

Star Wars: The New Jedi Order - Edge of Victory I - Conquest

Greg Keyes

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Also by Greg Keyes

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About the Book

The dazzling Star Wars adventure The New Jedi Order continues as Luke Skywalker, Anakin Solo, Mara Jade Skywalker, and others battle their deadliest enemy in a tale of nonstop action, shadowy evil and spectacular triumph...

No longer content with the destruction the Yuuzhan Vong have already sown, Warmaster Tsavong Lah has demanded the heads of all the Jedi. Now the Jedi Knights are in terrible danger - and none more so than the young students at the Jedi academy on Yavin 4. Already the sympathizers known as the Peace Brigade are in the Yavin system - and a Yuuzhan Vong fleet is not far behind.

At Luke Skywalker's request, Talon Karrde mounts an expedition to rescue the young students. Anakin Solo has his own ideas. Impatient, and figuring that forgiveness is easier to come by than permission, he takes off for Yavin 4 in his X-wing.

When it comes to confidence, courage and raw Force talent, Anakin has a few peers, But when his friend Tahiri is separated from the other academy kids and captured by the Yuuzhan Vong, even Anakin may be in over his head. For the aliens have a different future in mind for Tahiri, and they will stop at nothing to achieve their horrific end...

Also by Greg Keyes

The Chosen of the Changeling

THE WATERBORN
THE BLACKGOD

The Age of Unreason

NEWTON'S CANNON
A CALCULUS OF ANGELS
EMPIRE OF UNREASON

The Psi Corps Trilogy

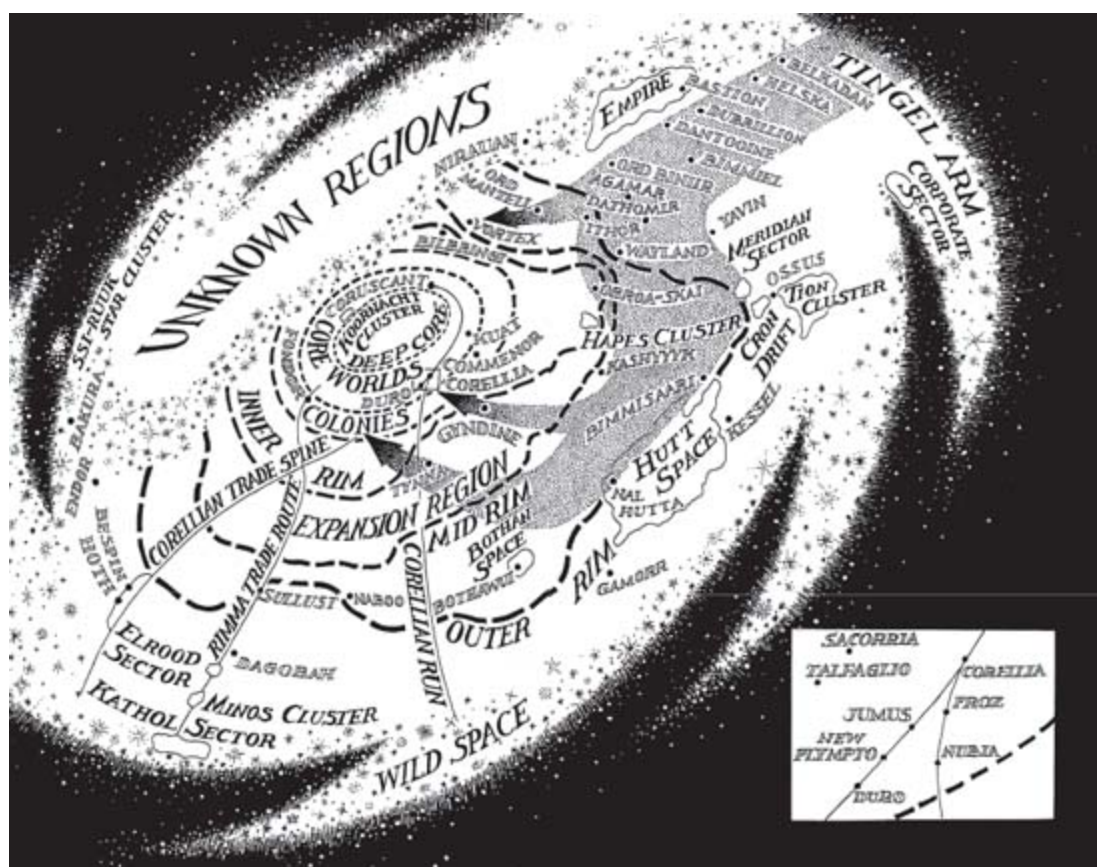
BABYLON 5: DARK GENESIS
BABYLON 5: DEADLY RELATIONS
BABYLON 5: FINAL RECKONING

Star Wars: The New Jedi Order – Edge of Victory I – Conquest

Greg Keyes

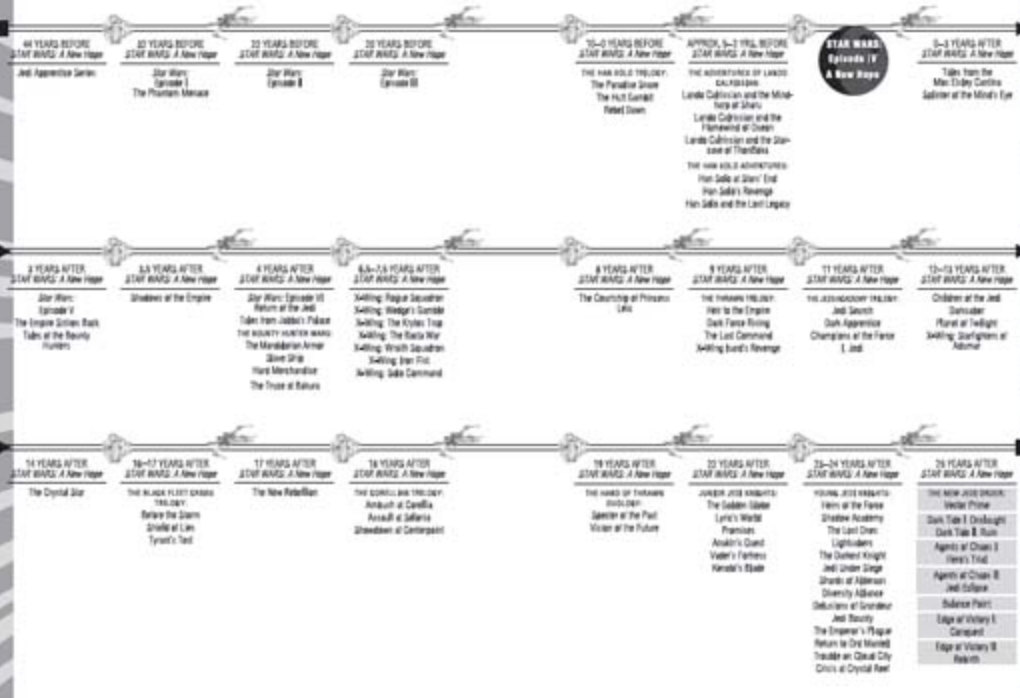


For Charlie Sheffer
And all of my friends at Salle Auriol Seattle



STAR WARS: THE NOVELS

— What Happened When?



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Anakin Solo; Jedi Knight (male human)
Ikrit; Jedi Master (male unknown)
Imsatad; Peace Brigade captain (male human)
Jacen Solo; Jedi Knight (male human)
Jaina Solo; Jedi Knight (female human)
Kam Solusar; Jedi Master (male human)
Luke Skywalker; Jedi Master (male human)
Mara Jade Skywalker; Jedi Knight (female human)
Mezhan Kwaad; master shaper (female Yuuzhan Vong)
Nen Yim; shaper adept (female Yuuzhan Vong)
Remis Vehn; Peace Brigade pilot (male human)
Sannah; Jedi student (female Melodie)
Shada D'ukal; Talon Karrde's business associate (female human)
Tahiri Veila; Jedi student (female human)
Talon Karrde; Independent Information Broker (male human)
Tionne; Jedi Knight (female human)
Tsaak Vootuh; commander (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Tsavong Lah; warmaster (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Uunu; Shamed One (female Yuuzhan Vong)
Valin Horn; Jedi student (male human)
Vua Rapuung; warrior (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Yal Phaath; master shaper (male Yuuzhan Vong)

PROLOGUE

DORSK 82 DUCKED behind the stone steps of the quay, just in time to dodge a blaster bolt from across the water.

"Hurry on board my ship," he told his charges. "They've found us again."

That was an understatement. Approaching along the tide embankment was a mob of around fifty Aqualish, jostling each other and shouting hoarsely. Most carried makeshift weapons—clubs, knives, rocks—but a few had force pikes and at least one had a blaster, as the smoking score on the quay testified.

"Join us, Master Dorsk," The 3D-4 protocol droid close behind him pleaded.

Dorsk nodded his bald yellow-and-green mottled head. "Soon. I have to slow their progress across the causeway, to give everyone time to board."

"You can't hold them off yourself, sir."

"I think I can. Besides, I need to try to talk to them. This is senseless."

"They've gone mad," the droid said. "They're destroying droids all over the city!"

"They aren't mad," Dorsk averred. "They're just frightened. The Yuuzhan Vong are on Ando, and may well conquer the planet."

"But why destroy droids, Master Dorsk?"

"Because the Yuuzhan Vong hate machines," the Khommite clone answered. "They consider them to be abominations."

"How can that be? Why would they believe that?"

"I don't know," Dorsk replied. "But it is a fact. Go, please. Help the others board. My pilot is already at the controls with the flight instructions, so even if something happens to me, you'll be okay."

Still the droid hesitated. "Why are you helping us, sir?"

"Because I am a Jedi and I can. You don't deserve destruction."

"Neither do you, sir."

"Thank you. I do not intend to be destroyed."

He raised his head up again as the droid finally followed its clattering, whirring comrades to the waiting ship.

The crowd had reached the ancient stone causeway connecting the atoll-city of Imthitill to the abandoned fishing platform Dorsk now crouched on. It seemed they were all on foot, which meant all he had to do was prevent them from crossing the causeway.

With a single bound, Dorsk propelled his thin body up onto the causeway, forsaking the cover of the step down to the fishing platform. Lightsaber held at his side, he watched the mob approach.

I am a Jedi, he thought to himself. A Jedi knows no fear.

Almost surprisingly, he didn't. His training with Master Skywalker had been fretted with attacks of panic. Dorsk was the eighty-second clone of the first Khommite to bear his name. He'd grown up on a world well satisfied with its own peculiar kind of perfection, and that hadn't prepared him for danger, or fear, or even the unexpected. There were times when he believed he could never be as brave as the other Jedi students or live up to the standard set by his celebrated predecessor, Dorsk 81.

But watching the large, dark eyes of the crowd that was drawing close, he felt nothing but a gentle sadness that they had been driven to this. They must fear the Yuuzhan Vong terribly.

The destruction of droids had begun small, but in a few days had become a planetwide epidemic. The government

of Ando—such as it was—neither condoned nor condemned the brutality, so long as no nondroids were killed or injured in the mess. Without help from the police, Dorsk 82 was the only chance the droids had, and he didn't plan to fail them. He had already failed too many.

He ignited his lightsaber and for an instant saw everything around him at once. The setting sun had spilled a glorious slick of orange fire into the ocean and lit the high-piled clouds on the horizon into castles of flame. Higher, the sky faded to gold-laced jade and aquamarine and then the pale of night. The lights in the cylindrical white towers of Imthitill were winking on, one by one, and so, too, were the lights of the fishing platforms floating in the deeps, spangling the ocean with lonely constellations.

His own planet hadn't any such untamed spectacles. Khomm's weather was as predictable and homogenous as its people. Likely he, Dorsk 82, was the only person of his entire species who could appreciate this sky, or the iron-dressed waves of the sea.

Salt air buffeted around him. He lifted his chin. Somehow, after all of these years, he felt he was doing the thing he had dreamed about at last.

One of the Aqualish stepped before the rest. He was smaller than many, his tusks incised in the local style. He wore the dappled slicksuit of a tug worker.

"Move, Jedi," he commanded. "These droids are none of your business."

"These droids are under my protection," Dorsk replied calmly.

"They are not yours to protect, Jedi," the Aqualish shouted back. "If their owners do not object, you have no say in the matter."

"I must disagree," Dorsk replied. "I also plead with you to see reason. Destroying the droids will not appease the Yuuzhan Vong. They are beyond appeasing."

“That’s our business,” the self-appointed spokesman of the group shouted. “This isn’t your planet, Jedi. It’s ours. Didn’t you hear? The Yuuzhan Vong just took Duro.”

“I had not heard,” Dorsk replied. “Nor does it matter. Go back to your homes in peace. I don’t want to hurt any of you. I’m taking these droids with me. You will not see them on Ando again. I swear it.”

This time he saw the blaster lift—held by an Aqualish deep in the crowd. Dorsk grasped it with the Force and whisked it through the air until it came to rest in his left hand.

“Please,” he said.

For a long moment, neither side moved. Dorsk felt them wavering, but the Aqualish were a stubborn and violent lot. It was easier to stop a nova once it had started than to calm a whole mob of Aqualish.

He heard a sudden hum and saw a security speeder approaching. He stepped back and allowed it to settle between him and the crowd. He did not relax his guard, even when eight Aqualish troopers in bright yellow body armor piled out and started motioning the crowd back.

The officer stepped forward. “What’s going on here?” he asked.

Dorsk motioned slightly with his head. “These people are intent on destroying a group of droids. I am protecting them.”

“I see,” the officer said. “That’s your ship?”

“Yes.”

“Are there any other Jedi on board?”

“No.”

“Very well.” The officer spoke into a small comlink, too low for Dorsk to hear, but the clone suddenly sensed what was about to happen.

“No!” he shouted. He spun on his heel and ran toward the ship, but even as he did so, several flares of light too bright to look upon struck it. A column of white flame leapt toward

the sky, carrying with it the fragments and ions that had once been his ship, his pilot Hhen, and thirty-eight droids.

Dorsk was still watching, mouth working soundlessly at the pointless destruction, when the stun baton hit him.

He fell, turning that same uncomprehending stare on his attackers. The officer he'd been speaking to stood there, holding the baton.

"Stay down, Jedi, and you'll live."

"What? Why? . . ."

"I suppose you haven't heard. The Yuuzhan Vong have proposed a peace. They will stop their conquest with Duro, and leave Ando, so long as we turn you Jedi over to them. They will take you dead, but they would rather have you alive."

Dorsk 82 summoned the Force, washed away the pain and paralysis of the blast, and stood.

"Drop your lightsaber, Jedi," the officer said.

Dorsk straightened himself and looked into the muzzles of the blasters. He dropped the one he had taken from the crowd. He hooked his lightsaber onto his belt.

"I will not fight you," he said.

"Fine. Then you won't mind surrendering your weapon."

"The Yuuzhan Vong will not keep their word. Their only desire is that *you* rid them of their worst enemies for them. With the Jedi out of the way, they will come for you. If you betray me, you betray yourselves."

"We'll take that chance," the officer said.

"I'm walking away from here," Dorsk said with a slight wave of his hand. "You will not stop me."

"No," the officer said. "I won't stop you."

"Nor will any of the rest of you."

Dorsk 82 started forward. One of the troopers, more strong willed than the others, lifted his blaster in a shaking hand.

"Don't," Dorsk pleaded. He held out his hand.

The blaster bolt grazed Dorsk in the palm, and he stepped back, but the action shook the other troopers from the suggestion he had placed in their minds. The next shot seared a hole through his thigh. He dropped to his knees.

"Stop," the officer said. "No more mind tricks."

Dorsk torturously pushed himself back to his feet. He took another step forward.

I am a Jedi. A Jedi knows no fear.

The dusk lit with blasterfire.

Help.

The automated signal was weak but faint.

"Got 'em," Uldir said. "I told you, didn't I?"

Dacholder, his copilot, clapped him on the back. "No doubt about it, lad. You're the best rescue flier in the unit."

"I have good hunches, that's all," Uldir replied. "See if you can contact them."

"Sure thing." Dacholder activated the comm unit. "*Pride of Thela* to injured vessel. Injured vessel, can you hear me?"

The answer was static—but modulated static.

"They're trying to answer," Uldir said. "Their comm unit must be damaged. Maybe when we get closer. Hey, there they are now."

Long-range sensors showed a craft dead in space, medium transport-sized. It ought to be the *Winning Hand*, a pleasure craft that had made a jump from the Corellian sector and vanished somewhere en route. The *Hand's* jump had taken her dangerously near Obroa-skai, which was now in Yuuzhan Vong space. Though they hadn't moved overtly on any planets since the fall of Duro, the Yuuzhan Vong had been setting up occasional dovin basal interdictors near their space, yanking from hyperspace ships bold or careless enough to approach their somewhat fuzzy borders. Most were never found again, but the *Winning Hand* had managed to get off a garbled transmission placing them along the Perlemian Trade Route not far from the Meridian

sector. That was still a lot of space, but search and rescue had been Uldir's business for the past six years. At the ripe old age of twenty-two, he was one of the best fliers in the corps.

"Dead-on," Dacholder said. "Congratulations. Again."

"Thanks, Doc."

Dacholder was a little older than Uldir, his hair prematurely shot with gray and receding from his forehead so fast Uldir could almost see it redshifting. He wasn't a great pilot, but he was competent enough, and Uldir liked him.

"Say, Uldir," Dacholder began, in an inquisitive tone, "I never asked you—when the Vong came along, why didn't you request transfer to a military unit? The way you fly, you could be an ace."

"Too hot for me," Uldir replied.

"Carbon flush. Rescue is twice the danger with a tenth of the firepower. During the fall of Duro I heard you picked up three stranded pilots under fire from four coralskippers with no backup at all."

"I was pretty lucky," Uldir demurred.

"You sure it's not something else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I heard you attended that Jedi academy of Skywalker's."

Uldir could only laugh at that. "*Attended* isn't the right word. I was there, caused a systemful of trouble in a real short time, and had no talent for the Jedi thing at all. Still, maybe you're right. I guess I figured if I couldn't be a Jedi, I could at least emulate 'em. Search and rescue seemed like the best way. And we're needed in wartime just as much as the flyboys."

"And you don't have to kill."

Uldir shrugged. "That sounds about right. When did you start thinking about me so much, Doc?" He flipped the magnification up on the visual. "Look there," he said, as the

derelict ship came on-screen. "She doesn't look half bad. Maybe they didn't have any casualties."

"We can only hope," Dacholder said.

"See anything else out there?"

"Not a thing," Dacholder replied.

"That's good. We're outside of Yuuzhan Vong space, but not *that* far outside. Even with all the tinkering I've done on this baby, I don't want to run up against one of their interdictors."

"I noticed you coaxed another twenty percent from the inertial dampeners. Good work."

"Shows what you can do when you've got no life but the service, I guess," Uldir replied. He adjusted their trajectory a bit. "Looks like they're limping, but life support seems to be okay."

"Yeah."

Uldir gave his copilot a sidewise glance. Doc seemed a little nervous, which was odd. Not that he had the steadiest nerves in the unit, but he was no coward. Maybe it was because they were out so far without backup. The war had forced everyone to spread resources thin.

"Uldir," Dacholder asked suddenly.

"Uh-huh?"

"Do you think we can beat them? The Vong?"

"That's a crazy question," Uldir replied. "Of course we can. They just got a jump on us, that's all. You'll see. Once the military gets its act together and brings the Jedi into the equation, the Yuuzhan Vong will be on the run soon enough."

Dacholder was silent for a moment, watching the ship grow larger.

"I don't think we can beat them," he said softly. "I don't think we ought to be fighting them in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, they've kicked our butts right from the start. If they make another push, they'll have Coruscant before you can

blink.”

“That’s pretty defeatist.”

“It’s pretty realistic.”

“Then what?” Uldir asked, a little heatedly. “You think we ought to surrender?”

“We don’t have to do that, either. Look, there aren’t that many Vong. They already have as many planets as they need, they’ve said so themselves. They haven’t made a move since Duro, and they won’t—”

The console got Uldir’s attention, so he didn’t hear the rest of what Dacholder was saying. “Hold that thought,” he snapped, “and hail that ship.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s playing dead, that’s why. All her systems just came on, and she’s trying for a tractor lock.” He quickly began evasive maneuvers.

“Let her have us, Uldir,” Dacholder said. “Don’t make me use this.”

To Uldir’s astonishment, *this* was a blaster his copilot had pointed at his head.

“Doc? What are you doing?”

“Sorry, lad. I like you, I really do. I hate doing this like drinking acid, but it has to be done.”

“What has to be done?”

“The Yuuzhan Vong warmaster was very specific. He wants *all* of the Jedi.”

“Doc, you fool, I’m *not* a Jedi.”

“There’s a list, Uldir, and you’re on it.”

“List? What list? Whose list? Not a Yuuzhan Vong list, because they couldn’t possibly know who went to the academy and who didn’t.”

“That’s right. Some of us are in high places.”

Uldir narrowed his eyes. “*Us*? You’re Peace Brigade, Doc?”

“Yes.”

“Of all the—” Uldir stopped. “And that ship. That’s what’s going to take me to the Yuuzhan Vong, isn’t it?”

"It wasn't my idea, lad. I'm just following orders. Now, slow her down like a good boy, and let them have their lock."

"I'm not a Jedi," Uldir repeated.

"No? I always thought your hunches were a little too good. You seem to see things before they come."

"Right. Like *this*, you mean?"

"Doesn't matter anyway. What matters is *they* think you're Jedi. And I'll bet you know things they would be interested in."

"Don't do this, Doc, I'm begging you. You know what the Yuuzhan Vong do to their victims. How can you even think of making deals with them? They destroyed Ithor, for space's sake!"

"The way I hear it, a Jedi named Corran Horn was responsible for that."

"Bantha fodder."

Dacholder sighed. "I'm giving you a three-count, Uldir."

"Don't, Doc."

"One."

"I won't go with them."

"Two."

"Please."

"Thr—"

He never got it out. By the time he got to the end of the word, Dacholder was in vacuum, twenty meters away and still accelerating. Uldir sealed the cockpit back up, ears popping and face tingling from his brief brush with nothingness. He glanced at the missing acceleration couch.

"I'm sorry, Doc," he said. "You didn't leave me much of a choice. I guess it's just as well I never told you about *all* of my modifications."

He opened the throttle, gaining quick ground on the yacht. By the time they overcame their inertia and started to gain, Uldir had punched into lightspeed and was gone.

To where, he didn't know. If he survived the hyperspace jump, would he be safe?

And if *he* wasn't safe, what about the real Jedi? His friends from the academy?

He couldn't hide from this. Master Skywalker had to know what was happening. He could think about himself after that was done.

Swilja Fenn tried to stay on her feet. Such a basic thing, standing. One rarely gave it a thought. But the long pursuit on Cujicor, copious blood loss, and a foul, cramped incarceration on a Peace Brigade ship rendered even such basic things a struggle. She drew on the Force for her strength and lashed her lekku in helplessness.

The Peace Brigade goons had dumped her, bound and half senseless, on some nameless moon and hauled gravity out of there. Not much later, the Yuuzhan Vong had shown up. They had cut away her bonds and then replaced them with a living, jellylike substance, all the while spitting at her in a language that seemed made entirely of curses.

After that, more travel in dark places and finally here, barely able to keep her feet under her, in a vast chamber that looked as if it had been carved inside of a chunk of raw meat. Smelled that way, too.

Swilja squinted at someone approaching from the murk and shadows at the far end of the room.

"What do you lylek-dung-grubbers want with me?" she snarled, momentarily forgetting her Jedi training.

The lapse got her a cuff in the face hard enough to knock her off her feet.

When she rose, *he* was standing over her.

The Yuuzhan Vong liked to scar themselves. They liked cut-up faces and tattoos, severed fingers and toes. The higher up the food chain they were, it seemed the less there was of them. Or at least, what had *started* as them, because they liked implants, too.

The Yuuzhan Vong standing above her must have been *way* up the food chain, because he looked like he had fallen into a bin of vibroblades. Scales the color of dried blood covered most of his body, and some sort of cloak hung from his shoulders. The latter twitched, slowly.

And like the other Yuuzhan Vong, he wasn't *there*. If he had been Twi'lek or human or Rodian, she might have stopped his heart with the Force or snapped his neck against the ceiling. Dark side or not, she would have done it and rid the galaxy of him forever.

She tried to do the next best thing—hurl herself at him and claw his eyes out. He was only a meter away; surely she could take just one of these gravel-maggots with her.

Unfortunately, the next best thing was exponentially less effective than the best. The same guard who had struck her a moment before lashed out faster than lightning, grabbing her by the lekku and yanking her back. He held her up to the monster confronting her.

"I know you," Swilja said, spitting out teeth and blood. "You're the one who called for our heads. Tsavong Lah."

"I am Warmaster Tsavong Lah," the monster confirmed.

She spat at him. The spittle struck his hand, but he ignored it, denying her even the minor victory of irritating him.

"I congratulate you on proving yourself worthy of honored sacrifice," Tsavong Lah said. "You are far more admirable than the cowering scum who delivered you to us. They will merely perish, when their time comes. We will not mock the gods by offering *them* in sacrifice." He suddenly showed more of the inside of his mouth than Swilja ever wanted to see. It might have been a grin or a sneer.

"If you know who I am," Tsavong Lah said, "you know what I want. You know *who* I want."

"I have no idea what you want. Given what I know of you it would probably make even a Hutt sick."

Tsavong Lah licked his lip and twisted his neck slightly. His eyes drilled at her.

“Help me find Jacen Solo,” he said. “With your help, I will find him.”

“Eat poodoo.”

Tsavong Lah shredded a laugh through his teeth.

“It is not my job to convince you,” he said. “I have specialists for that. And if you still cannot be convinced, there are others, many others. One day you will all embrace the truth—or death.” With that he seemed to forget she existed. His eyes emptied of any sign that he saw her or had ever seen her, and he walked slowly away.

“You’re wrong!” she screamed, as they dragged her from the chamber. “The Force is stronger than you. The Jedi will be your end, Tsavong Lah!”

But the warmaster didn’t turn. His stride never broke.

An hour later, even Swilja didn’t believe her brave words. She didn’t even remember them. Nothing existed for her but pain, and eventually, not even that.

PART ONE

PRAXEUM

CHAPTER ONE

LUKE SKYWALKER STOOD steady and straight before the gathered Jedi, his face composed and stronger than durasteel. The set of his shoulders, his precise gestures, the weight and timbre of each word he spoke all confirmed his confidence and control.

But Anakin Solo knew it was a lie. Anger and fear filled the chamber like a hundred atmospheres of pressure, and beneath that weight something in Master Skywalker crumpled. It felt like hope breaking. Anakin thought it was the worst thing he had ever felt, and he had felt some very bad things in his sixteen years.

The perception didn't last long. Nothing was broken, only bent, and whatever it was straightened, and Master Skywalker was again as strong and confident in the Force as to the eye. Anakin didn't think anyone else had noticed it.

But *he* had. The unshakable had shaken. It was something Anakin would never forget, another of the many things that had seemed eternal to him suddenly gone, another speeder zooming out from underneath his feet, leaving him flat on his back wondering what had happened. Hadn't he learned yet?

He forced himself to focus his ice-blue eyes on Master Skywalker, on that familiar age- and scar-roughened face. Beyond him, through a huge transparisteel window, flowed the never-ending light and life of Coruscant. Against those cyclopean buildings and streaming trails of light, the Master seemed somehow frail or distracted.

Anakin distanced himself from his heartsickness by concentrating on his uncle's words.

“Kyp,” Master Skywalker was saying, “I understand how you feel.”

Kyp Durrón was more honest than Master Skywalker, in some ways. The anger in his heart was no stranger to the expression on his face. If the Jedi were a planet, Master Skywalker stood at one pole, radiating calm. Kyp Durrón stood at the other, fists clenched in fury.

Somewhere near the equator the planet was starting to pull apart.

Kyp took a step forward, running his hand through dark hair shot with silver. “Master Skywalker,” he said, “I submit that you do *not* know how I feel. If you did, I would sense it in the Force. We all could. Instead, you hide your feelings from us.”

“I never said I *felt* as you do,” Luke said gently, “only that I understand.”

“Ah.” Kyp nodded, raising one finger and shaking it at Skywalker as if suddenly comprehending his point. “You mean you understand *intellectually*, but not with your heart! The Jedi you trained and inspired are hunted and killed throughout the galaxy, and you ‘understand’ it the way you might an equation? Your blood doesn’t burn to *do* something about it?”

“Of course I want to do something about it,” Luke said. “That’s why I’ve called this meeting. But anger is not the answer. Attack is not the answer, and retribution most certainly is not. We are Jedi. We defend, we support.”

“Defend who? Support what? Defend those beings you rescued from the atrocities of Palpatine? Support the New Republic and its good people? Shield the ones we have all shed blood for, time and again in the cause of peace and the greater good? These same cowardly beings who now defame us, deride us, and sacrifice us to their new Yuuzhan Vong masters? No one *wants* our help. They want us dead and forgotten. I say it’s time we defend ourselves. Jedi for the Jedi!”

Applause smacked around the chamber—not deafening, but not trivial either. Anakin had to admit, Kyp made a certain amount of sense. Who could the Jedi trust now? Only other Jedi, it seemed.

“What would you have us do, then, Kyp?” Luke asked mildly.

“I told you. Defend ourselves. Fight evil, in whatever guise it takes. And we don’t let the fight come to us, to catch us in our homes, asleep, with our children. We go out and find the enemy. Offense against evil *is* defense.”

“In other words, you would have us all emulate what you and your dozen have been doing.”

“I would have us emulate *you*, Master Skywalker—when you were battling the Empire.”

Luke sighed. “I was young, then,” he pointed out. “There was much I did not understand. Aggression is the way of the dark side.”

Kyp rubbed his jaw, then smiled briefly. “And who should know better, Master Skywalker, than one who *did* turn to the dark side.”

“Exactly,” Luke replied. “I fell, though I knew better. Like you, Kyp. We both, in our own way, thought we were wise enough and nimble enough to walk on the laser beam and not get burned. We were both wrong.”

“And yet we returned.”

“Barely. With much help and love.”

“Granted. But there were others. Kam Solusar, for instance, not to forget your own father—”

“What are you saying, Kyp? That it is easy to return from the dark side, and that justifies the risk?”

Kyp shrugged. “I’m saying the line between dark and light isn’t as sharp as you’re trying to make it, or exactly where you want to put it.” He steepled his fingers beneath his chin, then shook them with an air of contemplation. “Master Skywalker, if a man attacks me with a lightsaber, may I

defend with my own blade, that he not take my head off? Is that too aggressive?"

"Of course you may."

"And after I defend, may I press my attack? May I return the blow? If not, why are we Jedi *taught* lightsaber battle techniques? Why don't we learn only how to defend, and back off until the enemy has us in a corner and our arms grow tired, until an attack finally slips through our guard? Master Skywalker, sometimes the only defense *is* an attack. You know this as well as anyone."

"That's true, Kyp. I do."

"But you back down from the fight, Master Skywalker. You block and defend and never return the blow. Meanwhile the blades directed against you multiply. And you have begun to lose, Master Skywalker. One opportunity lost! And there lies Daeshara'cor, dead. Another slip in your defense, and Corran Horn is slandered as the destroyer of Ithor and driven to seclusion. Again an attack is neglected, and Wurth Skidder joins Daeshara'cor in death. And now a flurry of failures as a million blades swing at you, and there go Dorsk 82, and Seyyerin Itoklo, and Swilja Fenn, and who can count those we do not know of yet, or who will die tomorrow? *When* will you attack, Master Skywalker?"

"This is ridiculous!" a female voice exploded half a meter from Anakin's ear. It was his sister, Jaina, her face gone red with internal heat. "Maybe you don't hear all the news, running around playing hero with your squadron, Kyp. Maybe you've started feeling so self-important that you think your way is the only way. While you've been out there blazing your guns, Master Skywalker has been working quietly and hard to make sure things don't fall apart."

"Yes, and see how well that's gone," Kyp said. "Duro, for instance. How many Jedi were involved there? Five? Six? And yet not one of you—Master Skywalker included—smelled the rank treachery of the situation until it was too late. Why didn't the Force guide you?" He paused and then