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Star Wars: Dark Nest I –  
The Joiner King

Troy Denning

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## **About the Book**

Seven years after their daring assault deep inside enemy territory (*Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Star by Star*), Jaina Solo and her fellow survivors answer a mysterious call for help and vanish into the Unknown Regions.

Soon, the Jedi Council learns that the group has undertaken a mission that will drive a wedge between the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances and its skittish ally, the Chiss Ascendancy. The investigation leads Luke Skywalker and his companions (Mara Jade Skywalker and Han and Leia Solo) on a perilous journey into the uncharted void that lies between what is right and what is wrong.

## About the Author

Troy Denning is the New York Times bestselling author of *Star Wars: Tatooine Ghost* and *Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Star by Star*, as well as *Waterdeep* (under the pseudonym Richard Awlinson), *Pages of Pain*, *Beyond the High Road*, *The Summoning*, and many other novels. A former game designer and editor, he lives in southern Wisconsin with his wife, Andria.

Also by Troy Denning

WATERDEEP  
DRAGONWALL  
THE PARCHED SEA  
THE VERDANT PASSAGE  
THE CRIMSON LEGION  
THE AMBER ENCHANTRESS  
THE OBSIDIAN ORACLE  
THE CERULEAN STORM  
THE OGRE'S PACT  
THE GIANT AMONG US  
THE TITAN OF TWILIGHT  
THE VEILED DRAGON  
PAGES OF PAIN  
CRUCIBLE: THE TRIAL OF CYRIC THE MAD  
THE OATH OF STONEKEEP  
FACES OF DECEPTION  
BEYOND THE HIGH ROAD  
DEATH OF THE DRAGON (with Ed Greenwood)  
THE SUMMONING  
THE SIEGE  
THE SORCERER

*STAR WARS: THE NEW JEDI ORDER: STAR BY STAR*  
*STAR WARS: TATOOINE GHOST*  
*STAR WARS: DARK NEST I: THE JOINER KING*  
*STAR WARS: THE UNSEEN QUEEN*  
*STAR WARS: DARK NEST III: THE SWARM WAR*  
*STAR WARS: LEGACY OF THE FORCE III: TEMPEST*  
*STAR WARS: LEGACY OF THE FORCE IX: INVINCIBLE*  
*STAR WARS: LEGACY OF THE FORCE VI: INFERNO*

# STAR WARS™

DARK NEST I  
THE  
JOINER KING

TROY DENNING



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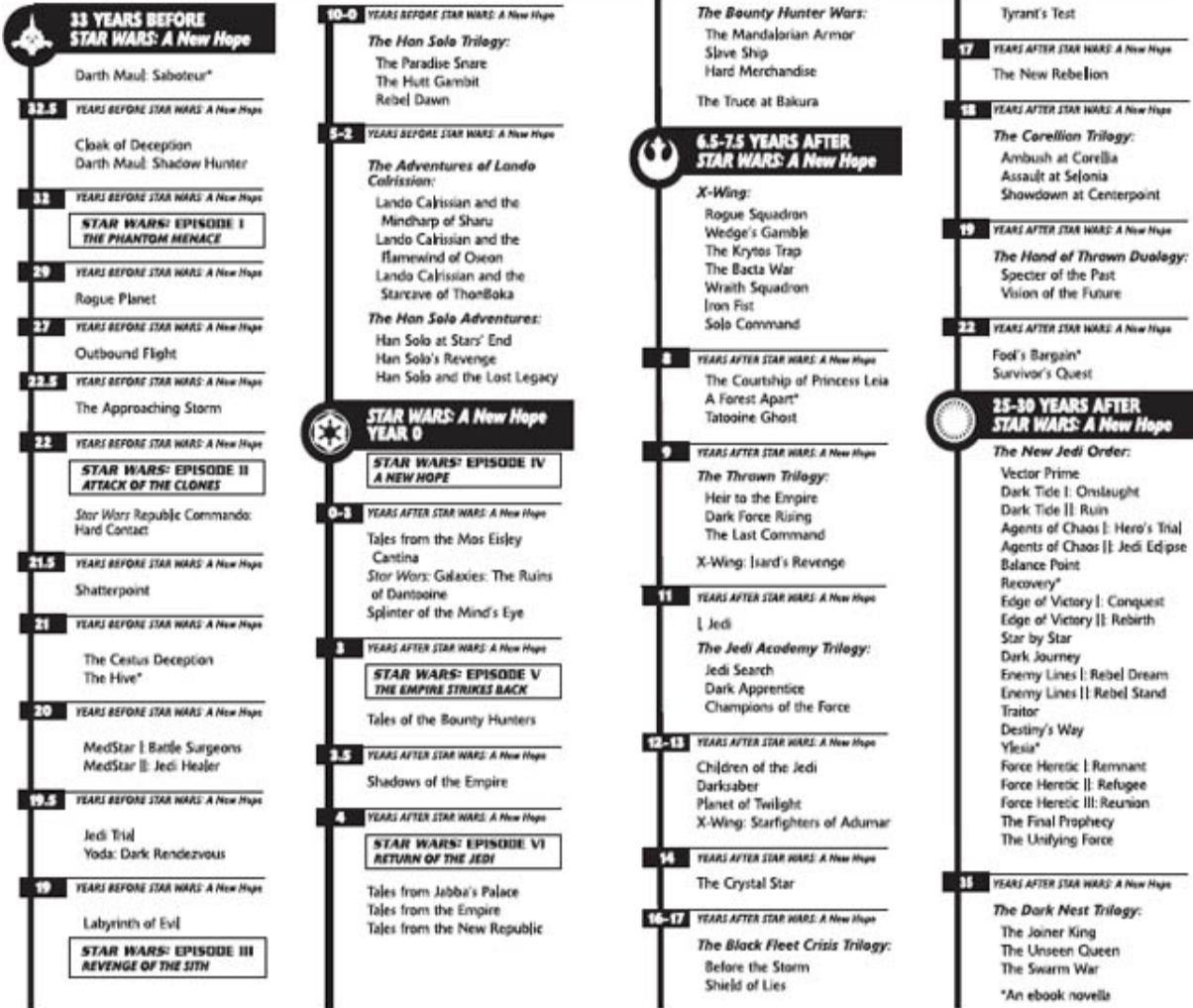
For Curtis Smith  
Who invited me to play in the Galaxy Far, Far Away  
A long, long time ago



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Many people contributed to this book in ways large and small. Thanks are especially due to: Andria Hayday, for advice, encouragement, critiques, and much more; James Luceno for being such a fun target for idea-bouncing; Enrique Guerrero for his suggestions and our many useful Chiss discussions; Shelly Shapiro and all the people at Del Rey who make this so much fun, particularly Keith Clayton and Colleen Lindsay; Sue Rostoni and the wonderful people at Lucasfilm, particularly Howard Roffman, Amy Gary, Leland Chee, and Pablo Hidalgo. And, of course, to George Lucas for opening his galaxy to the rest of us.

## THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

lema Rar; Jedi Knight (female Twi'lek)  
en Skywalker; child (male human)  
-3PO; protocol droid  
al Omas; Galactic Alliance Chief-of-State (male human)  
ilghal; Jedi Master (female Mon Calamari)  
orog; mastermind (Killik)  
an Solo; captain, *Millennium Falcon* (male human)  
icen Solo; Jedi Knight (male human)  
e Juun; captain, *XR808g* (male Sullustan)  
gged Fel; commander, Chiss task force (male human)  
ina Solo; Jedi Knight (female human)  
eia Organa Solo; copilot, *Millennium Falcon* (female human)  
owbacca; Jedi Knight (male Wookiee)  
uke Skywalker; Jedi Master (male human)  
lara Jade Skywalker; Jedi Master (female human)  
2-D2; astromech droid  
aynar Thul; crash survivor (male human)  
aba Sebatyne; Jedi Master (female Barabel)  
ahiri Veila; Jedi Knight (female human)  
arfang; copilot, *XR808g* (male Ewok)  
ekli; Jedi Knight (female Chadra-fan)  
enel Ka; Queen Mother (female human)  
esar Sebatyne; Jedi Knight (male Barabel)  
elk; crash survivor (male human)  
ekk; Jedi Knight (male human)

## PROLOGUE

The feeling had returned, a sense of desperation that burned in the Force like a faraway star, clear and bright and beckoning. Jaina Solo found her gaze straying through the justice ship viewport, out into the blue-flecked void that hung behind the slowly spinning cylinder of Detention Center *Maxsec Eight*. As before, the sensation came from the direction of the Unknown Regions, a call for ... what? And from whom? The touch was too wispy to tell. It always was.

“Jedi Solo?” The inquisitor stepped closer to the witness rail. “Shall I repeat the question?”

A tall, stiff woman with a shaved head and deep lines at the corners of her gray eyes, Athadar Gyad had the brusque demeanor of a retired military officer. It was a common affectation among petty Reconstruction Authority bureaucrats, even when the only notation in their service record was a decades-old planetary conscription number.

“When you boarded the *Night Lady* with Jedi Lowbacca and—”

“Sorry, Inquisitor. I did hear the question.” Jaina shifted her gaze to the accused, a massive Yaka with an expressionless, near-human face. He wore an engraved Ithorian skull on the lateral cover of his cybernetic implant. “Redstar’s crew tried to turn us away.”

A glint of impatience showed in Gyad’s gray eyes. “They attacked you with blasters, isn’t that correct?”

“Right.”

“And it was necessary to defend yourselves with your lightsabers?”

“Right again.”

Gyad remained silent, tacitly inviting her witness to elaborate on the battle. But Jaina was more interested in the sense of desperation she felt in the Force. It was growing stronger by the moment, more urgent and frightened.

“Jedi Solo?” Gyad stepped in front of Jaina, blocking her view out of the inquest salon. “Please direct your attention to me.”

Jaina fixed the woman with an icy stare. “I thought I had answered your question.”

Gyad drew back almost imperceptibly, but continued her examination as though there had been no resentment in Jaina’s voice. “What were you wearing at the time?”

“Our cloaks,” Jaina said.

“Your Jedi cloaks?”

“They’re just cloaks.” Jaina had stood at enough witness rails in the last few years to know that the inquisitor was trying to bolster a weak case with the mystique of her Jedi witnesses—a sure sign that Gyad did not understand, or respect, the Jedi role in the galaxy. “Jedi don’t wear uniforms.”

“Surely, you can’t mean to suggest that a criminal of Redstar’s intelligence failed to recognize—” Gyad paused to reconsider her phrasing. Tribunal inquisitors were supposed to be impartial investigators, though in practice most limited their efforts to presenting enough evidence to lock away the accused. “Jedi Solo, do you mean to suggest the crew could have legitimately believed you to be pirates?”

“I don’t know what they believed,” Jaina said.

Gyad narrowed her eyes and studied Jaina in silence. Despite Luke Skywalker’s advice after the war to avoid involving the Jedi in the mundane concerns of the new

government, the challenge of rebuilding the galaxy obliged much of the order to do just that. There were just too many critical missions that only a Jedi could perform, with too many dire consequences for the Galactic Alliance, and most Reconstruction Authority bureaucrats had come to view the Jedi order as little more than an elite branch of interstellar police.

Finally, Jaina explained, "I was too busy fighting to probe their thoughts."

Gyad let out a theatrical sigh. "Jedi Solo, isn't it true that your father once made his living as a smuggler?"

"That was a little before my time, Inquisitor." Jaina's retort drew a hiss of laughter from the spectator area, where two of her fellow Jedi Knights, Tesar Sebatyne and Lowbacca, sat waiting for her to finish. "And what would that have to do with the price of spice on Nal Hutta?"

Gyad turned to the panel of magistrates. "Will you please instruct the witness to answer—"

"Everyone knows the answer," Jaina interrupted. "It's taught in half the history classes in the galaxy."

"Of course it is." The inquisitor's voice grew artificially compassionate, and she pointed to the Yaka captive. "Would it be possible that you identify with the accused? That you are reluctant to testify against a criminal because of your father's own ambivalent relationship with the law?"

"No." Jaina found herself squeezing the witness rail as though she meant to crimp the cold metal. "In the last five standard years, I've captured thirty-seven warlords and broken more than a hundred smuggling—"

Suddenly the sense of desperation grew more tangible in the Force, more clear and familiar. Jaina's gaze turned back to the viewport, and she did not finish her answer.

"Wait."

Tahiri Veila raised a hand, and the two Yuuzhan Vong standing before her fell silent. The two groups of spectators

watched her expectantly, but she remained quiet and stared into Zonama Sekot's blue sky. Over the last few weeks, she had begun to sense a distant foreboding in the Force, a slowly building dread, and now that feeling had developed into something more ... into anguish and panic and despair.

"*Jeedai Veila?*" asked the smaller of the speakers. With one blind eye and a lumpy, lopsided face, he was one of the Extolled, a disfigured underclass once known as the Shamed Ones. They had earned their new name by rising up against their upper-caste oppressors to help end the war that had nearly destroyed both the Yuuzhan Vong and the civilized galaxy. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes." Tahiri forced her attention back to the group. Their blue-rimmed eyes and leathery faces seemed more familiar to her than the reflection of the blond-haired women she saw in the mirror every morning—but that was hardly a surprise, considering what had happened to her during the war. She was as much Yuuzhan Vong now as she was human, at least in mind and spirit. "But it doesn't have anything to do with this. Go on."

The Extolled One—Bava, she remembered—bowed deeply, intentionally lowering himself to her height.

"As I was saying, *Jeedai Veila*, four times this week we have caught Sal Ghaton and his warriors stealing from our gardens."

Tahiri cocked her brow. "*Your* gardens, Bava?" La'okio was supposed to be a communal village, an experiment where the contentious castes of Yuuzhan Vong society would learn to work together—and to trust each other. "I thought the gardens belonged to everyone."

"We have decided that every grashal is also allowed to plant an extra plot for itself." Bava sneered in Ghaton's direction, then continued, "But the warriors are too lazy to work their own ground. They expect us to do it for them."

“We cannot do it for ourselves!” Ghator objected. Half a meter taller than Tahiri and nearly three times her mass, he still bore the tattoos and ritual scarrings of a former subaltern. “We are cursed by the gods. Nothing we plant will grow.”

Tahiri fought back a sigh. “Don’t tell me you’ve separated by caste again. You’re supposed to be living in mixed groups.”

As Tahiri spoke, she felt the familiar touch of a Chadra-Fan searching for her in the Force, wanting to know if she also sensed the growing strength of the *feeling*. She opened herself to the contact and focused her thoughts on the mysterious fear. Tekli was not particularly strong in the Force, and what Tahiri perceived as a clarion call would seem barely a whisper to the little Chadra-Fan. Neither of them bothered to reach out for their companion Danni Quee; Force-sensitive though she might be, so far Danni had proven numb to the sensation.

“Living in mixed grashals is unclean,” Ghator said, drawing Tahiri’s attention back to the problems in La’okio. “Warriors cannot be asked to sleep on the same dirt as Shamed Ones.”

“Shamed Ones!” Bava said. “We are Extolled. We are the ones who exposed Shimrra’s heresy, while you warriors led us all to ruin.”

The blue rim around Ghator’s eyes grew wider and darker. “Beware your tongue, raal, lest its poison strike you dead.”

“There is no poison in truth.” Bava sneaked a glance in Tahiri’s direction, then sneered, “You are the Shamed Ones now!”

Ghator’s hand sent Bava tumbling across the rugrass so swiftly that Tahiri doubted she could have intercepted it had she wanted to, and she did not want to. The Yuuzhan Vong would always have their own way of working out



problems—ways that Danni Quee and Tekli and perhaps even Zonama Sekot itself would never fully comprehend.

Bava stopped rolling and turned his good eye in Tahiri's direction. She returned his gaze and did nothing. Having risen from their outcast status through their efforts to end the war, the Extolled Ones were proving eager to find another caste to take their place. Tahiri thought it might be good to remind them of the consequences of such behavior. Besides, the *feeling* was growing stronger and clearer; she had the sense that it was coming from someone she knew, someone who had been trying to reach her—and Tekli—for a very long time.

*Come fast ...* The voice arose inside Tahiri's mind, clear and distinct and eerily familiar. *Come now.*

The words seemed to fade even as Jacen Solo perceived them, sinking below the threshold of awareness and vanishing into the boggy underlayers of his mind. Yet the message remained, the conviction that the time had come to answer the call he had been feeling over the last few weeks. He unfolded his legs—he was sitting cross-legged in the air—and lowered his feet to the floor of the meditation circle. A chain of soft pops sounded as he crushed the tiny blada vines that spilled out of the seams between the larstone paving blocks.

"I'm sorry, Akanah. I must go."

Akanah answered without opening her eyes. "If you are sorry, Jacen, you must *not* go." A lithe woman with an olive complexion and dark hair, she appeared closer to Jacen's age than her own five standard decades. She sat floating in the center of the meditation circle, surrounded by novices who were trying to imitate her with varying degrees of success. "Sorrow is a sign that you have not given yourself to the Current."

Jacen considered this, then dipped his head in acknowledgment. "Then I'm not sorry." The call continued

in the Force, a needle-sharp pang that pulled at Jacen deep inside his chest. "And I must go."

Now Akanah opened her eyes. "What of your training?"

"I'm grateful for what you have shown me so far." Jacen turned to leave. "I'll continue when I return."

"No." As Akanah spoke, the meditation circle exit vanished behind a vine-strewn wall. "I cannot permit that."

Jacen stopped and turned to face her. "Illusions aren't necessary. If you don't wish me to return, I won't."

"What I don't wish is for you to leave." Akanah floated over to him and lowered her own feet. She was so immersed in the White Current that even the delicate blada leaves did not pop beneath her weight. "It's too soon. You're not ready."

Jacen forced himself to remain patient. After all, he was the one who had sought out the Fallanassi. "I have completed many trainings, Akanah. What I have learned is that every order believes *its* way is the only way."

"I am not speaking of monks and witches, Jacen Solo. I am speaking of you." Her dark eyes caught his gaze. "Your feelings on this are unclear. Someone calls, and you go without knowing why."

"Then you feel it, too?"

"No, Jacen. You are as clumsy in the Current as your uncle. Your feelings leave ripples, and ripples can be read. Does the call come from your brother?"

"No. Anakin died in the war." It had been eight years, and Jacen could finally speak those words with some measure of acceptance, with some recognition of the purpose his brother's death had served in the Force. It had been the turning point in the war, when the Jedi finally learned how to fight the Yuuzhan Vong—and not become monsters themselves. "I've told you that."

"Yes, but is it *him*?" Akanah stepped closer to Jacen, and his nostrils filled with the scent of the waha plants that grew in the temple bathing pool. "After someone sinks

beneath the Current, a circle of ripples remains behind. Perhaps it is the ripples you sense.”

“That does not make what I feel any less real,” Jacen countered. “*Sometimes, the effect is all we can know of the cause.*”

“Do you remember my words only so you can use them to spar with me?” Akanah’s hand came up as though to bat him across the ear, and his own hand reflexively rose to block. She shook her head in disgust. “You are a dreadful student, Jacen Solo. You hear, but you do not learn.”

It was a rebuke to which Jacen had grown accustomed during his five-year search for the true nature of the Force. The Jensaarai, the Aing-Tii, even the Witches of Dathomir had all said similar things to him—usually when his questions about their view of the Force grew too probing. But Akanah had more reason than the others to be disappointed in him. Striking another would be anathema to any Adept of the White Current. All Akanah had done was lift her hand; it had been Jacen who interpreted the action as an attack.

Jacen inclined his head. “I learn, but sometimes slowly.” He was thinking of the two apparitions he had already seen of his dead brother, the first when a cavern beast on Yuuzhan’tar used one to lure him into its throat, the second on Zonama, when Sekot had taken Anakin’s form while they talked. “You think I’m giving form to this call, that I impose my own meaning on the ripples I feel.”

“What *I* think is not important,” Akanah said. “Still yourself, Jacen, and see what is really in the Current.”

Jacen closed his eyes and opened himself to the White Current in much the same way he would have opened himself to the Force. Akanah and the other Adepts taught that the Current and the Force were separate things, and that was true—but only in the sense that any current was different from the ocean in which it flowed. In their essential wholeness, they were each other.

Jacen performed a quieting exercise he had learned from the Theran Listeners, then focused on the call. It was still there, a cry so sharp it hurt, in a voice he remembered and could not identify ... *come ... help ...* a male voice, but one he recognized as not belonging to his brother.

And there was something else, too, a familiar presence that Jacen *did* know, not sending the call, but reaching out along with it. Jaina.

Jacen opened his eyes. "It's not Anakin ... or his ripples."  
"You're certain?"

Jacen nodded. "Jaina senses it, too." That was what his sister was trying to tell him, he knew. Their twin bond had always been strong, and it had only grown stronger during his wanderings. "I think she intends to answer it."

Akanah looked doubtful. "I feel nothing."

"*You* aren't her twin." Jacen turned and stepped through the wall-illusion hiding the exit, only to find Akanah—or the illusion of Akanah—blocking his way. "Please ask the Pydyrians to bring my ship down from orbit. I'd like to leave as soon as possible."

"I am sorry, but no." Akanah's eyes caught his gaze again and held it almost physically. "You have the same power I once sensed in your uncle Luke, but without the light. You must not leave before you have found some."

Jacen was stung by her harsh assessment, but hardly surprised. The war against the Yuuzhan Vong had brought the Jedi a deeper understanding of the Force—one that no longer saw light and dark as opposing sides—and he had known before he came that the Fallanassi might find this new view disturbing. That was why he had hid it from them ... or thought he had.

"I'm sorry you disapprove," Jacen said. "But I no longer view the Force in terms of light and dark. It embraces more than that."

"Yes, we have heard about this 'new' knowledge of the Jedi." Akanah's tone was scornful. "And it troubles my heart

to see that their folly now rivals their arrogance.”

“Folly?” Jacen did not want to argue, but—being one of the first advocates of the new understanding—he felt compelled to defend his views. “That ‘folly’ helped us win the war.”

“At what price, Jacen?” Akanah’s voice remained gentle. “If the Jedi no longer look to the light, how can they serve it?”

“Jedi serve the Force,” Jacen said. “The Force encompasses both light and dark.”

“So now you are beyond light and dark?” Akanah asked. “Beyond good and evil?”

“I’m no longer an active Jedi Knight,” Jacen answered, “but yes.”

“And you do not understand the folly in that?” As Akanah spoke, her gaze seemed to grow deeper and darker. “The arrogance?”

What Jacen understood was that the Fallanassi had a rather narrow and rigid view of morality, but he did not say so. The call was continuing to pull at him inside, urging him to be on his way, and the last thing he wanted to do now was waste time in a debate that would change no one’s mind.

“The Jedi serve only themselves,” Akanah continued. “They are pompous enough to believe they can use the Force instead of submitting to it, and in this pride they have caused more suffering than they have prevented. With no light to guide you, Jacen, and the power I sense in you, I fear you will cause even more.”

The frank words struck Jacen like a blow, less because of their harshness than because of the genuine concern he sensed behind them. Akanah truly feared for him, truly feared that he would become an even greater monster than had his grandfather, Darth Vader.

“Akanah, I appreciate your concern.” Jacen reached for her hands and found himself holding only empty air. He

resisted the temptation to find her real body in the Force; Adepts of the White Current considered such acts intrusions just short of violence. "But I won't find my light here. I have to go."

# ONE

EVENING HAD COME to Unity Green, and the first hawk-bats were already out, dipping down to pluck yammal-jells and coufee eels from the rolling whitecaps on Liberation Lake. On the far shore, the yorik coral bluffs that marked the edge of the park had grown purple and shadowed. Beyond them, the durasteel skeletons of the rising skytowers gleamed crimson in the setting sun. The planet remained as much Yuuzhan'tar as Coruscant, and in many ways that would never change. But it was at peace. For the first time in Luke Skywalker's life, the galaxy was truly not at war—and that counted for everything.

There were still problems, of course. There always would be, and today several senior Masters were struggling to address the chaos that Jaina and four other young Jedi Knights had caused by abruptly abandoning their duties and departing for the Unknown Regions.

"Lowbacca was the only one who completely understood the biomechanics of the *Maledoth*," Corran Horn was saying in his throaty voice. "So, as you can see, the Ramoan relocation project has ground to a complete standstill."

Luke reluctantly shifted his gaze from the viewport to the council room's speaking circle, where Corran stood using a laser-wand to highlight the holographic projection of a huge Yuuzhan Vong slaveship. The Jedi order had been hoping to use the vessel to evacuate the population of a dying world.

Corran flicked the laserwand, and the holograph switched to the image of blast-pocked asteroid miner. "The

situation in the Maltorian mining belt is deteriorating as well. Without Zekk there to lead the hunt, Three-Eye's pirates have the run of the system. Raw material shipments have fallen by fifty percent, and RePlanetHab is trying to buy them off."

"That's one circuit we need to kill now," Mara said. Seated in the chair next to Luke's, she was—as usual—the first to cut to the heart of the matter. That was one of the things Luke most admired about her; in a time when the smallest decision carried ramifications that even a Columi dejarik champion could not predict, his wife's instincts remained steady and true. "If rehab conglomerates start buying off pirates, we'll have marauders popping up all over the Core."

The other Masters voiced their agreement.

"Fine," Corran said. "Where do we find a replacement for Zekk?"

No one rushed to answer. The Jedi were spread too thin already, with most Jedi Knights—and even some apprentices—already assigned three tasks. And as the ranks of the greedy and the selfish grew ever more adept at manipulating the Galactic Alliance Senate, the situation seemed increasingly desperate.

Finally, Kyp Durrón said, "The Solos should be finished on Borao soon." Dressed in threadbare cape and tunic, wearing his brown hair long and shaggy, Kyp looked as though he had just come in from a long mission. He always looked like that. "Maybe RePlanetHab will be patient if they know they're the Solos' next assignment."

The silence this time was even longer than the last. Strictly speaking, the Solos were not available for assignments. Han wasn't even a Jedi, and Leia's status was completely informal. The council just kept asking them to help out, they just kept doing it, and every Master in the room knew the order had been exploiting the Solos' selfless natures for far too long.



“Someone else needs to contact them,” Mara finally said. “It’s getting so bad that Leia cringes whenever she sees Luke’s face on the holocomm.”

“I can do it,” Kyp offered. “I’m used to making Leia cringe.”

“That takes care of Maltoria,” Corran said. “Now, what about the Bothan ar’krai? Alema’s last report suggested that Reh’mwa and his fundamentalists had a line on Zonama Sekot’s location. They were provisioning the *Avengeance* for a scouting mission into the Unknown Regions.”

A subtle eddy in the Force drew Luke’s attention toward the entrance. He raised a hand to stop the discussion.

“Excuse me.” He turned toward the foyer and immersed his mind completely in the Force until he recognized one of the presences coming toward them, then said, “Perhaps we should continue this later. We don’t want Chief Omas to know how concerned we are about Jaina’s departure.”

“We don’t?”

“No.” Luke rose and started toward the door. “Especially not when he’s bringing Chiss.”

Luke stopped in the foyer area, where a simple wooden bench and two empty stone vases sat opposite the door, arranged to subtly calm visitors and make them feel welcome. Barely a moment passed before the door hissed open and a young apprentice came to a surprised halt directly in front of Luke.

“M-master S-skywalker!” the young Rodian stammered. He turned and raised a spindly-fingered hand toward the door. “Chief Omas and—”

“I know, Twool. Thank you.”

Luke nudged the youth back into the corridor with the other apprentice, then stepped into the doorway and found himself looking at Chief of State Cal Omas and a trio of blue-skinned Chiss. With a wrinkled face and sagging jowls, the Chiss in front was probably the oldest Luke had ever

seen. The two in the rear were clearly bodyguards—tall, strong, alert, and dressed in the black uniforms of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet.

“Chief Omas,” Luke said. The strains of Omas’s office showed in his hollow cheeks and ashen complexion. “Welcome.”

“You’re expecting us.” Omas cast a pointed glance into the conference room. “Good.”

Luke ignored the hint and bowed to the elderly Chiss.

“And Aristocra ...” It took a moment for the name to rise to the top of Omas’s mind, where Luke could sense it without being overly intrusive. “Mitt’swe’kleoni. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

The Chiss’s red eyes narrowed to crimson lines. “Very impressive. It’s not easy to gather identity files on Chiss aristocracy.”

“We haven’t.” Luke smiled and continued to block the door. “You and your bodyguards are welcome to come inside, once you have removed your hidden weapons.”

Omas cringed visibly, but Luke did not move. Even had he not perceived the concealed weapons through the Force, he still would have made the request. These *were* Chiss, after all.

“As you know,” Luke continued, “the only weapons allowed in the Jedi Temple are lightsabers.”

Mitt’swe’kleoni smiled like an old man caught sipping something against his doctor’s orders, then pulled a small hold-out blaster from his boot and passed it to a bodyguard.

“My bodyguards will wait in the corridor,” he said. “I can see they wouldn’t be of much use in a room full of Jedi.”

“There would be no need.” Luke stepped aside and waved the two statesmen toward the conference circle. “Please join us.”

As they crossed the room, Mitt’swe’kleoni kept sneaking glances at its appointments—the automated service kitchen, the small forest of rare trebala plants, the

flowform chairs—and the arrogance vanished from his demeanor. It was not a reaction Luke liked to see. The new Temple had been a gift from the Galactic Alliance, pressed on the Jedi when—in a desperate attempt to manufacture a symbol of progress—the faltering Reconstruction Authority had moved the seat of government back to Coruscant. In most regards, the relocation had failed as spectacularly as it had deserved. But the Temple, a stone-and-transparisteel pyramid designed to harmonize with the new face of postwar Coruscant, never failed to impress with its regal scale and Rebirth architecture. It also served as a constant reminder to Luke of his greatest fear, that the Jedi would start to perceive themselves through the eyes of others and become little more than the guardians of a grateful Galactic Alliance.

At the conference area, the Jedi Masters rose to greet their guests.

“Everyone knows Chief Omas, I think.” Luke motioned Omas into a chair, then took Mitt’swe’kleoni by the elbow and guided him into the sunken speaking circle. “This is Aristocra Mitt’swe’kleoni from the Chiss empire.”

“Please use my core name, Tswek,” the Aristocra instructed. “It will be much easier for you to pronounce correctly.”

“Of course,” Luke said, continuing to look at the council. “Tswek has some disturbing news for us, I believe.”

Tswek’s wrinkled brow rose, but he no longer seemed surprised by Luke’s “intuition.” “Then you know the purpose of my visit?”

“We can sense your apprehension through the Force,” Luke said, avoiding a direct answer. “I assume it concerns our Jedi in the Unknown Regions.”

“Indeed it does,” he said. “The Chiss Ascendancy requires an explanation.”

“An explanation?” Corran was not quite able to conceal his indignation. “Of what?”

Tswek pointedly ignored Corran and continued to stare at Luke.

"The Jedi have many voices, Aristocra," Luke said. "But we speak as one."

Tswek considered this a moment, then nodded. "Very well." He turned to Corran. "We demand an explanation of your actions, of course. What happens on our frontier is no concern of yours."

Despite the wave of confusion and doubt that rippled through the Force, the Jedi Masters remained outwardly composed.

"The *Chisz* frontier, Aristocra?" Saba Sebatyne, one of the newest Jedi Masters, asked.

"Of course." Tswek turned to the Barabel, his brow furrowed in thought. "You don't know what your Jedi Knights have been doing, do you?"

"All of our Jedi are well trained," Luke said to Tswek. "And the five under discussion are very experienced. We're confident they have good reason for any action they've undertaken."

A glint of suspicion showed in Tswek's crimson eyes. "So far, we have identified *seven* Jedi." He turned to Omas. "It appears I have no business here after all. Obviously, the Jedi involved in this matter are acting on their own."

"Involved in *what* matter?" Kyp asked.

"That is of no concern to the Galactic Alliance," Tswek said. He bowed to the council at large. "My apologies for taking so much of your time."

"No apologies are necessary," Luke said. He considered dropping the name of Chaf'orm'bintrani, an Aristocra he and Mara had met on a mission some years earlier, but it was impossible to know how this would be received. Chiss politics were as volatile as they were secretive, and for all Luke knew Formbi's had been one of the five ruling families that had mysteriously disappeared while the rest of the

galaxy fought the Yuuzhan Vong. "Anything in which our Jedi Knights involve themselves concerns this council."

"Then I suggest you do a better job supervising them in the future," Tswek said. When Luke did not step out of his way, he turned to Omas. "I'm quite finished here, Chief."

"Of course." Omas shot Luke a look imploring him to stand aside, then said, "An escort will meet you at the Temple entrance. I believe I need to have a word with these Jedi."

"In that case, I'll thank you for your hospitality now." Tswek bowed to the Chief, then started for the door. "I'll be returning to the Ascendancy within the hour."

Omas waited until the Aristocra was gone, then scowled at Luke. "Well?"

Luke spread his hands. "At this point, Chief Omas, you know more than we do."

"I was afraid of that," Omas growled. "Apparently, a team of Jedi have involved themselves in a border dispute with the Chiss."

"How can that be?" Mara asked. Luke knew that she meant the question literally. Before departing, Jaina had sent the council a set of destination coordinates that she and the others had calculated by triangulating the direction from which the mysterious call had come. An astronomical reconnaissance had revealed not even a star in the area, and certainly no indication that the coordinates would be of interest to the Chiss. "Their destination was over a hundred light-years from Ascendancy space."

"Then our Jedi *are* out there," Omas said. "What in the blazes for? We can't spare *one* Jedi at the moment, much less seven."

Mara's green eyes looked ready to loose a stream of blaster bolts. "*Our* Jedi, Chief Omas?"

"Forgive me." The Chief's voice was more placating than apologetic; Luke knew that, in his heart, Omas considered

the Jedi as much servants of the Galactic Alliance as he was. "I didn't mean to imply anything."

"Of course not," Mara said, in a tone that suggested he had better be serious. She turned to the rest of the council. "Mitt'swe'kleoni said *seven* Jedi. What do we make of that?"

"This one only countz five." Saba lifted her hand and began to raise her taloned fingers. "Jaina, Alema, Zekk, Lowbacca, and Tesar."

Kyp added two fingers. "Tekli and Tahiri?"

Omas frowned. "How could you know that? I thought they were with Zonama Sekot in the Unknown Regions."

"They're supposed to be," Corran said. "But, like the others, they're also Myrkr survivors."

"I don't understand," Omas said. "What does this have to do with the Myrkr mission?"

"I wish we knew," Luke said. Undertaken in the middle of the war with the Yuuzhan Vong, the Myrkr mission had been as costly as it had been successful. Anakin Solo and his strike team had destroyed the enemy's Jedi-killing voxyn. But six young Jedi Knights had died in the process—including Anakin himself—and another was missing and presumed lost. "All I can tell you is that for several weeks, Jaina and the other survivors of that mission reported feeling a 'call' from the Unknown Regions. On the day they left, that call became a cry for help."

"And since we know Tenel Ka is still on Hapes," Mara explained, "it seems likely the extra Jedi are Tekli and Tahiri."

Nobody suggested that Jaina's brother, Jacen, might be one of the extras. The last anyone had heard, he had been somewhere on the far side of the galaxy, sequestered with the Fallanassi.

"What *about* Zonama Sekot?" Omas asked. Zonama Sekot was the living planet that had agreed to serve as