

A Path to Choose

By: R. A. Peterson

CHAPTER 1

As the dark Jedi ignited his crimson blade Dalton felt a wave of sudden fear enter his mind. *There is no fear, only the Force*, he thought, remembering his training. He calmed his mind as his master had taught him to do and his hands slowly stopped trembling. Once again Dalton peered through the crack in the door at the two figures within. His master, Tajus Arkkon, stood motionless with his lightsaber hilt still inactivated at his belt. Why he hadn't drawn his weapon yet bothered Dalton; would he allow this dark side Force-wielder to strike him down so easily?

The dark Jedi bore many scars on his ghastly-pale face and wore the typical black robes of a Sith. His blood-red saber hummed ominously in his right hand. Then he spoke, grinning maliciously. "Do you know how long I've waited for this moment, Tajus?"

"Not long enough unfortunately," was the response.

The dark Jedi's smirk faded into a frown. "Ever since Korriban, when I could fully comprehend the treachery of the Jedi!"

Wiping away the sweat that was forming on his brow Dalton reached for his own lightsaber he'd finished constructing a week before. It was crude but it worked, well at least it *had* worked.

"I don't want to fight you Uurek," said Tajus evenly. The dark Jedi brought up his blade. "I no longer answer to that name, my master. I am Darth Jeed!"

Tajus had once told Dalton that he had lost an apprentice several years before the Great Purge, during the Clone Wars. He had presumed that by lost he meant he'd been killed. Apparently he'd been wrong.

"It's not too late to turn back," started Tajus, resting his hand on his lightsaber hilt. "Turn away from your anger; it'll only destroy you."

Jeed laughed and lowered his weapon. "Do you realize how pathetic you are, you and your stupid Jedi code? I only regret not having the pleasure of exterminating more of your kind."

The Jedi master, seemingly hurt, unclipped his lightsaber from his belt. "Then do what you must. I have failed you and now I must pay for my crime."

The dark Jedi lunged at his former master with a cry. Tajus snapped on his saber and quickly parried the attack aside. Jeed brought about his crimson blade in a wide arc, and then began a series of swift slices directed at Tajus's torso. The Jedi master blocked the attacks, remaining on the defensive.

Dalton watched nervously at first as his mentor exchanged swings with Jeed. However, soon his anxiety was overcome by a captivation for the fluid form of the two combatants.

Minutes passed as the glowing blades of energy met throwing red and green light over the dwelling's walls.

Jeed brought his lightsaber above his head and came down hard knocking Tajus's blade away. He then made a sharp swipe at the Jedi master, who back-stepped avoiding the crimson blade by mere centimeters. Tajus was then able to bring up his blade just in time to batter aside Jeed's quick strokes.

Dodging a vicious slash Tajus Arkkon twisted his blade and then made a firm jab at Jeed. Before the emerald blade could meet flesh Jeed parried it, and swung back tightly slicing off the Jedi master's sword-hand. While he was still stunned Jeed caught him across the jaw with the butt of his hilt, which knocked him to the floor.

Dalton gripped his lightsaber ever more tightly with his thumb hovering above the activation switch. He couldn't stand doing nothing while the dark Jedi was about to kill his master. *You are very gifted Dalton, but your greatest flaw is your impatience*, Dalton remembered Tajus saying.

I'm sure Tajus didn't factor in his own death to my reprimanding; he rationalized, as he started for the door's handle. Before he could open the door he felt a brief forewarning through the Force; his master wanted him to wait.

"You've lost my old friend," whispered the dark Jedi stooping down to his former master. Blood dripping from the corner of his mouth he met Jeed's dark eyes with his own icy-blue stare.

"Not yet." With a raise of his hand Tajus threw Jeed across the room with a powerful Force-push. As Jeed crashed against the opposite wall out cold Tajus grabbed his lightsaber and ran toward where Dalton hid. Dalton opened the door and Tajus ran past him to the adjoining hallway. Tajus led him to his quarters where he opened a wicker chest in the corner of the room.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Here take this.” He replied, handing Dalton a survival pack. Scouring through the chest he pulled out several other items and then started out of the room. “Dalton, do you remember when I told you about the safe house network?”

“Yeah, to hide fugitive Jedi,” said Dalton, as they continued through the passage. “What about it?”

Of the several items he carried Taju took a small datapad and handed it to Dalton. “That’s a list of contacts and locations along the network. You’re going to need it once I get you out of here.”

“What about you?”

“I have some unfinished business,” he said glancing back. “But don’t worry about me, for now we must deal with your own well-being.”

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After going out the back entrance of their cave hideaway, Taju and Dalton began to trek through the dense jungles of Jayspor. The planet itself was almost completely landmass made up of vast plains and wild jungles. Located on the fringe of the Inner Rim Territories, the planet had yet to be colonized based on the fact that it was so untamed. The massive life form reading was one of the reasons Taju Arkkon had fled to Jayspor after the Great Purge almost five years ago.

Dalton held his amethyst-bladed lightsaber out ahead of him chopping through the course growth of prickly vyassha vines as his master directed him. Like many flora on Jayspor the vyassha vines were carnivorous, pulling its live prey into a pool of acids to be digested.

“How much further?” Asked Dalton, panting in the humidity.

Examining a handheld scanner Taju looked up ahead. “Fifty meters or so and it looks like we got company.”

To avoid giving away their position Dalton switched off his lightsaber and began a meticulous work of parting the tangled mess of growth through the Force. Nearly twenty minutes later the notorious white armor of Imperial stormtroopers could be seen through the

underbrush. Under the cover of a knobby gowutu tree, the two Jedi surveyed the surroundings.

“I count ten, but there are undoubtedly more of them out there.” Tajus said quietly.

“Do you think they know about your ship?”

Tajus watched the troopers intently. “No.”

Waiting another ten minutes to increase distance between them and the patrol, Tajus and Dalton left the hiding spot. Coming to a tangled mess of vines, Tajus pulled at the growth to reveal a worn *Delta-7* Jedi starfighter. The ship’s original red paint job was nearly faded, but it otherwise looked serviceable.

Tajus opened the canopy and hopped in the cockpit. Viewing the instruments he called to Dalton, “Everything seems in order, how’s it look out there?”

“Fine, aside from your droid: what happened?” questioned Dalton.

Tajus glanced sidelong at the disabled astromech before looking back to the controls.

“Space battle—scars from a lifetime ago.” Working on the controls Tajus powered up the craft and rechecked the instruments. The rugged Jedi Master climbed back out holding his injured arm close to his body. “You ready?”

“Yeah.”

Dalton dropped into the single seat and started to familiarize himself with the controls. Back when he’d been traveling with a Sakiyan freighter pilot two years prior Dalton had learned the fundamentals of piloting. *But then*, he thought, *this is no freighter*. Tajus handed him the pack and datapad, “The ship’s hyperspace ring is in orbit around Jayspor’s moon; you should have no problem docking with it. Once you’re hooked up set coordinates for Taanab, which you can access via that datapad. I have a friend there who can help you.”

Nodding simply Dalton secured the items under his seat and scanned the controls again.

He was about to close the canopy when he felt a hand on his shoulder. "I want you know that upon my exile I feared I would never be given the chance to make amends for my failure. You gave me a chance for redemption, so thank you."

Looking into the eyes of his good friend and mentor Dalton smiled. "May the Force be with you Master."

"And with you."

With that Dalton hit the switch to close the canopy and grabbed the controls. The Jedi starfighter rose several meters into the air through the thick congress of branches. Past the top-most layers Dalton saw the setting sun throwing its golden rays across the sea of trees. Unable to see his master in the shadows, he pushed the throttle to full.

Escaping the planet's atmosphere, the view of space filled the cockpit with its millions of white pinpoints adorning the broad darkness. Dalton was caught off guard for a second, but quickly refocused bringing the starfighter in a wide turn to port directed at Jayspor's moon. The moon's bright white landscape reflected the system's sunlight as Dalton brought the ship in closer.

Following the horizon Dalton could barely make out a metallic surface in orbit and so assumed it was the hyperspace ring since his sensors weren't in range. He prepared himself to dock the ring as he noticed that it was leaving orbit. It took him only a second to realize that he'd been mistaken in his assumption when a burst of blaster fire over passed his ship by less than a meter.

As the object grew closer its general outline came into view, revealing its bulbous cockpit attached to two flat panels on either side. Barely in time Dalton was able to slide roll the ship to starboard before more blaster fire sliced through where he'd been. Evening out he redirected so he could catch a glance at the TIE fighter while still maintaining his general direction. The TIE twisted and than inverted back at Dalton blasting emerald fire. *Do I run or fight?*

Glancing over the controls Dalton found that the shields were fifty percent gone, but it was better than flying naked. The TIE fighter continued straight on firing wildly. *I hope he's as bad as he's coming on.*

Taking a deep breath Dalton brought the starfighter around toward the Imperial fighter. The crosshairs slowly leveled off and he pulled the trigger sending off several scarlet blasts. Just as he thought

the shots would make contact the TIE pulled up and sped past him. Dalton yanked the controls, veering around to blast the TIE before it came back around, only to find nothing but empty space and the moon below.

Suddenly, as an answer to his questioning, the sensors started beeping and the whole ship shuddered as blaster fire made contact. "What the..." managed Dalton before yet another blast shook the Jedi starfighter. Red lights began to flash and emergency tones started to noise, leading Dalton to examine the readings. Shields had been reduced to fewer than twenty percent and other damage had been sustained to the rear of the ship. "This is not good."

Dalton corkscrewed the ship hard and then dove the ship toward the moon's surface hoping to avoid any further damage. According to the sensors the TIE had fallen back at about two thousand meters, but he wasn't about to loosen up. Careening around Dalton flew back from the moon preparing to blast the TIE to shrapnel. *Fly wide, take my shots and stay alive*, planned Dalton still without conviction.

Drawing the TIE fighter nearer Dalton readied himself to shoot as soon as he was in range. The numbers streamed away as the distance between them closed. Dalton squeezed the trigger, with his first shots streaked under the TIE. Blaster fire erupted from the TIE fighter's twin laser canons in response.

As the distance closed their shots became more accurate, missing by mere centimeters rather than whole meters. Afraid of colliding Dalton was about to pull out when he felt a reassuring calm to stay course. With the trigger held down the scarlet shots continued to streak past the Imperial fighter until one hit its mark. The TIE fighter's cockpit exploded vibrantly, pitching the remains in every direction.

Dalton smiled to himself, astonished that he'd survived an encounter with an Imperial TIE fighter. Trembling from the stress on his tense muscles he reevaluated the ship's condition giving his racing breath a chance to slow.

Soon Dalton was off again searching for the missing hyperspace ring, which he found less than a minute later drifting leisurely in orbit exactly as Tajus had said. Docking to the ring he found the coordinates for Taanab and punched them into the navigational computer. Taking one last look at the planet's green

surface Dalton flipped a lever jolting the Jedi starfighter into the swirling tunnel of hyperspace.