



**STAR
WARS**™
DAWN OF THE JEDI

INTO THE VOID

TIM LEBBON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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ABOUT THE BOOK

A stand-alone tie-in to the successful comic book series, *Star Wars: Dawn of the Jedi*, written by fantasy novelist, Tim Lebbon.

Taking place thousands of years before the time of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. On the remote world Tython ancient philosophers and scientists share their mystical knowledge and study the ways of the Force. They establish the order of the Je'daii - which, in years to come, will become the Jedi. But first these visitors from so many different planets must colonize a dangerous new homeworld and surmount societal conflicts as the burgeoning Rakatan Empire prepares to conquer the known galaxy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TIM LEBBON is a *New York Times* bestselling writer from South Wales. He's had almost thirty novels published to date, as well as dozens of novellas and hundreds of short stories. His most recent releases include *Coldbrook* from Arrow/Hammer, *London Eye* (book one of the *Toxic City* trilogy) from Pyr in the United States, *Nothing as It Seems* from PS Publishing, and *The Heretic Land* from Orbit, as well as The Secret Journeys of Jack London series (co-authored with Christopher Golden), *Echo City*, and *The Cabin in the Woods* novelization. Future novels include *The Silence* (Titan). He has won four British Fantasy Awards, a Bram Stoker Award, and a Scribe Award, and has been a finalist for World Fantasy, International Horror Guild, and Shirley Jackson awards.

Film rights to The Secret Journeys of Jack London series have been acquired by 20th Century Fox, and he and Christopher Golden wrote the first draft of the screenplay. A TV series of his *Toxic City* trilogy is in development with ABC Studios in the United States, and he's also working on new novels and screenplays, both solo and in collaboration.

Find out more about Tim Lebbon at his website www.timlebbon.net.

BY TIM LEBBON

NOVELS

Mesmer

Hush (with Gavin Williams)

Face

The Nature of Balance

Until She Sleeps

Desolation

Berserk

Dusk

Hellboy: Unnatural Selection

The Everlasting

Dawn

30 Days of Night

Mind the Gap (with Christopher Golden)

Fallen

The Map of Moments (with Christopher Golden)

The Island

Hellboy: The Fire Wolves

Bar None

The Chamber of Ten (with Christopher Golden)

30 Days of Night: Fear of the Dark

Echo City

The Shadow Men (with Christopher Golden)

The Secret Journeys of Jack London: The Wild (with
Christopher Golden)

The Secret Journeys of Jack London: The Sea Wolves (with
Christopher Golden)

The Cabin in the Woods

The Heretic Land

Toxic City (book one): *London Eye*

Coldbrook

Toxic City (book two): *Reaper's Legacy*

Star Wars: Dawn of the Jedi: Into the Void

NOVELLAS

White
Naming of Parts
Exorcising Angels
Changing of Faces
Dead Man's Hand
Pieces of Hate
A Whisper of Southern Lights
The Reach of Children
Children of the New Disorder (with Lindy Moore)
The Thief of Broken Toys

COLLECTIONS

Faith in the Flesh
As the Sun Goes Down
White and Other Tales of Ruin
Fears Unnamed
After the War
Last Exit for the Lost
Nothing as It Seems



Tim Lebbon



CENTURY

For Ellie and Dan, my young Padawan

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THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



BEFORE THE REPUBLIC 37,000–25,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

c. 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dawn of the Jedi: Into the Void



OLD REPUBLIC 5000–67 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Lost Tribe of the Sith[†]

Precipice
Skyborn
Paragon
Savior
Purgatory
Sentinel

3954 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic: Revan

3650 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic: Deceived

Lost Tribe of the Sith[†]

Pantheon
Secrets

Red Harvest

The Old Republic: Fatal Alliance

The Old Republic: Annihilation

2975 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Lost Tribe of the Sith[†]

Pandemonium

1032 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Knight Errant

Darth Bane: Path of Destruction

Darth Bane: Rule of Two

Darth Bane: Dynasty of Evil



RISE OF THE EMPIRE 67–0 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

67 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Plagueis

33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Maul: Saboteur*

Cloak of Deception

Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

32 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE I THE PHANTOM MENACE

Rogue Planet
Outbound Flight
The Approaching Storm

22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE II ATTACK OF THE CLONES

22–19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Clone Wars
The Clone Wars: Wild Space
The Clone Wars: No Prisoners

Clone Wars Gambit

Stealth
Siege

Republic Commando

Hard Contact
Triple Zero
True Colors
Order 66

Shatterpoint
The Cestus Deception
The Hive*
MedStar I: Battle Surgeons
MedStar II: Jedi Healer
Jedi Trial
Yoda: Dark Rendezvous
Labyrinth of Evil

19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

Imperial Commando 501st

Coruscant Nights
Jedi Twilight
Street of Shadows
Patterns of Force

The Last Jedi

*An eBook novella

**Forthcoming

† Lost Tribe of the Sith: The Collected Stories

19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Paradise Snare
The Hutt Gambit
Rebel Dawn

The Adventures of Lando Calrissian
The Force Unleashed
The Han Solo Adventures
Death Troopers
The Force Unleashed II



**REBELLION
0–5 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

Death Star
Shadow Games

0

**STAR WARS: EPISODE IV
A NEW HOPE**

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina
Tales from the Empire
Tales from the New Republic
Winner Lose All*
Scoundrels
Allegiance
Choices of One
Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine
Splinter of the Mind's Eye

3

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

**STAR WARS: EPISODE V
THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK**

Tales of the Bounty Hunters
Shadows of the Empire

4

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

**STAR WARS: EPISODE VI
THE RETURN OF THE JEDI**

Tales from Jabba's Palace
The Bounty Hunter Wars
The Mandalorian Armor
Slave Ship
Hard Merchandise
The Truce at Bakura
Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor



**NEW REPUBLIC
5–25 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

X-Wing

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

The Courtship of Princess Leia
A Forest Apart*
Tatooine Ghost

The Thrawn Trilogy

Heir to the Empire
Dark Force Rising
The Last Command

X-Wing: Isard's Revenge

The Jedi Academy Trilogy

Jedi Search
Dark Apprentice
Champions of the Force

I, Jedi

Children of the Jedi

Darksaber

Planet of Twilight

X-Wing: Starfighters of Adumar

The Crystal Star

The Black Fleet Crisis Trilogy

Before the Storm
Shield of Lies
Tyrant's Test

The New Rebellion

The Corellian Trilogy

Ambush at Corellia
Assault at Selonia
Showdown at Centerpoint

The Hand of Thrawn Duology

Specter of the Past
Vision of the Future

Scourge

Fool's Bargain*

Survivor's Quest

*An eBook novella

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



NEW JEDI ORDER 25–40 YEARS AFTER *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Boba Fett: A Practical Man*

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

35 YEARS AFTER *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

The Dark Nest Trilogy

The Joiner King
The Unseen Queen
The Swarm War



LEGACY 40+ YEARS AFTER *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Legacy of the Force

Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury
Revelation
Invincible

Crosscurrent
Riptide

Millennium Falcon

43 YEARS AFTER *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Fate of the Jedi

Outcast
Omen
Abyss
Backlash
Allies
Vortex
Conviction
Ascension
Apocalypse

X-Wing: Mercy Kill

45 YEARS AFTER *STAR WARS: A New Hope*

Crucible**

*An eBook novella
**Forthcoming

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Lanoree Brock; Je'daii Ranger (Human female)

Dalien Brock; dreamer (Human male)

Tre Sana; rogue (Twi'lek male)

Dam-Powl; Je'daii Master (Cathar female)

Lha-Mi; Je'daii Temple Master (Dai Bendu male)

Kara; troublemaker (Human female)

Lorus; Kalimahr Police Captain (Sith male)

Maxhagan; gangster (Human male)

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...

At the heart of any poor soul not at one with the
Force, there is only void.

—Unknown Je'daii,
2,545 TYA (Tho Yor
Arrival)

CHAPTER ONE
DARK MATTERS



Even at the beginning of our journey I feel like a rock in the river of the Force. Lanoree is a fish carried by that river, feeding from it, living within it, relying on the waters for her well-being. But I am unmoving. An inconvenience to the water as long as I remain. And slowly, slowly, I am being eroded to nothing.

—Dalien Brock, diaries, 10,661 TYA

She is a little girl, the sky seems wide and endless, and Lanoree Brock breathes in the wonders of Tython as she runs to find her brother.

Dalien is down by the estuary again. He likes being alone, away from all the other children at Bodhi, the Je'daii Temple of the Arts. Her parents have sent her to find him, and though they still have some teaching to do that afternoon, they've promised that they will walk up to the boundary of the Edge Forest that evening. Lanoree loves it up there. And it scares her a little, as well. Close to the temple, near the sea, she can feel the Force ebbing and

flowing through everything—the air she breathes, the sights she sees, and all that makes up the beautiful scenery. Up at the Edge Forest, there's a primal wildness to the Force that sets her blood pumping.

Her mother will smile and say that she will learn about it all, given time. Her father will look silently into the forest, as if he silently yearns to explore that way. And her little brother, only nine years old, will start to cry.

Always at the Edge Forest, he cries.

"Dal!" She swishes through the long grasses close to the riverbank, hands held out by her sides so that the grass caresses her palms. She won't tell him about the walk planned for that evening. If she does he'll get moody, and he might not agree to come home with her. He can be like that sometimes, and their father says it's the sign of someone finding his own way.

Dal doesn't seem to have heard her, and as she closes on him she slows from a run to a walk and thinks, *If that was me I'd have sensed me approaching ages ago.*

Dal's head remains dipped. By his side he has created a perfect circle using the stones of chewed mepples, his favorite fruit. He does that when he's thinking.

The river flows by, fast and full from the recent rains. There's a power to it that is intimidating, and, closing her eyes, Lanoree feels the Force and senses the myriad life-forms that call the river home. Some are as small as her finger, others that swim upriver from the ocean almost half the size of a Cloud Chaser ship. She knows from her studies that many of them have teeth.

She bites her lip, hesitant. Then she probes out with her mind and—

"I told you to never do that to me!"

"Dal ..."

He stands and turns around, and he looks furious. Just for a moment there's a fire in his eyes that she doesn't like. She has seen those flames before, and carries the knotted

scar tissue in her lower lip to prove it. Then his anger slips and he smiles.

“Sorry. You startled me, that’s all.”

“You’re drawing?” she asks, seeing the sketchbook.

Dal closes the book. “It’s rubbish.”

“I don’t believe that,” Lanoree says. “You’re really good. Temple Master Fenn himself says so.”

“Temple Master Fenn is a friend of Father’s.”

Lanoree ignores the insinuation and walks closer to her brother. She can already see that he has chosen a fine place from which to draw the surroundings. The river curves here, and a smaller tributary joins from the hills of the Edge Forest, causing a confusion of currents. The undergrowth on the far bank is colorful and vibrant, and there’s a huge old ak tree whose hollowed trunk is home to a flight of weave birds. Their spun golden threads glisten in the afternoon sun. The birdsong complements the river’s roar.

“Let me see,” Lanoree says.

Dal does not look at her, but he opens the pad.

“It’s beautiful,” she says. “The Force has guided your fingers, Dal.” But she’s not sure.

Dal picks a heavy pencil from his pocket and strikes five thick lines through his drawing, left to right, tearing the paper and ruining it forever. His expression does not change, and neither does his breathing. It’s almost as if there is no anger at all.

“There,” he says. “That’s better.”

For a moment the lines look like claw marks, and as Lanoree takes a breath and blinks—

A soft, insistent alarm pulled her up from sleep. Lanoree sighed and sat up, rubbing her eyes, massaging the dream away. Dear Dal. She dreamed of him often, but they were usually dreams of those later times when everything was

turning bad. Not when they were still children for whom Tython was so full of potential.

Perhaps it was because she was on her way home.

She had not been back to Tython for more than four years. She was a Je'daii Ranger, and so ranging is what she did. Some Rangers found reasons to return to Tython regularly. Family connections, continuous training, face-to-face debriefs, it all amounted to the same thing—they hated being away from home. She also believed that there were those Je'daii who felt the need to immerse themselves in Tython's Force-rich surroundings from time to time, as if uncertain that their affinity with the Force was strong enough.

Lanoree had no such doubts. She was comfortable with her strength and balance in the Force. The short periods she had spent with others on retreats on Ashla and Bogan—a voluntary part of a Padawan's training, should they desire to go—had made her even more confident in this.

She stood from her cot and stretched. She reached for the ceiling and grabbed the bars she'd welded there herself, pulling up, breathing softly, then lifting her legs and stretching them out until she was horizontal to the floor. Her muscles quivered, and she breathed deeply as she felt the Force flowing through her, a vibrant, living thing. Mental exercise and meditation were fine, but sometimes she took the greatest pleasure in exerting herself physically. She believed that to be strong with the Force, one had to be strong in body.

The alarm was still ringing.

"I'm awake," she said, easing herself slowly back to the floor, "in case you hadn't noticed."

The alarm snapped off, and her Peacemaker ship's grubby yellow maintenance droid ambled into the small living quarters on padded metal feet. It was one of many adaptations she'd made to the ship in her years out in the Tythan system. Most Peacemakers carried a very simple

droid, but she'd updated hers to a Holgorian IM-220, capable of limited communication with a human master and other duties not necessarily exclusive to ship maintenance. She'd further customized it with some heavy armor, doubling its weight but making it much more useful to her in risky scenarios. She spoke to it, its replies were obtuse, and she supposed it was the equivalent of trying to communicate with a grass kapir back home. She had even named it.

"Hey, Ironholgs. You better not have woken me early."

The droid beeped and scraped, and she wasn't sure whether it was getting cranky in its old age.

She looked around the small but comfortable living quarters. She had chosen a Peacemaker over a Hunter because of its size; even before she'd flown her first mission as a Je'daii Ranger, she knew that she would be eager to spend much of her time in space. A Hunter was fast and agile but too small to live in. The Peacemaker was a compromise on maneuverability, but she had spent long periods living alone on the ship. She preferred it that way.

And like most Rangers, she had made many modifications and adaptations to her ship that stamped her own identity upon it. She'd stripped out the table and chairs and replaced them with a weights and tensions rack for working out. Now, she ate her food sitting on her narrow cot. She'd replaced the holonet entertainment system with an older flatscreen, which doubled as communications center and reduced the ship's net weight. Beside the extensive engine compartment there had been a small room that housed a second cot for guests or companions, but because she had neither she had filled the space with extra laser charge pods, a water-recycling unit, and food stores. The ship's four laser cannon turrets had also been upgraded, and it now also carried plasma missiles, and drone missiles for long-distance combat. At the hands of the Cathar master armorer Gan Corla, the cannons now

packed three times more punch and were effective over twice the range as those standard to Peacemakers.

She had also altered and adapted the function and position of many cockpit controls, making it so that only she could effectively fly the ship. It was hers, it was home, and that was how she liked it.

“How long to Tython?” she asked.

The droid let out a series of whines and clicks.

“Right,” Lanoree said. “Suppose I’d better freshen up.” She brushed a touch pad and the darkened screens in the forward cockpit faded to clear, revealing the star-speckled view that never failed to make her heart ache. There was something so profoundly moving to the distance and scale of what she saw out there, and the Force never let her forget that she was a part of something incomprehensibly large. She supposed it was as close as she ever came to a religious epiphany.

She touched the pad again and a red glow appeared, surrounding a speck in the distance. Tython. Three hours and she’d be there.

The Je’daii Council ordering her back to Tython meant only one thing. They had a mission for her, and it was one that they needed to discuss face-to-face.

Washed, dressed, and fed, Lanoree sat in the ship’s cockpit and watched Tython drawing closer. Her ship had communicated with sentry drones orbiting at thirty thousand kilometers, and now the Peacemaker was performing a graceful parabola that would take it down into the atmosphere just above the equator.

She was nervous about visiting Tython again, but part of her was excited as well. It would be good to see her mother and father, however briefly. She contacted them far too infrequently. With Dal dead, she was now their only child.

A soft chime announced an incoming transmission. She swiveled her seat and faced the flatscreen, just as it

snowed into an image.

“Master Dam-Powl,” Lanoree said, surprised. “An honor.” And it was. She had expected the welcoming transmission to be from a Je’daii Ranger or perhaps even a Journeyer she did not know. Not the Cathar Je’daii Master.

Dam-Powl bowed her head. “Lanoree, it’s good to see you again. We’ve been eagerly awaiting your arrival. Pressing matters beg discussion. *Dark matters.*”

“I assumed that was the case,” Lanoree said. She shifted in her seat, unaccountably nervous.

“I sense your discomfort,” Master Dam-Powl said.

“Forgive me. It’s been some time since I spoke with a Je’daii Master.”

“You feel unsettled even with me?” Dam-Powl asked, smiling. But the smile quickly slipped. “No matter. Prepare yourself, because today you speak with six Masters, including Stav Kesh’s Temple Master Lha-Mi. I’ve sent your ship the landing coordinates for our meeting place thirty kilometers south of Akar Kesh. We’ll expect you soon.”

“Master, we’re not meeting at a temple?”

But Dam-Powl had already broken the transmission, and Lanoree was left staring at a blank screen. She could see her image reflected there, and she quickly gathered herself, breathing away the shock. *Six Je’daii Masters? And Lha-Mi as well?*

“Then it *is* something big.”

She checked the transmitted coordinates and switched the flight computer to manual, eager to make the final approach herself. She had always loved flying and the freedom it gave her. Untethered. Almost a free agent.

Lanoree closed her eyes briefly and breathed with the Force. It was strong this close to Tython, elemental, and it sparked her senses alive.

By the time the Peacemaker sliced into Tython’s outer atmosphere, Lanoree’s excitement was growing. The landing zone was nestled in a small valley with giant

standing stones on the surrounding hills. She could see several other ships, including Hunters and another Peacemaker. It was a strange place for such a meeting, but the Je'daii Council would have its reasons. She guided her ship in an elegant arc and landed almost without a jolt.

“Solid ground,” she whispered. “Ironholgs, I don’t know how long we’ll be here, but take the opportunity to run a full systems check. Anything we need we can pick up from Akar Kesh before we leave.”

The droid emitted a mechanical sigh.

Lanoree probed gently outward, and when she sensed that the air pressures had equalized, she opened the lower hull hatch. The smells that flooded in—rash grass, running water, that curious charged smell that seemed to permeate the atmosphere around most temples—brought a rush of nostalgia for the planet she had left behind. But there was no time for personal musings.

Three Journeymen were waiting for her, wide-eyed and excited.

“Welcome, Ranger Brock!” the tallest of the three said.

“I’m sure,” she said. “Where are they waiting for me?”

“On Master Lha-Mi’s Peacemaker,” another Journeyman said. “We’re here to escort you. Please, follow us.”

“I’m here representing the Council of Masters,” the Talid Temple Master Lha-Mi said. “Forgive us for not welcoming you back to Tython in more ... salubrious surroundings. But by necessity this meeting must be covert.” His long white hair glowed in the room’s artificial light. He was old and wise, and Lanoree was pleased to see him again.

“It’s so nice to be back,” Lanoree said. She bowed.

“Please, please.” Lha-Mi pointed to a seat, and Lanoree sat facing him and the other five Je’daii Masters. This Peacemaker’s living quarters had been pared down to provide a circular table with eight seats around it, and little more. She nodded a silent greeting to Lha-Mi, Dam-Powl

and the Cathar Master Tem Madog, but the other three she did not know. It seemed that things had moved swiftly while she had been away, especially when it came to promotions.

“Ranger Brock,” Master Dam-Powl said, smiling. “It’s wonderful to see you again in the flesh.” She was a Master at Anil Kesh, the Je’daii Temple of Science, and during Lanoree’s training there, she and Dam-Powl had formed a close bond. It was she more than any other who had expressed the conviction that Lanoree would be a great Je’daii one day. It was also Dam-Powl who had revealed and encouraged the areas of Force use at which Lanoree was most skilled—metallurgy, elemental manipulation, alchemy.

“Likewise, Master Dam-Powl,” Lanoree said.

“How are your studies?”

“Progressing,” Lanoree said. There was a hidden place in her Peacemaker ship, and a container holding a very personal experiment, and sometimes she spent long hours at work there. Her alchemical skills still seemed fledgling sometimes, but the sense of accomplishment and power she felt while using them were almost addictive.

“You’re a talented Je’daii,” Master Tem Madog said. “I can sense your experience and strength growing with the years.” It was a durasteel sword forged by this master weapons smith that hung by Lanoree’s side. The blade had saved her life on many occasions, and on other occasions it had taken lives. It was her third arm, a part of her. In the four years since leaving Tython she had never been more than an arm’s reach from the weapon, and she felt it now, cool and solid, keen in the presence of its maker.

“I honor the Force as well as I can,” Lanoree said. “‘I am the mystery of darkness, in balance with chaos and harmony.’” She smiled as she quoted from the Je’daii oath, and some of the Masters smiled back. Some of them. The three she did not know remained expressionless, and she probed gently, knowing that she risked punishment yet unable to break her old habit. She always liked knowing

who she was talking to. And as they had not introduced themselves, she thought it only fair.

They closed themselves to her, and one, a Wookiee, growled deep in his throat.

“You have served the Je’daii and Tython well during your years as Ranger,” Lha-Mi said. “And sitting before us now, you must surely believe that we mean you no ill. I understand that this meeting might seem strange and that being faced with us might seem ... daunting. Intimidating, perhaps? But there is no need to invade another’s privacy, Lanoree, especially a Master’s. No need at all.”

“Apologies, Master Lha-Mi,” Lanoree said, wincing inwardly. *You might have been out in the wilds*, she berated herself, *but be mindful of the Je’daii formality*.

The Wookiee laughed.

“I am Xiang,” one of the strangers, a female of the Sith species, said. “Your father taught me, and now I teach under him at Bodhi Temple. A wise man. And good at magic tricks.”

For an instant Lanoree felt a flood of emotion that surprised her. She remembered her father’s tricks from when she and Dal were children—how he would pull objects out of thin air, turn one thing into another. Back then, she’d believed he was using mastery of the Force, but he had told her that there were some things not even the Force could do. *Tricks*, he’d said. *I’m merely fooling your senses, not touching them with my own*.

“And how is he?” Lanoree asked.

“He’s fine,” Xiang said, her red skin creasing with a smile. “He and your mother send their best wishes. They’d hoped you could visit them, but given the circumstances, they understand why that would be difficult.”

“Circumstances?”

Xiang glanced sidelong at Lha-Mi and then back at Lanoree. When she spoke again, it was not to answer her

query. “We have a mission for you. It’s ... delicate. And extremely important.”

Lanoree sensed a shift in the room’s atmosphere. For a few moments they sat in almost complete silence—Temple Master Lha-Mi, five other Je’daii Masters, and her. Air-conditioning hummed, and through the chair she could feel the deeper, more insistent vibration of the Peacemaker’s power sources. Her own breath was loud. Her heart beat the moments by. The Force flowed through and around her, and she felt history pivoting on this moment—her own history and story, and that of the Je’daii civilization as well.

Something staggering was going to happen.

“Why do you choose me?” she asked softly. “There are many other Rangers, all across the system. Some much closer than me. It’s taken me nineteen days to reach here from Obri.”

“Two reasons,” Xiang said. “First, you’re particularly suited to the investigations required. Your time on Kalimahr brokering the Hang Layden deal displayed your sensitivity in dealing with inhabitants on the settled worlds. Your actions on Nox saved many lives. And your defusing of the Wookiee land wars on Ska Gora probably prevented a civil war.”

“It was hardly a defusing,” Lanoree said.

“The deaths were unfortunate,” Lha-Mi said, “but they prevented countless more.”

Lanoree thought of the giant apex trees aflame, countless burning leaves drifting in the vicious winds that sometimes stirred the jungles there, the sound of millennia-old tree trunks splitting and rupturing in the intense firestorm, and the screams of dying Wookiees. And she thought of her finger on the triggers of her laser cannons, raised and yet more than ready to fire again. *It was me or them*, she thought whenever the dream haunted her, and she knew that to be true. She had tried everything else—*everything*—but in the end, diplomacy gave way to blood. Yet each time

she dreamed, the Force was in turmoil within her, dark and light vying for supremacy. Light tortured her with those memories. Dark would let her settle easy.

“You saved tens of thousands,” Xiang said. “Maybe more. The Wookiee warlord Gharcanna had to be stopped.”

“I only wish he had not fought to the end.” Lanoree glanced at the Wookiee Master and he nodded slowly, never taking his eyes from hers. He had great pride, and carried his sadness well.

“You said two reasons,” Lanoree said.

“Yes.” Xiang seemed suddenly uncomfortable, shifting in her seat.

“Perhaps I should relay the rest of the information,” Lha-Mi said. “The mission first. The threat that has risen against the Je’daii, and perhaps even Tython itself. And when you know that, you will understand why we have chosen you.”

“Of course,” Lanoree said. “I’m honored to be here, and keen to hear. Any threat against Tython is a threat against everything I love.”

“Everything we *all* love,” Lha-Mi said. “For ten thousand years we have studied the Force and developed our society around and within it. Wars and conflicts have come and gone. We strive to keep the dark and the light, Bogan and Ashla, forever in balance. But now ... now there is something that might destroy us all.

“One man. And his dreams. Dreams to leave the Tythan system and travel out into the galaxy. Many people desire to do so, and it’s something I understand. However settled we are in this system, any educated being knows that our history lies out there, beyond everything we now know and understand. But this man seeks another route.”

“What other route?” Lanoree asked. Her skin prickled with fear.

“A hypergate,” Lha-Mi said.

“But there is no hypergate on Tython,” Lanoree said, “only tales of one deep in the Old City, but they’re just that. Tales.”

“Tales,” Lha-Mi said, his eyes heavy, beard drooping as he lowered his head. “But some people will chase a tale as far and hard as they can, and seek to make it real. We have intelligence that this man is doing such a thing. He believes that there’s a hypergate deep beneath the ruins of the Old City on the continent of Talss. He seeks to activate it.”

“How?” she asked.

“A device,” Lha-Mi said. “We don’t know its nature or its design. But our source tells us it will be fueled by dark matter, harnessed through arcane means. Forbidden. Dreaded. The most dangerous element known to us, and which no Je’daii would ever dare attempt to capture or create.”

“But if there’s no hypergate—”

“Tales,” Lha-Mi said again. “He chases a legend. But whether it exists or not is irrelevant. The threat is the dark matter he intends using to try to initiate the supposed gateway. It could ...” He trailed off and looked to his side.

“It could destroy Tython,” Dam-Powl said. “Exposing dark matter to normal matter would be cataclysmic. It would create a black hole, swallowing Tython in a heartbeat. The rest of the system, too.”

“And if there *is* a hypergate, and it *does* work?”

Silence for a while. And then one of the three Masters she did not know spoke, her first and last words of the meeting. “Then the danger to the Je’daii would be very different but equally severe.”

“So you see the dire threat we face,” Lha-Mi said.

“Just one man? So arrest him.”

“We don’t know where he is. We don’t even know which planet he’s on.”

“The little intelligence you have is sound?” Lanoree asked, but she already knew the answer to that. Such a

gathering of Je'daii Masters for this purpose would not have taken place otherwise.

"We have no reason to doubt it," Lha-Mi said, "and every reason to fear. If it does transpire that the threat is not as severe as it appears, then that's a good thing. All we waste is time."

"But the hypergate," Lanoree said. "Protect it. Guard it."

Lha-Mi leaned forward across the table. With a blink he closed off the cabin—air-conditioning ceased; the door slammed shut and locked. "The hypergate is a tale," he said. "That is all."

Lanoree nodded. But she also knew that talking about a simple story would surely not require such care and such an arrangement as this. *For later*, she thought, guarding her thoughts.

"And now to why it's you we've chosen for the mission," Xiang said. "The man is Dalien Brock, your brother."

Lanoree reeled. She never suffered from space sickness—the Force settled her, as it did all Je'daii—but she seemed to sway in her seat, though she did not move; dizziness swept through her, though the Peacemaker was as stable as the ground it rested upon.

"No," she said, frowning. "Dalien died nine years ago."

"You found no body," Xiang said.

"I found his clothing. Shredded. Bloodied."

"We have no reason to doubt our sources," Lha-Mi said.

"And I have no reason to believe them!" Lanoree said.

Silence in the room. A loaded hush.

"Your reason is that we order this," Lha-Mi said. "Your reason is any small element of doubt that exists over your brother's death. Your reason is that, if this is true, he might be a threat to Tython. Your brother might destroy everything you love."

He fled, I found his clothes, down, down deep in the—the Old City.

“You see?” Lha-Mi asked as if reading her thoughts. For all Lanoree knew he had, and she did not question that. He was a Temple Master, after all, and she only a Ranger. Confused as she was, she could not help her thoughts betraying her.

“He always looked to the stars,” Lanoree said softly.

“We hear whispers of an organization, a loose collection of people, calling themselves Stargazers.”

“Yes,” Lanoree said, remembering her little brother always looking outward to the depths of space as she looked inward.

“Find your brother,” Lha-Mi said. “Bring him back to Tython. Stop his foolish schemes.”

“He won’t come back,” Lanoree said. “If it really is him, he’ll never return after so long. So young when he died, but even then he was growing to ...”

“To hate the Je’daii,” Xiang said. “All the more reason to bring him back to us.”

“And if he refuses?”

“You are a Je’daii Ranger,” Lha-Mi said. And in a way, Lanoree knew that was answer enough.

“I need everything you know.”

“It’s already being downloaded to your ship’s computer.”

Lanoree nodded, unsurprised at their forwardness. They’d known that she could not say no.

“This is a covert operation,” Xiang said. “Rumors of the hypergate persist, but the knowledge that someone is trying to initiate it might cause panic. We could send a much larger force against Dalien, but that would be much more visible.”

“And there’s a deeper truth,” Lha-Mi said.

“You don’t want people supporting his cause,” Lanoree said. “If news of what he plans spreads, many more might attempt to initiate the gate. More devices. More dark matter.”