

## CHAPTER THREE

THE GALACTIC MARKET on Coruscant was as busy as ever, but nobody paid any attention to Revan as he made his way through the crowds. Almost two years had passed since he had been proclaimed the savior of the galaxy. Though the Senate had awarded him its highest honor, the Cross of Glory, in a ceremony broadcast across the HoloNet, and his name was well remembered, his ordinary and rather unremarkable features had faded from public memory. In the aftermath of the presentation he had become a reclusive hero, eschewing public appearances and declining interview requests from any and all media outlets. He had shaved off his beard, and he rarely wore his Jedi robes out in public, making it even less likely anyone would notice him.

He liked being anonymous; it was one of the reasons he had settle on Coruscant. With one trillion people it was easy to blend into the crowd. That was even truer here in the Galactic Market, the most cosmopolitan section of the Republic's capital world. Merchants and shoppers of virtually every known species gathered to conduct commerce in a kaleidoscope of colors, shapes, and sizes. Red-skinned Togrutas intermingled with blue-skinned Twi'leks; diminutive Sullustans haggled with massive Hutts; fish-like Mon Calamari shared the streets with feline Cathar. Among such a diverse and interesting group, nobody paid any attention to a lone human and his astromech droid.

Unfortunately, the lack of attention meant that many in the crowd accidentally kicked, bumped, or tripped over T3-M4 as he scooted along at Revan's heel. The droid expressed his displeasure with a steady stream of angry beeps and chirps.

"Now you know why I told HK- Forty- seven he couldn't come," Revan told T3. "He'd probably try to clear a path through all these 'meatbags' with a flamethrower."

The astromech responded with a long, low whistle, and Revan laughed out loud before adding, "Let's not and say we did. Besides, we're almost there."

They reached their destination a few minutes later: the Dealer's Den, a small cantina in the far corner of the Galactic Market that offered drinks, dancers, and gambling. The Dealer's Den catered to the seedier elements of Coruscant society: black-market smugglers; thugs and bounty hunters; stim and spice dealers. As a result, the clientele was predominantly a mix of species with unsavory galactic reputations. Scattered among the Rodians, Chevin, and Kubaz were a handful of humans, including the man Revan had come looking for: Canderous Ordo.

The Mandalorian was sitting by himself at a small table in the far corner, his back to the wall as was his habit. He was wearing his familiar outfit of tan pants, a leatheris vest, and a sleeveless black shirt that left his heavily muscled arms bare in order to display the clan mark tattooed on his left shoulder. His hair was styled in a brush cut, accentuating his square jaw and rugged, no-nonsense features. He still looked every bit the part of a mercenary, though Revan knew he hadn't accepted a job since they'd teamed up to take down Darth Malak two years earlier.

A scantily clad Twi'lek dancer was giving Canderous a private performance as he sipped on a blue-tinged drink. Despite the distraction, he noticed Revan immediately. He raised a meaty hand in a wave and

shooed away his entertainment. The dancer shot Revan an angry glare as she stomped away, her head-tails twitching with irritation.

T3 beeped in surprise.

"I guess he's a good tipper," Revan answered with a shrug.

Nobody else paid them much attention as they crossed the cantina floor and took a seat at the Mandalorian's table.

"You look like death warmed over," Canderous said by way of greeting. "Is being married to Bastila really that bad?"

"I'm not getting much sleep lately," Revan admitted. "Bad dreams," he added as Canderous arched an eyebrow. "Besides, you're one to talk. Looks like you haven't shaved in three days."

The Mandalorian smiled and caressed the stubble across his cheeks and chin with an open palm. "The ladies around here like their men to have rough edges. You want something to drink?"

Revan shook his head. "Not from here. That concoction you've got looks like it could peel the enamel off my teeth."

Canderous shrugged and raised his glass to his lips. He took a long swig, closed his eyes, and shuddered.

"It's an acquired taste," he admitted. "So why are you here? I get the feeling this isn't just a social call."

"I've got some questions about the war."

Revan didn't need to clarify; for Canderous there was only one war that mattered. He and Revan had fought on opposite sides, mortal enemies who knew each other only by reputation long before they joined forces against Malak and became friends.

"Not much to say. We lost. You won," Canderous said with a shrug.

"We thought we could conquer the Republic, but instead we ended up a broken people."

He spoke with a casual indifference, but Revan knew him well enough to sense the bitterness and regret behind his words. The Mandalorians had been a proud and noble culture, fighting battles to win honor and glory; now the clans were scattered across the galaxy, reduced to working as mercenaries and thugs for the highest bidder.

Revan didn't like bringing up such a painful topic, but there was information he needed, and he felt this was the only way to get it.

"There's one thing I never understood about the Mandalorian Wars," he pressed. "What started them? Why, after all these centuries, did you suddenly decide to launch an all-out attack on the Republic?"

"It was Mandalore's idea."

Revan knew that Canderous wasn't referring to the original founder of his people. For centuries, each successive leader of the Mandalorian clans had symbolically taken up the name of Mandalore as a way to simultaneously honor his cultural heritage and reinforce his own authority.

To distinguish among rulers, each chose an honorific to define his or her reign, such as Mandalore the Conqueror or Mandalore the Indomitable. The most recent ruler had called himself Mandalore the Ultimate.

"Mandalore felt the Republic was weak," Canderous continued. "Vulnerable. He summoned the warriors of the clans, and we followed him into what we thought would be our greatest conquest."

There was no need to ask if Canderous or any of his fellow warriors had hesitated. When Mandalore called, the clans answered. While there might be battles and disputes among those seeking to be Mandalore's successor when he fell, once the decision was made there was never any dissent or debate.

"Things were going fine until you came along," Canderous said with a grim smile. "You and your followers turned the entire tide of the war against us. Eventually you killed Mandalore, and everything changed."

Revan couldn't actually remember any of his battles against the Mandalorians; they were buried in the part of his mind that had been locked away when the Jedi Council turned him against Malak. But he had studied up on his own history enough to fill in the missing details from Canderous's narrative.

In battle after battle, Revan had led the Jedi and Republic forces to victory. Realizing defeat was inevitable, Mandalore the Ultimate had challenged Revan to single combat, and Revan had accepted.

Though the Mandalorian fought valiantly, in the end he was no match for the Jedi Order's most powerful champion. But it wasn't enough for Revan to simply defeat his enemy. In Mandalorian culture, the death of one leader was merely an opportunity for another warrior to seize control of the clans by claiming the fallen Mandalore's helmet. To prevent this, Revan had stripped the helmet from his vanquished foe's corpse and hidden it on an unknown world.

For a warrior culture defined and bound by tradition and honor codes, the loss of Mandalore's Mask was a crippling blow. Denied the sole item recognized as the symbol of leadership, the Mandalorians could not choose a new Mandalore. With no universally acclaimed ruler, the various clans

began to fight among themselves for power. Their armies became fragmented and ineffective, and within weeks a series of decisive victories by Revan's troops forced the Mandalorians to accept an unconditional surrender.

The humiliating defeat and the loss of Mandalore's Mask destroyed the once proud culture. Canderous had spoken of this once during the time they'd spent together stopping Malak. Surprisingly, he didn't blame Revan for what had become of the Mandalorians. He blamed Mandalore for not being strong enough to win their battle; he blamed the brothers and sisters of his clan for being too weak to pick up the pieces so they could rebuild their society. But mostly, he just didn't talk about it.

Revan hated picking at the old wound, but he felt he had no choice.

"Is there anything else you can tell me? About what happened before Mandalore declared war on the Republic? Anything unusual that might have been a catalyst for the war?"

Canderous tilted his head to the side and squinted one eye. "This have anything to do with those bad dreams you mentioned?"

"It might."

The Mandalorian nodded. "You're getting more of your memories back, aren't you?"

"Only bits and pieces. I keep having visions of a world I don't recognize. The whole planet is covered in electrical storms, day and night."

"Doesn't sound familiar," Canderous said after a few moments of thought. "What do you think it means?"

"I wish I knew. But I've got a bad feeling about it."

"And you think it's connected to our war against the Republic?"

"Think about it," Revan explained. "Mandalore the Ultimate decides to do something none of his predecessors even considered: launch an all-out war on the Republic. Malak and I defeat you. But after that, we mysteriously take our troops and disappear into the Unknown Regions beyond Mandalorian space. When we return, we decide to launch a war against the Republic, too."

"It does seem like sort of a strange coincidence," Canderous agreed.

"You think you ran across this storm-covered planet in the Unknown Regions?"

"I'm not sure. But something happened to us out there. Something made us turn against the Republic. Maybe it's connected to Mandalore's decision to attack the Republic in the first place."

"And you think whatever this thing is, it's still out there? And it's still dangerous?"

"I feel like visions are a warning. Like part of my old self is trying to tell me something I can't afford to ignore." Revan sighed. "Sounds a little crazy, doesn't it?"

Canderous barked out a laugh. "After everything we've been through, this just feels like old times." He looked at Revan. "So what is it you want me to do?"

"I want to know more about Mandalore the Ultimate. But nobody's going to talk to an outsider like me. I need someone who can talk to the clans and get answers."

There was a long silence while Revan waited for Canderous to reply. He noticed that the Mandalorian's fingers were gripping his glass so hard, they were turning white.

"I've spent most of the last five years trying to avoid other Mandalorians," he finally muttered.

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it was important."

Canderous took a deep breath and downed the rest of his drink, closing his eyes and shuddering just as he had with the previous gulp.

"You know why I've been hanging around this kriffing bar for two years, turning down everyone who came to offer me a job?" he asked.

He didn't bother to wait for a reply. "I had a feeling you were going to get mixed up in something interesting, and I wanted to be around for the fun. Guess this is it."

"I knew I could count on you, Canderous."

"Let me reach out to some people," the Mandalorian said. "See what I can dig up. Can't promise I'll find anything, though."

"I'm kind of hoping you don't," Revan replied. "But neither one of us is that lucky."