side of the Force in the room. He had to fight to keep his concentration.

Palpatine's aides, Sly Moore and Mas Amedda, stood at both ends of his desk. His Royal Red Guards — six of them — stood at attention near the exit door. A thin graying man with sunken cheeks, dressed in an Imperial uniform, stood near them. Ferus had no idea who he was, but the way he stood spoke of a certain importance.

All this, Ferus thought, for little old me?

Palpatine had contacted him only a few days before. He had asked him to this meeting, even though Ferus had recently escaped from an Imperial prison. The Emperor had guaranteed his safety. When Ferus had arrived, he'd undergone a standard weapons check, but to his surprise, Sly Moore had allowed him to keep the lightsaber he had clipped to his utility belt. He hadn't bothered to hide it. He knew Palpatine was aware that he had one.

"Please sit," Palpatine said, gesturing to a chair. "Make yourself comfortable. You see we allowed you to keep your weapon. A lightsaber . . . how interesting. And here I thought you were a *former* Jedi."

"Former apprentice, actually."

Palpatine sat and folded his hands on his desk. Ferus wrenched his eyes away from the Sith's long, deeply furrowed nails, caked with dirt. "I could hardly expect you to admit to being a Jedi, seeing that they were traitors who tried to bring down the Republic."

"I'm confused," Ferus said. "I thought it was *you* who brought down the Republic. Didn't you declare an Empire a couple of months ago?"

"I'm curious as to how you obtained a lightsaber," Palpatine said, ignoring Ferus's question. "Strange to see, because we received reports that a ship had landed on Illum, where so many lightsabers are created."

"Did you? I'm glad to hear it's still a popular place."

Palpatine gave a thin smile. "Only for the Jedi, and they are all gone now."

"I heard that, too."

"It was a shame that such a respected order overstepped its bounds so badly."

"Is that what happened? I had no idea."

Ferus felt sweat bead up on his hairline and hoped the Emperor wouldn't see it. He was feeling Palpatine out, trying to provoke him. But Palpatine just continued to speak in the same deep, sonorous voice, close to expressionless.

“Perhaps now we should discuss why I asked you here,” the Emperor said.

“I have to admit I’m curious,” Ferus said.

He had debated whether to come. He had been on a remote space station with his crew when the summons came. They were a scruffy bunch, made up of members of a group called the Erased, which included Keets Freely, a former journalist, and Curran Caladian, who had been a Senate aide. Also along was Clive Flax, who had escaped from the same prison as Ferus. Ferus was fond of Clive, who had been a double agent during the Clone Wars but claimed to owe allegiance to no one but himself. And then there was Trever, the street kid who’d been traveling with Ferus. Trever had been a stowaway on his flight from his homeworld of Bellassa, and the two had journeyed together ever since.

Also along was Solace, a reluctant traveler. She’d once been the great Jedi Knight Fy-Tor-Ana. She’d changed her name and had tried to forget her past existence as a Jedi. So she hadn’t been too thrilled when Ferus came along, suggesting she team up to find other missing Jedi.

They’d been on their way to the secret base Ferus had set up for any Jedi he might find, when the summons had come from Palpatine. Ferus had been trying to get back there for weeks now. He needed to know how Jedi Master Garen Muln was faring.

Ferus had found him in the caves of Illum, waiting for death to take him. He'd still been weak when Ferus had left him in the care of his friends, Raina and Toma.

The Erased had all conferred, argued, and then, in the end, decided that Ferus couldn't ignore the summons. Besides, they reasoned, he might learn things from Palpatine that could be useful in the coming fight against him.

It was too dangerous for his friends to be near the Senate. They had gone to the secret hideout of Dexter Jettster, hundreds of levels below on Coruscant. If Ferus didn't return that day, they would come looking for him.

The thing was, he'd just had a hard time breaking out of an Imperial prison. He didn't want to end up in one again.

"I don't break my promises," Palpatine said. "You will be allowed to leave once you hear my proposal. I'm hoping you will accept it, but if not, the door will be open. However, I have no doubt you *will* accept."

Think again. There was no way Ferus would help the Empire. But for the moment, he'd keep his mouth shut.

"I'll let you be briefed by Moff Tarkin, who has been in constant contact with our Imperial advisor on Sath."

The tall man with the gray skin and dark hair took one step forward.

“We have received a request from a planet called Samaria through our own Imperial advisor there,” he said. “The Samaritan ruler has asked us to send an emissary directly from this office to help them. Their mainframe computer for the city systems of the capital city of Sath has been infiltrated. A bug has been introduced into the system that has transferred personal information from one citizen to another in a random pattern — and thus has thrown the banking, medical, and social services into chaos. Not only that, but the city systems have also malfunctioned. Do you know Samaria?”

“I’ve heard of it,” Ferus said. “Never been there. I do know it’s a desert planet, completely dependent on technology. I would imagine that this problem would eventually lead to major systemic breakdowns.”

“Excellent,” Palpatine said. “You have the picture entirely. Already, there is danger that the planet will collapse into anarchy.”

Tarkin continued in the same terse tone. “The bug has been introduced so cleverly that no one can figure out how to kill it. Every time they’ve tried to fix it, it sends the programs into another random sequence. If the planet has to start over and collect information on every citizen, it could be disastrous.”

Tarkin stepped back, his moment in the spotlight over. He seemed such a colorless presence . . . yet Ferus's instincts told him to beware.

"You can see why I've come to you, Master Olin," Palpatine said. "Since you've popped up, I've had occasion to read your file. You have an impressive history since leaving the Jedi. You're the best in the galaxy at computer security."

"I wouldn't say the best."

"I would."

In a former life, Ferus had been an expert at computer systems and identity coding. His company, Olin/Lands, had helped people disappear into new lives and had been expert at security wipes and the creation of new ID docs.

He could guess how much trouble the planet of Samaria was in. But that didn't mean he'd be an agent of the Empire.

"You were the most proficient in the galaxy," Palpatine continued. "No one else has been able to solve this problem. Your job will be to trace the saboteur through the system and find the key that will lead you to who did this. Then the Empire can restore the planet to stability. After all, stability is why the Empire began. We will reign over an unparalleled number of peaceful years. And we will always reach out a hand to help any planet in distress."

And if you believe that, you'll believe anything.

"I appreciate your problem," Ferus said. "Unfortunately, I can't help you."

Under the hood, the dark gaze flickered.

"I'm needed elsewhere," Ferus continued. "Now, since you assured me your exit door was open, I'll take my leave."

"If you must. Let him go," Palpatine instructed the Royal Guards.

Ferus walked toward the door. He waited at any moment for the Guards to strike him down on Palpatine's order. He wouldn't hesitate to use his lightsaber. If he had to die here, he would. There was no way he was going back to prison.

"There is just one more thing you should consider," Palpatine said.

Ferus stopped, his eyes on the door — and freedom. Here it was. He must have been a fool to think for even a second that Palpatine would let him go.

"You probably haven't heard the news. Your partner, Roan Lands, has been arrested."

Ferus felt the name like a stab in his heart. His partner. His friend. Roan.

Still, he kept his face to the door. He wouldn't give Palpatine the satisfaction of seeing his face.

“Along with an acquaintance of yours, Dona Telamark.”

Dona, who’d hidden him when the Imperial soldiers were hunting him. Who’d asked for nothing and had given him everything. She was an elder woman, strong and sturdy, who loved her mountain home and her solitude. The thought of her in a prison was wrenching.

“They are both,” Palpatine said, his voice rising, “scheduled to be executed.”

Ferus tried not to shake.

“For what crime?” he asked.

“Conspiracy against the government of Bellassa.”

What a joke. The government of Bellassa was under the domination of the Empire. Nobody would be foolish enough to conspire against it.

Palpatine’s voice curled around his ear, thick and rancid. “However, if you could extricate yourself from your other commitments, I could request leniency from the Bellassan government. Perhaps even clemency.”

There it was — the catch.

Just like that. Snap. He was caught.

He’d expected a catch. He just hadn’t expected it to be so personal.



CHAPTER TWO

Trapped.

He'd walked right into it.

He'd had to agree to Palpatine's request. He'd had no choice.

Furious, he strode down the hallway that connected him to the main Senate building. He couldn't believe he had just agreed to work for a Sith.

He felt disgusted with himself, but he saw no way out — not if Roan and Dona's lives were on the line. Now he was headed to the Senate landing platform, where Palpatine had arranged a starship for him.

The usual crowd of senatorial aides, assistants, droids, and Senators swirled all around him. BD-3000 luxury droids hovered near the Senators, oozing compliments into ears and fluffing up capes. It was a sight he remembered well from his years on Coruscant.

Yet he did not feel the same sense of busy discord

he remembered from earlier times. Once there had been the buzz of conversations and arguments. Now there were blocs of Senators walking in lock-step, their rich robes in bright colors. Their collars, the larger the better, were made of fur or stiff silk and framed their glossy, well-fed faces. They were followed by trails of assistants, dressed just a shade less extravagantly than their bosses. Ferus saw more displays of wealth, and less displays of deference. There did not seem to be the busy hum of important work being discussed.

The Senate had changed, and he wanted no part of it.

A new addition to the Senate was the constant presence of Prowler 1000 seeker droids. They could be assigned to track any individual. He was certain that from the minute he stepped foot outside Palpatine's office, his movements were being watched.

He'd have no opportunity to get to Dex's hideout now. He couldn't even risk using his comlink. He had to assume that comm transmissions were monitored. Somehow he'd have to find a way once he was on Samaria. He couldn't trust the comm unit on the ship, either.

Trapped.

Ahead he saw a worker mopping up the hallway. Dressed in bright yellow coveralls, the man bent

over the vibromop, putting as little energy as possible into the task. His dark hair was covered by a rag that he had knotted in four corners, and he wore a face mask, no doubt to protect his lungs from constantly breathing in the strong cleanser. He swung the vibromop wide, and Ferus had to dance away in order to prevent himself from tripping over it.

“Sorry about that, mate,” the worker said, and Ferus realized with a pleased shock that it was Clive.

“I see you’ve found your calling at last,” Ferus murmured. He bent down to pretend to examine a spray of cleanser that had dotted his trousers. “They’ve arrested Roan and Dona.”

The prowler buzzed overhead, and he moved on. Within a few steps he saw a cafe, one of the many eating areas tucked underneath the overhangs on the Senate’s main hallways. A waiter was sponging off a table, dressed in the gray tunic the servers wore. Now that he was alert for it, Ferus picked out Keets right away.

He stopped at the counter and ordered a small cup of juice. He stood, sipping it, as the line moved forward, shielding him momentarily from the prowler. Keets approached to wring out the sponge at the sink near Ferus.

“Heading directly to Samaria,” Ferus said as he turned away.

He walked down the hallway, turned the corner,

and saw a young boy selling the *Senatorial Record Digest*. Although the Senate cam droids sent official transcripts directly to the computers of the Senators, many of them still preferred to pick up durasheet copies of the digest, which summarized the events of a day, hour by hour.

This time, the newsboy was Trever, his bluish hair covered by a cap with a visor that shadowed his face.

Ferus reached out for the newssheet. “Blackmailed me to take the job,” he said, tossing Trever a credit.

He pretended to scan the *Record* as he walked, then tossed it in a wastebin by a fresher. He waved his hand over the sensor to enter. The prowler followed him inside. The droid was as impossible to shake off as bantha drool.

He paused to wash his hands. An attendant handed him a towel. It was Oryon, his Bothan friend. Oryon had swathed his powerful frame in coveralls and his luxuriant mane in a close-fitting cap.

He dried his hands. “Computer systems crash on Samaria,” he murmured.

He walked out. He knew that they would pass each tidbit of information along until they had a full picture of his dilemma. Despite his predicament, his heart felt full. He was surrounded by friends. Each one of them was wanted by the Empire. Each one of

them was endangered by being here. Yet they were here.

Ferus reached the landing platform. He saw a pilot drinking a mug of tea by the opulent personal transports of the Senators. He was a slender Svrenini in a pilot's uniform. It was Curran Caladian, his furred face neatly combed, his bright eyes covered by the visor on his helmet. Ferus walked by him, pretending to admire a gleaming Nubian yacht with a chromium hull.

Drawing closer, he said, "I'll be going to the city of Sath. Reporting to an Imperial advisor."

He walked on. The only one of his crew he hadn't seen was Solace, but he didn't expect to. Out of all his friends, she was the most wanted by the Empire. The entire Imperial army and security forces, as well as Coruscant police, were on the alert for her. She had fought a battle in the underworld of Coruscant, trying to protect the group she'd gathered in the caverns of the underground oceans. She'd personally taken down squads of stormtroopers. It was truly too dangerous for her to be here.

An Imperial officer met him at the ship and told him the coordinates were already entered into the nav computer. The ship would need no refueling. He was not to stop at any space station. They were awaiting him in Sath. He was to land directly on the prime minister's landing platform.

The officer turned away as Ferus started toward the ramp. Suddenly another pilot accosted him.

“Don’t think you’re jumping the fueling line, fella,” she said in a grating tone. “I’ve been here for twenty minutes.”

It was Solace. She had disguised herself so well he didn’t think he’d have been able to pick her out if she hadn’t said something. She seemed taller and broader. She wore a black helmet and gloves up to her elbows, and tall boots.

“Got all the info,” she told him quickly. “I’ll take Trever and Oryon to Bellassa to track Roan and Dona. Trever knows the ropes there. Keets and Curran will stay on Coruscant and dig for information. Clive will follow you to Samaria.”

Her calm dark eyes met his for a moment. “I will find Roan and Dona. I’ll bring them to safety.”

It was a promise, from one Jedi to another.

They didn’t say it, but their gazes sent the message: *May the Force be with you.*

Ferus turned and strode up the ramp. Moments later, the ship shot out into the space lanes. He headed for the hyperdrive ring, and he was off.



CHAPTER THREE

Samaria was a small planet in the tiny system of Leemurtoo, in a strategic area of the Core Worlds. After receiving permission to land, Ferus buzzed over the city of Sath to get an airborne view.

The Samaritans had manufactured a huge bay that was channeled into large canals that ran through the city. Along the edges of the bay, the engineers had built fingers of white sand that flung out into the aquamarine water, forming flowerlike designs. On these fingers were the most exclusive buildings, primarily residences and offices for the rich. The buildings were topped with domes that competed for attention, each with its own rich color and metallic inlays.

The complex of buildings that comprised the royal court of Samaria took up one whole flower made up of ten long petals with gleaming white buildings built of synthstone.

Ferus decided to ignore his instructions to land on the private landing platform of the prime minister of Samaria. Instead he headed for the main spaceport of Sath. He could always claim ignorance, and he wanted to get a feel for the city on his own, before he was briefed by some Imperial or government functionary.

“Boots logic,” his Master, Siri Tachi, had called it. She meant get your feet on the ground, look around, and get a feel for the place yourself, instead of relying on the data you were given.

After landing, he activated the ramp and received a blast of heat from the dry air. He headed over to register with the dockmaster, a Samarian who waved him off. “You’ve already been cleared. The spaceport is closed to all vehicles but those with Imperial registration,” he said. He turned back to the pile of durasheet records on his desk. “Can’t believe I have to do this without a computer,” he muttered.

“Why don’t you just wait until the data is up and running again?” Ferus asked.

The Samarian looked up and blinked his mild blue eyes. “But then I’d be behind.”

“True,” Ferus said. He recognized a dedicated bureaucrat when he saw one.

“Take the turbolift down to the city levels. If you take an air taxi, you take your life in your

hands. Space lanes are free-for-alls now. No controls at all.”

Ferus nodded and walked to the turbolift. He took it down to the main level of Sath. It was a three-level city, with buildings of various sizes punching through the main street levels. Laid out on a grid, it had numerous ways for pedestrians to navigate with lift tubes, mobile ramps, and movers that could carry up to forty people at a time. All of the walkways were under cooling systems and shaded from the hot sun. Many buildings were connected by covered walkways at various levels. It was possible to walk the entire city without going outside. Fountains had been designed to refresh the air but were now shut off, no doubt because of the citywide system failure.

Ferus alternately walked and hopped on a repulsorlift mover. He saw disorder everywhere. Obviously the breakdown of the system had affected everything. The people were distressed, milling about, carrying on anguished conversation and desperately waiting in long lines. Considered highly advanced, the system on Sath didn't use physical credits, relying on computers to record every transaction, from a mug of tea to the purchase of a speeder. Now there were long lines at banks, clinics, and food distribution outlets. Frustrated Sathers crowded the streets, relying on barter to get what they needed.

Lighting systems were on half-power. Huge vidscreens that had once broadcast news and information were blank. The air lanes were snarled with traffic.

He could feel the panic in the air. This was a society on the brink of spiraling out of control.

Ferus finished his journey at the expanse of a blue-green bay. He hopped a repulsorlift ferry to take him out to the large, flowerlike span where the government residences were built. The heat was like a blast from a flameweb as he made his way down the empty boulevard.

He reached the gate to the palace and stood in front of the vidscreen, then realized it wasn't working. He looked around for a button to push or a comm device to activate but met only the smooth stone wall of the gate.

Then it slid open and he stared into the muzzle of a blaster rifle. The soldier was dressed in sand-colored fatigues. "State your business."

"Ferus Olin. I'm expected."

The soldier checked a durasheet. "This way."

Ferus followed him into the entryway to the palace. It was a large, sprawling white structure with seven domes inlaid with stone the color of the sea. Huge slabs of stone had been cut and placed in a striking pattern on the floor of the entryway. The glowlights were set in beautiful globes of blue glass.

Ferus followed the soldier into a reception area lined with long, low seating with tapestried cushions. He stood in the center of the tiled floor, a mosaic of a map of Sath. He looked down and reflected how fragile a mighty city could be.

He waited for fifteen minutes, until he realized he was deliberately being made to wait. Rather an odd way to treat an emissary from the Emperor. He had long ago learned — not from Siri, who could be so impatient, but from Obi-Wan — that part of diplomacy is never being irritated at being kept waiting, but using it to your advantage. So he used the time to study the map of Sath and memorize the main boulevards and districts.

At last the doors slid open and a tall man with graying hair entered. He was dressed modestly in a dark tunic and pants, and Ferus was surprised when he introduced himself as the prime minister of Samaria, Aaren Larker. He had expected someone in rich robes, someone who would match these opulent surroundings.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting,” Larker said. “I was in conference with the Imperial advisor. He’ll be along in a moment. I assume that you were briefed on Coruscant.”

“I was briefed by the Emperor himself,” Ferus disclosed.

“Imperial Advisor Divinian is here to oversee the

search for the saboteur,” Larker said. “You are to work closely with him.”

Ferus inclined his head. He had no intention of working closely with anyone.

“Divinian,” he said. “Is that Bog Divinian, the former Senator from Nuralee?”

Larker nodded.

Ferus was surprised. He’d met Bog Divinian before the Clone Wars, when he was still a Padawan. Bog had been married to a friend of Obi-Wan’s, Astri Oddo, but Ferus had lost track of both of them when he’d left the Jedi Order. Bog had fallen into disgrace after he’d conspired to take control of the Senate from Chancellor Palpatine. He’d been kicked out of office and scorned by his own people. How odd that the Emperor would allow him to gain such a high title, when Bog had once conspired to unseat him.

The doors opened again. Now Ferus realized fully why he’d been kept waiting. Bog wanted to make sure that Ferus knew that even though he’d been sent by the Emperor, it was Bog who was in charge.

“Ah,” Bog said, by way of greeting. He held out a hand but didn’t move. Ferus had to step forward to greet him. Bog was dressed in the gray tunic that most Imperial functionaries wore to match the soldier’s outfits. Over it, he had thrown a royal blue cloak embroidered with gold thread. He had aged

since Ferus had last seen him, ten years ago at the Galactic Games. His hair was dyed jet-black, and his florid face was now broad. His middle had thickened and his hair had thinned.

“Ferus Olin,” he said. “Welcome to Samaria. I trust you found the Emperor in good health.”

Ferus didn’t think that “good health” would under any circumstances describe the Emperor, but he nodded anyway.

“The government of Samaria asked for our help,” Bog said, folding his hands and putting on a grave expression. “Naturally the Empire was quick to reach out a hand. I am that hand,” he said portentously.

Which I guess makes me a finger, Ferus thought. But he kept his mouth shut. It was important to keep Bog on his side, at least for now.

“The prime minister here seems to have lost control of his planet,” Bog continued in a jovial tone. “Haven’t you, old friend?”

Ferus saw the flush of annoyance on Larker’s face. The contempt within Bog’s tone made it clear again who was in charge here.

“How kind of you to elevate me to old friend when we’ve known each other such a short time,” Larker said in a polite tone. Ferus strained to hear the sarcasm in it but could find none. Nevertheless he knew it was there.

“A friend in need, indeed,” Bog continued. He wheeled and addressed Ferus. “You were supposed to land at the palace,” he said.

“I wasn’t aware I was under orders,” Ferus replied.

Bog stared at him expressionlessly for a moment, then let out a booming laugh. “Just so! You’re not in the Imperial army! So I suppose it makes sense to reject the advice of those who know better. The space lanes are dangerous in Sath.”

“I walked,” Ferus said.

This brought an incredulous look from Bog. “In the heat? I guess you’re not aware that Samaria is a desert planet, ha-ha!”

Ferus was getting bored with Bog’s attempts to put him in his place. He turned to Larker. “Have you had many problems with lawbreaking?”

Relieved to have his expertise consulted, Larker shook his head. “Not yet, but of course it is of concern. So far the Sathans are making the best they can out of a hard situation.”

“Yes, I see that they’re setting up a bartering system,” Ferus said.

“We’re working on establishing government-approved values,” Larker said. “That way, everything will be clear, and the people will be able to figure out how to get food and fuel. That is our most important

job at the moment. The saboteur has left no trace in the system. Every time we go in to try a fix, something else malfunctions. One day we'll have our transportation running, or our space lanes monitored, and then the next they'll be out again."

Ferus nodded. "I've seen this kind of bug before. If the saboteur is clever enough, it can be extraordinarily difficult to fix."

"I'm sure we'll be able to crack it," Bog said, obviously annoyed at being left out of the conversation. "Then we'll get everything under control."

Everything under his control, Ferus realized. This would be a test for Bog. Ferus would fix the problem, Bog would take the credit, rise in the Imperial hierarchy, and be the real power on the planet. It was a transparent plan, and the funny thing was that although Ferus was aware of it and Larker was undoubtedly aware of it, Bog still thought that his plan was shrouded in mystery. There was nothing worse, Ferus thought, than a dull man who was convinced of his cleverness.

But he couldn't underestimate Bog. He knew from experience that the combination of aggressiveness and ambition could make a being dangerous. Especially with the full might of the Empire behind him.

Now Ferus realized why he'd been sent. This wasn't about helping a planet — not that he'd

believed that in the first place. Bog's presence here and the way he treated Larker made it clear: This was about taking over Samaria. If Ferus fixed their central computer system, he'd be giving the Imperials the method to control the planet completely.