

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: The New Jedi Order - The Unifying Force

James Luceno

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Star Wars: New Jedi Order Round-Robin Interview
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The ROBOTECH Series

(as Jack McKinney, with Brian Daley)

THE BLACK HOLE TRAVEL AGENCY Series

(as Jack McKinney, with Brian Daley)

A Fearful Symmetry

Illegal Alien

The Big Empty

Kaduna Memories

The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles: The Mata Hari Affair

The Shadow

The Mask of Zorro

Río Pasión

Rainchaser

Rock Bottom

Star Wars: Cloak of Deception

Star Wars: Darth Maul, Saboteur (e-book)

Star Wars: The New Jedi Order:

Agents of Chaos I: Hero's Trail

Star Wars: The New Jedi Order:

Agents of Chaos II: Jedi Eclipse

Star Wars: Dark Lord

Star Wars: Labyrinth of Evil

Triumph or obliteration?

**For the New Jedi Order and the
unrelenting Yuuzhan Vong, it will
be the last, epic battle—the
ultimate fight that will decide
the fate of the galaxy....**



THE UNIFYING FORCE

JAMES LUCENO



arrow books

*In memory of my compadre, Tom Peirce,
who understood that being accepting of death is not the
same as being resigned to dying. A true warrior to the last.*

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THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



44 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Apprentice series

33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Maul: Saboteur
Cloak of Deception

32.5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

32 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE I THE PHANTOM MENACE

29 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Rogue Planet

22.5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Approaching Storm

22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE II ATTACK OF THE CLONES

21.5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Shatterpoint

21 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Cestus Deception

20 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

MedStar I: Battle Surgeons
MedStar II: Jedi Healer

19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE III

10-0 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Han Solo Trilogy:

The Paradise Snare
The Hutt Gambit
Rebel Dawn

5-2 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Adventures of Lando Calrissian series

The Han Solo Adventures series



STAR WARS: A New Hope YEAR 0

STAR WARS: EPISODE IV A NEW HOPE

0-3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales from the Mos Eisley
Cantina
Splinter of the Mind's Eye

1 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE V THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Tales of the Bounty Hunters

1.5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Shadows of the Empire

4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE VI RETURN OF THE JEDI

Tales from Jabba's Palace

The Bounty Hunter Wars:

The Mandalorian Armor
Slave Ship
Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura



6.5-7.5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing:

Rogue Squadron
Wedge's Gamble
The Krytos Trap
The Bacta War
Wrath Squadron
Iron Fist
Solo Command

8 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Courtship of Princess Leia
A Forest Apart
Tatooine Ghost

9 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Thrawn Trilogy:

Heir to the Empire
Dark Force Rising
The Last Command
X-Wing: Isard's Revenge

11 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

I, Jedi

The Jedi Academy Trilogy:

Jedi Search
Dark Apprentice
Champions of the Force

12-13 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Children of the Jedi
Darksaber
Planet of Twilight
X-Wing: Starfighters of Adumar

14 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Crystal Star

16-17 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Black Fleet Crisis Trilogy:

Before the Storm
Shield of Lies
Tyrant's Test

18 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Corellian Trilogy:

Ambush at Corellia
Assault at Selonia
Showdown at Centerpoint

19 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Hand of Thrawn Duology:

Specter of the Past
Vision of the Future

22 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Junior Jedi Knights series

Fool's Bargain
Survivor's Quest

23-24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Young Jedi Knights series

25-30 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The New Jedi Order:

Vector Prime
Dark Tide I: Onslaught
Dark Tide II: Ruin
Agents of Chaos I: Hero's Trial
Agents of Chaos II: Jedi Eclipse
Balance Point
Recovery
Edge of Victory I: Conquest
Edge of Victory II: Rebirth
Star by Star
Dark Journey
Enemy Lines I: Rebel Dream
Enemy Lines II: Rebel Stand
Traitor
Destiny's Way
Ylesia
Force Heretic I: Remnant
Force Heretic II: Refugee
Force Heretic III: Reunion
The Final Prophecy
The Unifying Force



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Nom Anor; executor (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Wedge Antilles; general (male human)
Nas Choka; warmaster (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Kyp Durrone; Jedi Master (male human)
Jagged Fel; pilot (male human)
Harrar; priest (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Traest Kre'fey; admiral (male Bothan)
Cal Omas; Chief of State (male human)
Onimi; Shamed One (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Danni Quee; scientist (female human)
Supreme Overlord Shimrra (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Luke Skywalker; Jedi Master (male human)
Mara Jade Skywalker; Jedi Master (female human)
Han Solo; captain, *Millennium Falcon* (male human)
Jacen Solo; Jedi Knight (male human)
Jaina Solo; Jedi Knight (female human)
Princess Leia Organa Solo; diplomat (female human)

PART ONE

ACROSS THE STARS

ONE

SELVARIS, FAINTLY GREEN against a sweep of white-hot stars, and with only a tiny moon for companionship, looked like the loneliest of planets. Almost five years into a war that had seen the annihilation of peaceful worlds, the disruption of major hyperlanes, the fall and occupation of Coruscant itself, the fact that such a backwater place could rise to sudden significance was perhaps the clearest measure of the frightful shadow the Yuuzhan Vong had cast across the galaxy.

Immediate evidence of that significance was a prisoner-of-war compound that had been hollowed from the dense coastal jungle of Selvaris's modest southern continent. The compound of wooden detention buildings and organic, hivelike structures known as grashals was enclosed by yorik-coral walls and watchtowers that might have been thrust from the planet's aquamarine sea, or left exposed by a freakishly low tide. Beyond the tall scabrous perimeter, where the vegetation had been leveled or reduced to ash by plasma weapons, rigid blades of knee-high grass poked from the sandy soil, extending all the way to the vibrant green palisade that was the tree line. Whipped by a persistent salty wind, the fanlike leaves of the tallest trees flapped and snapped like war banners.

Standing between the prison camp and a brackish estuary that meandered finally to the sea, the jungle combined indigenous growth with exotic species

bioengineered by the Yuuzhan Vong and soon to become dominant on Selvaris, as had already happened on countless other worlds.

Two charred yorik-trema landing craft, not yet fully healed from recent deep-space engagements with the enemy, sat in the spacious prison yard. Shuffling past them came a group of humans, bald-domed Bith, and thick-horned Gotals, carrying three corpses wrapped in cloth.

His back pressed to one of the coralcraft, a Yuuzhan Vong guard watched the prisoners struggle with the dead.

"Be quick about it," he ordered. "The maw luur doesn't like to be kept waiting."

The camp's prisoners had argued vehemently to be allowed to dispose of bodies according to the customs of the deceased, but graves or funeral pyres had been expressly forbidden by order of the Yuuzhan Vong priests who officiated at the nearby temple. Their ruling was that all organics had to be recycled. The dead could either be left to Selvaris's ample and voracious flocks of carrion eaters, or be fed to the Yuuzhan Vong biot known as a maw luur, which some of the more well-traveled prisoners characterized as a mating of trash compactor and Sarlacc.

The guard was tall and long-limbed, with an elongated sloping forehead and bluish sacs underscoring his eyes. The light of Selvaris's two suns had reddened his skin slightly, and the planet's hothouse heat had turned him lean. Facial tattoos and scarifications marked him as an officer, but he lacked the deformations and implants peculiar to commanders. Bound by a ring of black coral, his dark hair fell in a sideknot to below his shoulders, and his uniform tunic was cinched by a narrow hide belt. A melee weapon coiled around his muscular right forearm, like a deadly vine.

What made Subaltern S'yito unusual was that he spoke Basic, though not nearly as fluently as his commander.

The prisoners paused briefly in response to S'yito's order that they hurry.

"We'd sooner see their bones picked clean by scavengers than let them be a meal for your garbage eater," the shortest of the humans said.

"Make the maw luur happy by throwing yourself in," a second human added.

"You tell him, Commenor," the Gotal beside him encouraged.

Shirtless, the prisoners were slick with sweat, and kilos lighter than when they had arrived on Selvaris two standard months earlier, after being captured during an abortive attempt to retake the planet Gyndine. Those who wore trousers had cut them off at the knee, and likewise trimmed their footwear to provide no more than was needed to keep their feet from being bloodied by the coarse ground or the waves of thorned senalaks that thrived outside the walls.

S'yito only sneered at their insolence, and waved his left hand to disperse the cloud of insects that encircled him.

The short human cracked a smile and laughed. "That's what you get for using blood as body paint, S'yito."

S'yito puzzled out the meaning of the remark. "Insects are not the problem. Only that they are not Yuuzhan Vong insects." With uncommon speed, he snatched one out of the air and curled his hand around it. "Not yet, that is."

Worldshaping had commenced in Selvaris's eastern hemisphere, and was said to be creeping around the planet at the rate of two hundred kilometers per local day. Bioengineered vegetation had already engulfed several population centers, but it would be months before the botanical imperative was concluded.

Until then, all of Selvaris was a prison. No residents had been allowed offworld since the internment camp had been grown, and all enemy communications facilities had been dismantled. Technology had been outlawed. Droids

especially had been destroyed with much accompanying celebration, and in the name of benevolence. Liberated from their reliance on machines, sentient species might at long last glimpse the true nature of the universe, which had been brought into being by Yun-Yuuzhan in an act of selfless sacrifice, and was maintained by the lesser gods in whom the Creator had placed his trust.

"Maybe you should just try converting our insects," one of the humanoids suggested.

"Start with threatening to pull their wings off," the short human said.

S'yito opened his hand to display the winged bug, pinched between forefinger and thumb but unharmed. "This is why you lose the war, and why coexistence with you is impossible. You believe we inflict pain for sport, when we do so only to demonstrate reverence for the gods." He held the pitiful creature at arm's length. "Think of this as yourselves. Obedience leads to freedom; disobedience, to disgrace." Abruptly, he smashed the insect against his taut chest. "No middle path. You are Yuuzhan Vong, or you are dead."

Before any of the prisoners could reply, a human officer stepped from the doorway of the nearest hut into the harsh sunlight. Thickset and bearded, he wore his filthy uniform proudly. "Commenor, Antar, Clak'dor, that's enough chatter," the officer said, referring to them by their native worlds rather than by name. "Carry on with your duties and report back to me."

"On our way, Captain," the short human said, saluting.

"That's Page, right?" the Gotal asked. "I hear nothing but good things."

"All of them true," one of the Bith said. "But we need ten thousand more like him if we're ever going to turn this war around."

As the prisoners moved off, S'yito turned to regard Captain Judder Page, who held the subaltern's appraising

gaze for a long moment before stepping back into the wooden building. The body bearer had spoken the truth, S'yito thought. Warriors like Page could snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

The Yuuzhan Vong held the high ground in the long war, but only barely. The fact that a prison camp had had to be grown on the surface of Selvaris was proof of that. Normally a battle vessel would have served as a place of detention. But with the final stages of the conflict being waged on numerous fronts, every able vessel was deployed to engage hostile forces on contested worlds, patrol conquered systems, defend the hazy margins of the invasion corridor, or protect Yuuzhan'tar, the Hallowed Center, over which Supreme Overlord Shimrra had now presided for a standard year.

In any other circumstance there would have been little need for high walls or watchtowers, let alone a full complement of warriors to guard even such high-status prisoners as the mixed-species lot gathered on Selvaris. At the start of the war, captives had been fitted with manacles, immobilized in blorash jelly, or simply implanted with surge-coral and enslaved to a dhuryam—a governing brain. But living shackles, quick-jelly, and surge-coral were in short supply, and dhuryams were so scarce as to be rare.

Were S'yito in command, Page and others like him would already have been executed. As it was, too many compromises had been made. The wooden shelters, the disposal of bodies, the food ... No matter the species, the prisoners had no stomach for the Yuuzhan Vong diet. With so many of them succumbing to their battle wounds or malnutrition, the prison commander had been forced to allow food to be delivered from a nearby settlement, where the residents plucked fish and other marine life from Selvaris's bountiful seas, and harvested fruits from the planet's equally generous forests. Against the possibility

that resistance cells might be operating in the settlement, the place was even more closely guarded than the prison.

It was said among the warriors that Selvaris had no indigenous sentients, and in fact the settlers who called the planet home had the look of beings who had either been marooned or were in hiding.

The sentient who delivered the weekly rations of food was no exception.

Covered with a nap of smoke-colored fur, the being walked upright on two muscular legs, and yet was graced with a useful-looking tail. Paired eyes sparkled in a slender mustachioed face, the prominent feature of which was a beak of some cartilaginous substance, perforated at intervals like a flute and downcurving over a drooping polar mustache. He was harnessed to a wagon that rode on two yorik coral wheels and was laden with baskets, pots, and an assortment of bulging, homespun sacks.

"Nutrition for the prisoners," the sentient announced as he neared the prison's bonework front gate.

S'yito ambled over while a quartet of sentries busied themselves removing the lids of the baskets and undoing the drawstrings that secured the sacks. He sniffed at the contents of one of the open bags.

"All this has been prepared according to the commander's instructions?" he asked the food bearer in Basic.

The being nodded. The fur on his head was pure white, and stood straight up, as if raised by fright. "Washed, decontaminated, separated into flesh, grains, and fruits, Fearsome One."

The honorific was usually reserved for commanders, but S'yito didn't bother to correct the food bearer. "Blessed, as well?"

"I arrive directly from the temple."

S'yito glanced down the unsurfaced track that vanished into the high jungle. To provide the garrison with a place of

worship, the priests had placed a statue of Yun-Yammka, the Slayer, in a grashal grown specifically for use as a temple. Close to the temple stood the commander's grashal, and barracks grashals for the lesser officers.

S'yito lowered his flat-nosed face to an open basket. "Fish?"

"Of a kind, Fearsome One."

The subaltern gestured to a cluster of hairy and hard-shelled spheres. "And these?"

"A fruit that grows in the crowns of the largest trees. Rich flesh, with a kind of milk inside."

"Open one."

The food bearer inserted a hooked finger deep into the seam of the fruit and pried it open. S'yito gouged out a fingerful of the pinkish flesh and brought it to his broad mouth.

"Too good for them," he announced, as the flesh dissolved on his thorn-pierced tongue. "But necessary, I suppose."

Few of the guards accepted that the prisoners couldn't tolerate Yuuzhan Vong food. They suspected that the alleged intolerance was a ploy—part of an ongoing contest of wills between the captives and their captors.

The food bearer placed his hands, palms raised, just below his heart, in a position of prayer. "Yun-Yuuzhan is merciful, Fearsome One. He provides even for the enemies of the true faith."

S'yito glowered at him. "What do you know of Yun-Yuuzhan?"

"I have embraced the truth. It took the coming of the Yuuzhan Vong to open my eyes to the existence of the gods. Through their mercy, even your captives will see the truth."

S'yito shook his head firmly. "The prisoners cannot be converted. For them the war is over. But eventually all will kneel before Yun-Yuuzhan." He waved a signal to the sentries. "Admit the food bearer."

In the largest of the wooden huts, all of which had been built by the prisoners themselves, there was little to do but tend to the sick and dying, pass the daylight hours in conversation or games of chance, or wait ravenously for the next meal to arrive. Harsh coughing or the occasional laugh punctuated a grim, broiling silence. The Yuuzhan Vong hadn't required any of the captives to work in the villip paddies or anywhere else in or outside the yorik coral walls, and thus far only the top-ranking officers had been interrogated.

A diverse lot, most of the prisoners had been taken at Bilbringi, but others had arrived from worlds as distant as Yag'Dhul, Antar 4, and Ord Mantell. They wore the tattered remains of starfighter flight suits and combat uniforms. Their battered and undernourished bodies—whether hairless, coated, sleek, or fleshy—were laminated in sweat and grime. They had Basic in common, and, more important, a deep, abiding hatred for the Yuuzhan Vong.

That they hadn't been killed outright meant that they were being saved for sacrifice—probably on completion of the worldforming of Selvaris, or in anticipation of an imminent battle with Galactic Alliance forces.

"Chow's here!" a human standing at the entrance said.

A rare cheer went up, and everyone capable got to their feet, forming up in an orderly line that spoke to the discipline demonstrated ceaselessly by the captives. Eyes wide, mouths salivating at the mere thought of nourishment, several of the prisoners hurried outdoors to help unload the food wagon and carry everything inside.

A Twi'lek with an amputated lekku studied the short being who had delivered the food, while the two of them were hauling sacks and pots into the hut.

"You're Ryn," the Twi'lek said.

"Hope that doesn't mean you won't touch the food," the Ryn said.

The Twi'lek's orange eyes shone. "Some of the best food I've ever tasted was prepared by Ryn. Years ago I ran with a couple of your people in the Outer Rim—"

"*Ten-shun!*" a human voice rang out.

Everyone in earshot snapped to, as a pair of human officers in uniform approached the hut. The prisoners had abandoned all notions of rank, but if it could be said that anyone was in command, it was these two—Captain Judder Page and Major Pash Cracken.

Hailing from important worlds—Page from Corulag, Cracken from Contruum—they had much in common. Both were scions of influential families, and both had trained at the Imperial Academy before defecting to the Rebel Alliance during the Galactic Civil War. Page, the more unremarkable looking of the pair, had established the Katarn Commandos; and Cracken—still ruggedly handsome and muscular in midlife—Cracken's Flight Group. Both had managed to become as fluent in Yuuzhan Vong as Subaltern S'yito was in Basic.

"Make room for the major and the captain at the front of the line," the same human who had announced them ordered.

The officers deferred. "We'll eat after the rest of you have had your share," Page said for the two of them.

"Please, sirs," several of those on line insisted.

Page and Cracken exchanged resigned looks and nodded. Cracken accepted a wooden bowl that had been fashioned by one of the prisoners, and moved to the head of the food line, where the Ryn was stirring the gruelish contents of a large yorik coral container.

"We appreciate your bringing this," Cracken said. His eyes were pale green, and his flame-red hair was shot through with gray, adding a measure of distinction to his aristocratic features.

The Ryn smiled slyly. Plunging a ladle deep into the gruel, he bent over the pot, encouraging Cracken to do the

same in order to get his bowl filled. When Cracken's left ear was within whisper distance of the Ryn's mouth, the being said, "Ryn one-one-five, out of Vortex."

Cracken hid his surprise. He had learned about the Ryn syndicate only two months earlier, during a briefing on Mon Calamari, which had become Galactic Alliance headquarters following the fall of Coruscant. An extensive spy network, comprised of not only Ryn but also members of other, equally displaced species, the syndicate made use of secret space routes and hyperlanes blazed by the Jedi, to provide safe passage for individuals and covert intelligence.

"You have something for us?" Cracken asked quietly while the Ryn was ladling gruel into the wooden bowl.

The Ryn's forward-facing eyes darted between the container and Cracken's lined face. "Chew carefully, Major," he said, just loud enough to be heard. "Expect the unexpected."

Cracken straightened, whispering the message to Page, who in turn whispered it to the Bith behind him in line. Surreptitiously, the message was relayed again and again, until it had reached the last of the one hundred or so prisoners.

By then Cracken, Page, and some of the others had carried their bowls to a crude table, around which they squatted and began to finger the gruel carefully into their mouths, glancing at one another in understated anticipation.

At the same time, three prisoners moved to the doorway to keep an eye out for guards. The Yuuzhan Vong hadn't installed villips or other listening devices in the huts, but warriors like S'yito, who displayed obvious curiosity about the enemy, had made it a habit to barge in without warning, and conduct sweeps and searches.

A Devaronian hunkered down across the table from Page made a gagging sound. Faking a cough, he gingerly

removed an object from his slash of dangerous mouth, and glanced at it in secret.

Everyone stared at him in expectation.

"Gristle," he said, lifting beady, disappointed eyes. "At least I think that's what it is."

The prisoners went back to eating, the tension mounting as their fingers began to scrape the bottoms of their bowls.

Then Cracken bit down on something that made his molars ache. He brought his left hand to his mouth, and used his tongue to push the object into his cupped hand. The center of attention, he opened his hand briefly, recognizing the object at once. Keeping the thing palmed, he set it on the table and slid it to his left, where, in the blink of an eye, it disappeared under the right hand of Page.

"Holowafer," the captain said softly, without taking a second look. "It'll display only once. We're going to have to be quick about it."

Cracken nodded his chin to the horned Devaronian. "Find Clak'dor, Garban, and the rest of that crew, and bring them here quickest."

The Devaronian stood up and hurried out the doorway.

Page ran his hand over his bearded face. "We're going to need a place to display the data. We can't risk doing it in the open."

Cracken thought for a moment, then turned to the long-bearded Bothan to his right. "Who's the one with the sabacc deck?"

The alien's fur rippled slightly. "That'd be Coruscant."

"Tell him we need him."

The Bothan nodded and made for the doorway. As word spread through the hut, the prisoners began to converse loudly, as cover for what was being said by those who remained at the table. The Ryn banged his ladle against the side of the pot, and several of the prisoners distributed

fruits to the others by tossing them through the air, as if in a game of catch.

"How are things in the yard?" Page asked the lookouts at the doorway.

"Coruscant's coming, sir. Also Clak'dor's bunch."

"The guards?"

"No one's paying any mind."

Coruscant, a tall, blond-haired human, entered grinning and fanning a deck of sabacc cards he'd fashioned from squares of leather. "Did I hear right that someone's interested in a game?"

Page motioned for everyone to form a circle in the center of the hut, and to raise the noise level. The guards had grown accustomed to the boisterous activity that would sometimes erupt during card games, and Page was determined to provide a dose of the real thing. A dozen prisoners broke out in song. The rest conversed jocularly, giving odds and making bets.

The human gambler, three Bith, and a Jenet were passed through the falsely jubilant crowd to the center of the circle, where Page and Cracken were waiting with the holowafer.

Coruscant began to dole out cards.

Highly evolved humanoids, Bith were deep thinkers and skillful artists, with an ability to store and sift through immense amounts of data. The Jenet, in contrast, was short and rodentlike, but possessed of an eidetic memory.

When Page was satisfied that the inner circle was effectively sealed off, he crouched down, as if to join in the game. "We'll get only one chance at this. You sure you can do it?"

The Jenet's muzzle twitched in amusement, and he fixed his red eyes on Page. "That's why you chose us, isn't it?"

Page nodded. "Then let's get to it."

Deftly, Page set the small wafer on the plank floor and activated it with the pressure of his right forefinger. An

inverted cone of blue light projected upward, within which flared a complex mathematical equation Page couldn't begin to comprehend, much less solve or memorize. As quickly as the numbers and symbols appeared, they disappeared.

Then the wafer itself issued a sibilant sound, and liquefied.

He had his mouth open to ask the Bith and the Jenet if they had been successful in committing the equation to memory, when S'yito and three Yuuzhan Vong guards stormed into the hut and shouldered their way to the center of the circle, their coufee daggers unsheathed and their serpentine amphistaffs on high alert, ready to strike or spit venom as needed.

"Cease your activities at once," the subaltern bellowed.

The crowd fanned out slowly and began to quiet down. Coruscant and the ostensible card players moved warily out of striking range of the amphistaffs.

"What's the problem, Subaltern?" Page asked in Yuuzhan Vong.

"Since when do you engage in games of chance at nourishment hour?"

"We're wagering for second helpings."

S'yito glared at him. "You trifle with me, human."

Page shrugged elaborately. "It's my job, S'yito."

The subaltern took a menacing step forward. "Put an end to your game—and your singing ... or we'll remove the parts of you that are responsible for it."

The four Yuuzhan Vong turned and marched from the hut.

"That guy has absolutely no sense of humor," Coruscant said when he felt he could.

Everyone in the vicinity of Page and Cracken looked to the two officers.

"The data has to reach Alliance command," Cracken said.

Page nodded in agreement. "When do we send them out?"

Cracken compressed his lips. "Prayer hour."

TWO

SHORTLY BEFORE ITS public immolation in a fire pit located just outside the prison gates, a silver protocol droid that had belonged briefly to Major Cracken had put the odds of escaping from Selvaris at roughly a million to one. But the droid hadn't known about the Ryn syndicate, or about what the clandestine group had set in motion on the planet, even before the first chunks of yorik coral had been sown.

Cracken, Page, and the others knew something else, as well: that hope flourished in the darkest of places, and that while the Yuuzhan Vong could imprison or kill them, there wasn't a soldier in the camp who wouldn't have risked his or her life to see even one of their number survive to fight another day.

First sunrise was an hour away, and Cracken, Page, the three Bith, and the Jenet were crouched at the entrance to a tunnel the prisoners had excavated with hands, claws, and whatever tools they had been able to fabricate or steal during the excavation of the fire pit, in which several dozen droids had been ritually slagged by the camp's resident priests.

Every prisoner in the hut was awake, and many hadn't slept a wink all night. They watched silently from the flattened fronds and grasses that were their beds, wishing they could voice a personal *good luck* to the four who were about to embark on what seemed a hopeless enterprise. Lookouts had been posted at the doorway. The light was

gauzy, and the air was blessedly cool. Outside the hut, the chitterings and stridulations of jungle life were reaching a fevered crescendo.

"You want to go over any of it?" Cracken asked in a whisper.

"No, sir," the four answered in unison.

Cracken nodded soberly.

"Then may the Force be with all of you," Page said for everyone in the hut.

The cramped entrance to the tunnel was concealed by Cracken's own bed of insect-ridden palm fronds. Below a removable grate, the hand-hewn shaft fell into utter darkness. The secret passageway had been started by the first captives to be imprisoned on Selvaris, and had been enlarged and lengthened over the long months by successive groups of new arrivals. Progress had often been measured in centimeters, as when the diggers had struck a mass of yorik coral that had taken root in the sandy soil. But now the tunnel extended beneath the prison wall and the senalak grasses beyond, to just inside the distant tree line.

His facial fur blackened with charcoal, the gaunt Jenet was the first to worm his way into the hole. When the three Bith had bellied in behind him, the entrance was closed and covered over.

What little light there had been disappeared.

The nominal leader of the would-be escapees, the Jenet had been captured on Bilbringi, during a raid on an enemy installation. His fellow captives knew him as Thorsh, although on his homeworld of Garban a list of his accomplishments and transgressions would have been affixed to the name. Reconnaissance was his specialty, so he was no stranger to darkness or tight spots, having infiltrated many a Yuuzhan Vong warren and grashal on Duro, Gyndine, and other worlds. The Selvaris tunnel felt comfortably familiar. The Bith had it harder because of

their size, but they were a well-coordinated species, with memory and olfactory abilities that rivaled Thorsh's own.

Indeterminate minutes of muted crawling brought them to the first of a series of confined right-angle turns, where the tunnelers had been forced to detour around an amorphous mass of yorik coral. To Thorsh the detour meant that the team was directly under the prison wall itself. Now it was just a matter of negotiating the long stretch beneath the senalaks the Yuuzhan Vong had cultivated outside the perimeter.

Thorsh knew better than to relax, but his continued vigilance hardly mattered.

In the space of a local week, senalak roots had penetrated the roof of the poorly braced tunnel, and the convoluted roots were every bit as barbed as the strands released by the knee-high stalks themselves.

For meters at a stretch there was simply no avoiding them.

The barbs shredded the thin garments the four had been wearing when captured, and left deep, bleeding furrows in the flesh of their backs.

Thorsh muttered a curse at each encounter, but the Bith—ever careful about displaying emotion—endured the pain in silence.

The brutal crawl ended where the tunnel sloped upward at the far edge of the senalak field. Shortly the team emerged inside the buttressed base of an enormous hardwood. The thick-trunked tree bore a striking resemblance to the gnarl-trees native to Dagobah, but was in fact a different species altogether. One hundred meters away, the prison wall glowed softly green with bioluminescence. Two sleepy guards occupied the closest watchtower, their amphistaffs stiff as spears, and a third could be glimpsed in the adjacent tower. Those warriors who weren't elsewhere within the walls of the compound were attending prayer services at the temple.

The bold incantations of the latter wafted through the jungle, counterpoint to the riotous calls of birds and insects. Strands of mist meandered through the treetops like apparitions.

One of the Bith elbowed his way alongside Thorsh, and aimed his slender forefinger to the west. "There."

Thorsh sniffed repeatedly and nodded. "There."

Deeper into the trees, ankle-high mud gave way to swamp, and it wasn't long before the four were wading waist-deep through black water. They made scarcely half a kilometer before an alarm sounded. Neither the howling of a siren nor the raucous bleating of a starship's klaxon, the alarm took the form of a prolonged and intensifying drone that arrived from all directions.

"Sentinel beetles," one of the Bith said in a grating voice.

Small creatures that resembled turfhoppers, sentinels reacted to intruders or danger with rapid beating of their serrated wings. The species was not native to Selvaris, or indeed to any other world in the galaxy.

Thorsh's clawed feet dug into the thick organic muck, and he quickened his pace, waving for the Bith to follow him.

"Hurry!"

The need for caution was behind them. They flailed through the dark, scum-covered water, stumbling forward, slamming into stilt roots, their uniforms snagging on quilled branches and sinuous, coarse-barked lianas. The droning of the sentinel beetles modulated to a deafening buzz, and the harnessed beams of lambent crystal illuminators played and crisscrossed overhead.

From the direction of the prison came the ferocious barking of bissops, the Yuuzhan Vong lizard-hounds. And something had taken to the air: a coralskipper gunship, or one of the seabirdlike fliers known as a tsik vai.