

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: The New Jedi Order
- Agents of Chaos: Hero's
Trial

James Luceno

CONTENTS

About Book
Also by James Luceno
Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgments
Map
Dramatis Personae

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Copyright

About the Book

Merciless attacks by an invincible alien force have left the New Republic reeling. Dozens of worlds have succumbed to occupation or annihilation, and even the Jedi Knights have tasted defeat. In these darkest of times, the noble Chewbacca is laid to rest, having died as heroically as he lived—and a grief-stricken Han Solo is left to fit the pieces of his shattered life back together before he loses everything: friends, family, and faith.

Refusing help from Leia or Luke, Han becomes the loner he once was, seeking to escape the pain of his partner's death in adventure ... and revenge. When he learns that an old friend from his smuggling days is operating as a mercenary for the enemy he sets out to expose the traitor. But Han's investigation uncovers an even greater evil: a sinister conspiracy aimed at the very heart of the New Republic's will and ability to fight—the Jedi.

Now Han must face down his inner demons and, with the help of a new and unexpected ally, honor Chewbacca's sacrifice in the only way that matters—by being worthy of it.

Also by James Luceno

The Robotech Series (as Jack McKinney, with Brian Daley)

The Black Hole Travel Agency (as Jack McKinney, with Brian Daley)

A Fearful Symmetry

Illegal Alien

The Big Empty

Kaduna Memories

The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles: The Mata Hari Affair

The Shadow

The Mask of Zorro

Río Pasión

Rainchaser

Rock Bottom

Star Wars: Cloak of Deception

Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Agents of Chaos: Jedi Eclipse

Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: The Unifying Force

Star Wars: Labyrinth of Evil

Star Wars: Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

Star Wars: Millennium Falcon



AGENTS OF CHAOS
HERO'S TRIAL

James Luceno

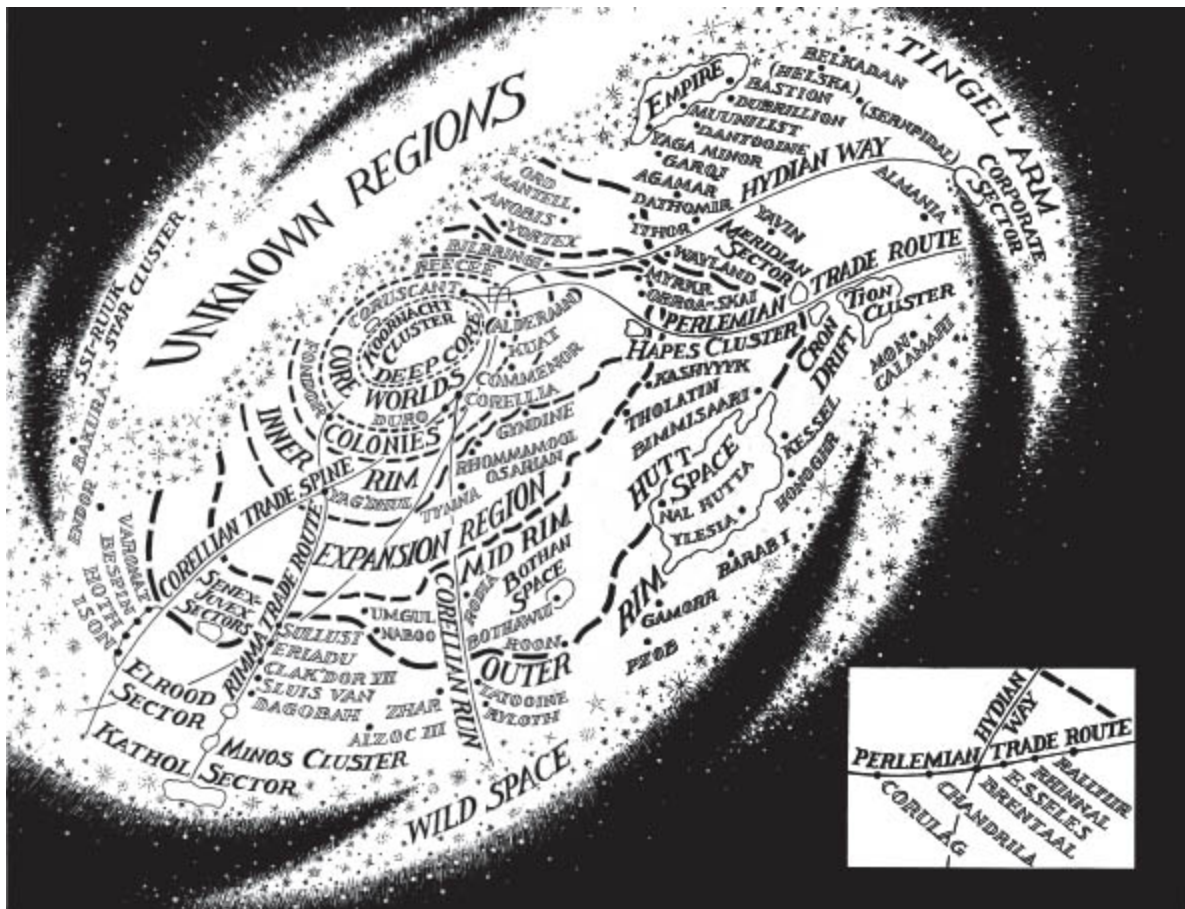


DEDICATION

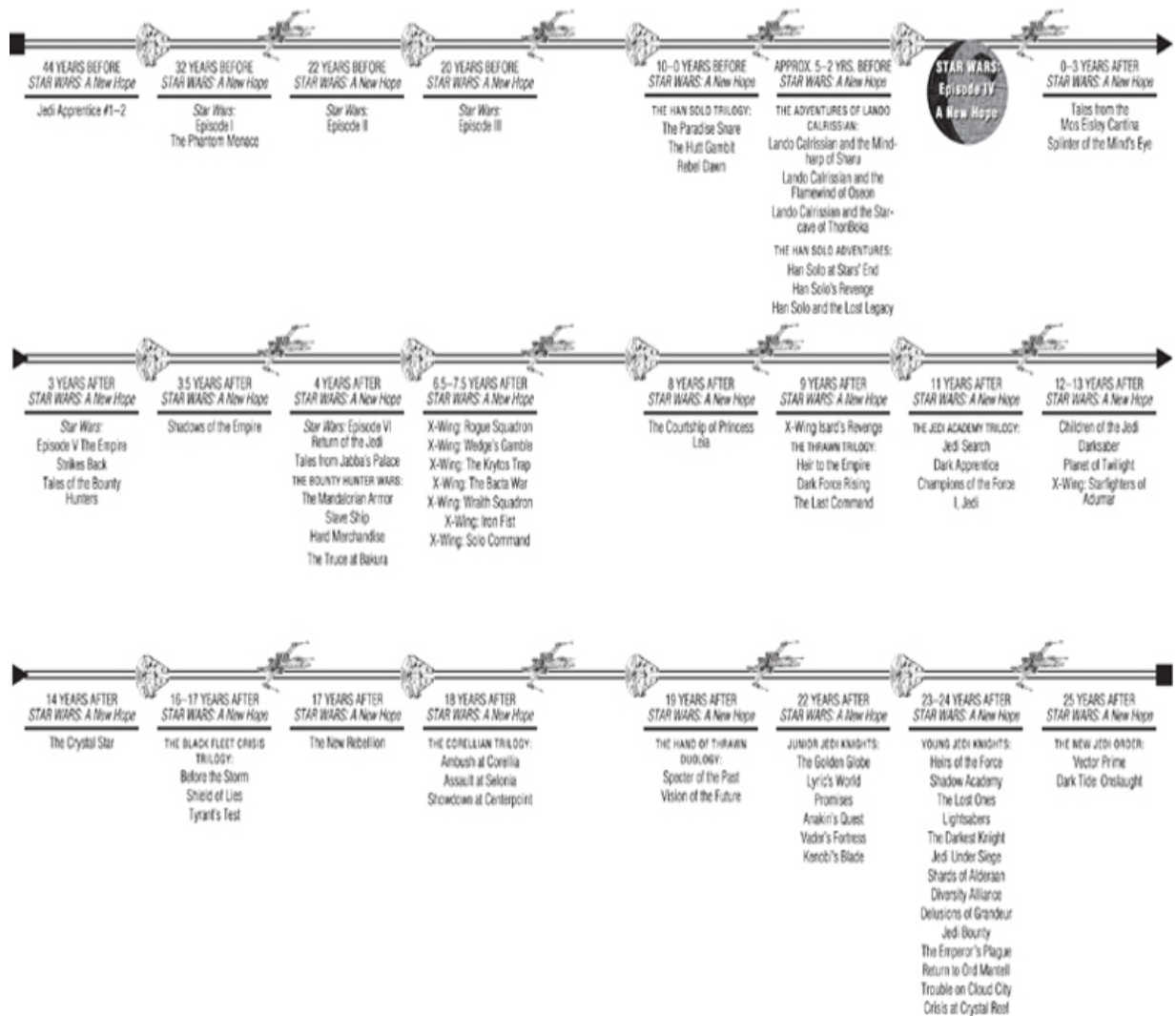
For my young son Jake,
and *The New Jedi Order*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to extend heartfelt thanks to those who kept me on track and loaned a hand along the way: Dan Wallace, who knows the expanded universe better than anyone; Rob Brown, whose suggestions helped shape chapter 7; and Alex Newborn, who steered me to a new character for chapter 14. Thanks, too, to Mike Kogge, Matt Olsen, Eelia Goldsmith Henderscheid, Enrique Guerrero, and Kris Boldis for their keen commentaries; fellow authors Robert Salvatore, Mike Stackpole, and Kathy Tyers for their detail work; and Shelly Shapiro, Sue Rostoni, and Lucy Autrey Wilson, without whom *The New Jedi Order* would never have taken shape. Finally, infinite gratitude to my late friend and collaborator, Brian Daley.



STAR WARS: THE NOVELS — What Happened When?



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Nom Anor; executor (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Malik Carr; commander (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Reck Desh; Peace Brigade mercenary (male human)
Droma; spacer (male Ryn)
Elan; priestess (female Yuuzhan Vong)
Harrar; priest (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Belindi Kalenda; New Republic Intelligence (female human)
Raff; battle tactician (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Roa; captain, *Happy Dagger* (male human)
Major Showolter; New Republic Intelligence (male human)
Luke Skywalker; Jedi Master (male human)
Mara Jade Skywalker; Jedi Master (female human)
Anakin Solo; Jedi Knight (male human)
Han Solo; captain, *Millennium Falcon* (male human)
Leia Organa Solo; New Republic ambassador (female human)
Tla; commander (male Yuuzhan Vong)
Vergere; Elan's familiar (female Fosh)

ONE

IF THE SYSTEM'S primary was distressed by the events that had transpired on and about the fourth closest of its brood, it betrayed nothing to the naked eye. Saturating local space with golden radiance, the star was as unperturbed now as it was before the battle had begun. Only the conquered world had suffered, its punished surface revealed in the steady crawl of sunlight. Regions that had once been green, blue, or white appeared ash-gray or reddish-brown. Below banks of panicked clouds, smoke chimneyed from immolated cities and billowed from tracts of firestormed evergreen forests. Steam roiled from the superheated beds of glacier-fed lakes and shallow seas.

Deep within the planet's shroud of cinder and debris moved the warship most responsible for the devastation. The vessel was a massive ovoid of yorik coral, its scabrous black surface relieved in places by bands of smoother stuff, lustrous as volcanic glass. In the pits that dimpled the coarse stretches hid projectile launchers and plasma weapons. Other, more craterlike depressions housed the laser-gobbling dovin basals that both drove the vessel and shielded it from harm. From fore and aft extended bloodred and cobalt arms, to which asteroidlike fighters clung like barnacles. Smaller craft buzzed around it, some effecting repairs to battle-damaged areas, others keen on recharging depleted weapons systems, a few delivering plunder from the planet's scorched crust.

Farther removed from the battle floated a smaller vessel, black, as well, but faceted and polished smooth as a

gemstone. Light pulsed through the ship at intervals, exciting one facet, then another, as if data were being conveyed from sector to sector.

From a roost in the underside of its angular snout, a gaunt figure, cross-legged on cushions, scanned the flotsam and jetsam a quirk of a gravitational drift had borne close to his ship: pieces of New Republic capital ships and starfighters, space-suited bodies in eerie repose, undetonated projectiles, the holed fuselage of a noncombat craft whose legend identified it as the *Penga Rift*.

In the near distance hung the blackened skeleton of a defense platform. Off to one side a ruined cruiser rolled end over end in a decaying orbit, surrendering its contents to vacuum like a burst pod scattering fine seeds. Elsewhere a fleeing transport, snagged by the spike of a bloated capture vessel, was being tugged inexorably toward the bowels of the giant warship.

The seated figure beheld these sights without cheer or regret. Necessity had engineered the destruction. What had been done needed to be done.

An acolyte stood in the rear of the command roost, relaying updates as they were received by a slender, living device fastened to his right inner forearm by six insectile legs.

“Victory is ours, Eminence. Our air and ground forces have overwhelmed the principal population centers and a war coordinator has installed itself in the mantle.” The acolyte glanced at the receiving villip on his arm, whose soft bioluminescent glow added appreciably to the roost’s scant light. “Commander Tla’s battle tactician is of the opinion that the astrogation charts and historical data stored here will prove valuable to our campaign.”

The priest, Harrar, glanced at the warship. “Has the tactician made his feelings known to Commander Tla?”

The acolyte’s hesitancy was answer enough, but Harrar suffered the verbal reply anyway.

“Our arrival does not please the commander, Eminence. He does not dismiss out of hand the need for sacrifice, but he asserts that the campaign has been successful thus far without the need for religious overseers. He fears that our presence will only confound his task.”

“Commander Tla fails to grasp that we engage the enemy on different fronts,” Harrar said. “Any opponent can be beaten into submission, but compliance is no guarantee that you have won him over to your beliefs.”

“Shall I relay as much to the commander, Eminence?”

“It is not your place. Leave that to me.”

Harrar, a male of middle years, rose and moved to the lip of the roost’s polygonal transparency, where he stood with three-fingered hands clasped at the small of his back—the missing digits having been offered in dedication ceremonies and ritual sacrifices, as a means of escalating himself. His tall slender frame was draped in supple fabrics of muted tones. A head cloth, patterned and significantly knotted, bound his long black tresses. The back of his neck showed vibrant markings etched into skin stretched taut by prominent vertebrae.

The planet turned beneath him.

“What is this world called?”

“Obroa-skai, Eminence.”

“Obroa-skai,” Harrar mused aloud. “What does the name signify?”

“The meaning is unknown at present. Though no doubt some explanation can be found among the captured data.”

Harrar’s right hand gestured in dismissal. “It’s a dead issue.”

A flash of weapons drew his eye to Obroa-skai’s terminator, where a yorik coral gunship was angling into the light, spewing rear fire at a quartet of snub-nosed starfighters that had evidently chased it from the planet’s dark side. The little X-wings were closing fast, thrusters ablaze and wingtips lancing energy beams at the larger

ship. Harrar had heard that the New Republic pilots had become adept at foiling the dovin basals by altering the frequency and intensity of the laser bolts the fighters discharged. These four pursued the gunship with a single-mindedness born of thorough self-possession. Such fierce confidence spoke to qualities the Yuuzhan Vong would need to keep solidly in mind as the invasion advanced. Largely oblivious to nuance, the warrior caste would have to be taught to appreciate that survival figured as strongly in the enemy's beliefs as death figured in the beliefs of the Yuuzhan Vong.

The gunship had changed vector and was climbing now, seemingly intent on availing itself of the protection offered by Commander Tla's warship. But the four fighters were determined to have it. Breaking formation, they accelerated, ensnaring the gunship at the center of their wrath.

The X-wing pilots executed their attack with impressive precision. Laser bolts and brilliant pink torpedoes rained from them, taxing the abilities of the gunship's dovin basals. For every bolt and torpedo engulfed by the gravitic collapses the dovin basals fashioned, another penetrated, searing fissures in the assault craft and sending hunks of reddish-black yorik coral exploding in all directions. Stunned by relentless strikes, the gunship huddled inside its shields, hoping for a moment's respite, but the starfighters refused to grant it any quarter. Bursts of livid energy assailed the ship, shaking it off course. The dovin basals began to falter. With defenses hopelessly compromised, the larger ship diverted power to weapons and counterattacked.

In a desperate show of force, vengeful golden fire erupted from a dozen gun emplacements. But the starfighters were simply too quick and agile. They made pass after pass, raking fire across the gunship's suddenly vulnerable hull. Gouts of slagged flesh fountained from

deep wounds and lasered trenches. The destruction of a plasma launcher sent a chain of explosions marching down the starboard side. Molten yorik coral streamed from the ship like a vapor trail. Shafts of blinding light began to pour from the core. The ship rolled over on its belly, shedding velocity. Then, jolted by a final paroxysm, it disappeared in a short-lived globe of fire.

It looked as if the X-wings might attempt to take the fight to the warship itself, but at the last moment the pilots turned tail. Salvos from the warship's weapons crisscrossed nearby space, but no missiles found their mark.

His scarified face a deeply shadowed mask, Harrar glanced over his shoulder at the acolyte. "Suggest to Commander Tla that his zealous gunners allow the little ones to escape," he said with incongruous composure. "After all, someone needs to live to speak of what happened here."

"The infidels fought well and died bravely," the acolyte risked remarking.

Harrar pivoted to face him fully, a bemused glint in his deeply set eyes. "Is that respect I hear?"

The acolyte nodded his head in deference. "Nothing more than an observation, Eminence. To earn my respect, they would have to embrace willingly the truth we bring them."

A herald of lesser station appeared in the roost, offering salute by snapping his fists to opposite shoulders. "*Belektiu*, Eminence. I bring word that the captives have been gathered."

"How many?"

"Several hundred—of diverse aspect. Do you wish to oversee the selection for the sacrifice?"

Harrar squared his shoulders and adjusted the fall of his elegant robes. "I am most eager to do so."

The transport gullet's diaphanous seal opened on an immense hold, packed to the bulkheads with captives taken on and in the skies above Obroa-skai. Harrar's entourage of personal guards and attendants moved into the hold, followed by the priest himself, perched atop a levitated cushion, one leg folded beneath him, the other dangling over the edge. The throbbing heart-shaped dovin basal that kept the cushion aloft answered to Harrar's quiet prompts, attracting itself to the hold's vaulted ceiling when the priest called for greater elevation, drawing itself toward one or another distant bulkhead when Harrar wished to be borne forward, backward, or to either side.

Well illuminated by bioluminescent patches that rashed the walls and ceiling, the hold had been sectioned off into a score of separate inhibition fields, arranged in two parallel rows and maintained by larger dovin basals. Pressed shoulder to shoulder in each field stood scholars and researchers from a host of worlds, humans and others—Bothans, Bith, Quarren, and Caamasi—all jabbering at once in a welter of tongues, while black-clad wardens armed with amphistaffs supervised the winnowing process. Meant for coralskipper sustenance rather than living cargo, the immense space reeked of natural secretions, blood, and sweat.

Mostly, though, fear was in the air.

Harrar hovered on the cushion, surveying the scene with hooded eyes. His retainers fell back so that he could proceed directly down the center aisle and inspect prisoners to both sides. In order to reach the first pair of inhibition fields, however, the priest was obliged to circumvent a large access shaft that had been filled to overflowing with confiscated droids, hundreds of them, heaped together in a mound of entangled limbs, appendages, and other mechanical parts.

When Harrar ordered a halt alongside the small mountain of machines, those droids that constituted the

summit began to tremble under his scrutiny. With a whirring of strained servomotors, domed, rectangular, and humaniform heads swiveled, audio sensors perked up, and countless photoreceptors came into sharp focus. A momentary avalanche sent several machines screeching and tumbling to the base of the pile, far belowdecks.

Harrar's intrigued gaze fell on a contorted protocol droid whose upper right arm boasted a band of colored cloth. He commanded the cushion to bring him within reach of the immobilized machine. "Why are some of these abominations affecting garments?" he asked his chief attendant.

"They appear to have functioned as research assistants, Eminence," the attendant explained. "Obroa-skai's libraries could be accessed only by those who had contracted with trained researchers. The symbol depicted on the machine's armband is that of the so-called Obroan Institute."

Harrar was aghast. "Do you mean to say that serious researchers consorted with these things as equals?"

The attendant nodded once. "Apparently so, Eminence."

Harrar's expression changed to one of contempt. "Allow a machine to think of itself as an equal and it will soon come to consider itself superior." He reached out, tore the armband from the droid's arm, and threw it to the deck. "Include a representative sampling of these monstrosities in the sacrifice," he ordered, "and incinerate the rest."

"We're done for," a muffled synthetic voice whined from deep within the pile.

Living arms of sundry lengths, colors, and textures reached imploringly for Harrar as the cushion carried him toward the closest inhibition field. Some of the prisoners begged for mercy, but most fell silent in stark apprehension. Harrar regarded them indifferently, until his eyes happened on a furred humanoid, from whose bulging brow emerged a pair of ringed, cone-shaped horns. Bare hands and feet were hardened by physical labor, but the

calluses belied a deep intelligence evidenced in the creature's limpid eyes. The humanoid wore a sleeveless sacklike garment that fell raggedly to the knees and was cinched at the waist by a braided cord fashioned from natural fiber.

"What species are you?" Harrar asked in flawless Basic.

"I am Gotal."

Harrar indicated the belted sackcloth. "Your attire befits a penitent more than a scholar. Which are you?"

"I am both, and I am neither," the Gotal said with purposeful ambiguity. "I am an H'kig priest."

Harrar twisted spiritedly on the cushion to address his retinue. "Good fortune. We have a holy one in our midst." His gaze returned to the Gotal. "Tell me something of your religion, H'kig priest."

"What interest could you have in my beliefs?"

"Ah, but I, too, am a performer of rituals. As one priest to another, then."

"We H'kig believe in the value of simple living," the Gotal said plainly.

"Yes, but to what end? To ensure bountiful harvests, to escalate yourself, to secure a place in the afterlife?"

"Virtue is its own reward."

Harrar adopted a puzzled look. "Your gods have said as much?"

"It is simply our truth—one among many."

"One among many. And what of the truth the Yuuzhan Vong bring you? Aver that you recognize our gods and I may be inclined to spare your life."

The Gotal stared at him dispassionately. "Only a false god would thirst so for death and destruction."

"Then it's true: you fear death."

"I have no fear of a death suffered in the cause of truth, the alleviation of suffering, or the abolishment of evil."

"Suffering?" Harrar leaned menacingly toward him. "Let me tell you of suffering, priest. Misery is the mainstay of

life. Those who accept this truth understand that death is the release from suffering. That's why we go willingly to our deaths, for we are the resigned ones." He scanned the captives and raised his voice. "We ask no more of you than we do ourselves: to repay the gods for the sacrifices they endured in creating the cosmos. We offer flesh and blood so that their work might endure."

"Our god demands no tribute other than good acts," the Gotal rejoined.

"Acts that raise calluses," Harrar said in disdain. "If this is all that is expected of you, it's no wonder your gods have abandoned you in your time of need."

"We have not been abandoned. We still have the Jedi."

Murmurs of fellowship moved through the throng of captives, reticently at first, then with mounting conviction.

Harrar regarded the disparate faces below him: the labrous and the thin-lipped, the rugose and the smooth, the hairless and the hirsute, the horned and the furrowed. In their home galaxy, the Yuuzhan Vong had attempted to eradicate such diversity, prompting wars that had raged for millennia and had claimed the lives of peoples and worlds too numerous to count. This time, though, the Yuuzhan Vong planned to be more circumspect, destroying only those peoples and worlds necessary to complete the cleansing.

"These Jedi are your gods?" Harrar asked at last.

The Gotal took a moment to answer. "The Jedi Knights are the trustees of peace and justice."

"And this 'Force' I have heard about—how would you describe it?"

The Gotal grinned faintly. "It is something you will never touch. Although if I didn't know better, I would swear you were sprung from its dark side."

Harrar's interest was piqued. "The Force contains both light and dark?"

"As do all things."

“And which are you with regard to us? Are you so sure you embody the light?”

“I know only what my heart teaches.”

Harrar deliberated. “Then this struggle is more than some petty war. This is a contest of gods, in which you and I are but mere instruments.”

The Gotal held his head high. “That may be so. But the final judgment is already decided.”

Harrar sneered. “May that belief comfort you in your final hour, priest—which, I assure you, is close at hand.” Again he addressed the multitudes. “Up until now your species have faced only Yuuzhan Vong warriors and politicians. As of today know that the true architects of your destiny have arrived.”

He beckoned his entourage forward. “This Force is a strange, stubborn faith,” he said quietly as one of his attendants came alongside the dovin basal cushion. “If ever we’re to rule here, we need to understand just how it binds these myriad beings together. And we need to vanquish the Jedi Knights, once and for all.”

TWO

IN A GALAXY fraught with wonders, the convergence of columnar tree trunks and forking branches that supported the Wookiee city of Rwookrrorro enjoyed a place of special honor. Viewed from above against its backdrop of fathomless forest, the city appeared to have been rescued from the planet's harsh underworld and submitted to Kashyyyk's scudded sky as an example of nature and technology in consummate poise.

At the outskirts of the city, distant from the circular buildings that rose from its spongy floor and scaled the trunks of the giant trees themselves, atop a massive fallen branch that spanned several treetops, a ceremony was in progress, enacted in observance of nature's timeless cycle of life and death.

The participants, including two dozen Wookiees and humans of both sexes, were arranged in a loose circle around a wooden table that happened also to be circular. Some stood, others sat on their haunches or on the ground, but all wore solemn expressions, save for the group's only nonliving members, the droids C-3PO and R2-D2, whose alloy countenances remained, in all circumstances, essentially neutral.

C-3PO stood with his bulbous head tilted slightly to one side and his arms bent at angles rarely adopted by the life-form after which he had been modeled. To the droid the rigid posture seemed entirely natural, a consequence of the way he was put together and the ever-changing demands of the servomotors that permitted him to gesticulate and

move about. Beside him, R2-D2 stood still as a fixture, locomotion struts planted firmly on the fallen wroshyr tree branch and center tread retracted.

In passing, C-3PO noted that the view from the fallen branch was really quite extraordinary. Fog was thick in the treetops, concealing the nearest of the Wookiee nursery rings and diffusing the morning light as might a prism. The view could even be said—though certainly not by him—to be *brehtaking*.

[We gather in memory of Chewbacca: honorable son, beloved mate, devoted father, loyal friend and comrade in arms, champion and clan uncle to all of us in spirit, if not in the traditional way.]

The Wookiee speaker was called Ralrracheen, though C-3PO had often heard him referred to simply as Ralrra. He was tall and aged, even for his arboreal species, but it wasn't the graying muzzle that distinguished him so much as his curious speech impediment. On any other occasion C-3PO would have been tasked to serve as translator and interpreter, but none of the humans present had need of his polyglot faculties that particular morning.

[In Chewbacca, the defiant flame burned brightest,] Ralrra went on, black nose twitching and long arms dangling at his sides. [On Kashyyyk or farr afield on distant worlds, he was never less than courageous and incorruptible—a Wookiee with heart enough for ten and eagerr strength enough forr fifty.]

Chewbacca had died six standard months earlier, during an ill-fated rescue attempt on the planet Sernpidal, after it had been targeted for destruction by the Yuuzhan Vong. The fact that it hadn't been possible to retrieve his body was a source of sorrow to all, for had Chewbacca been returned to Kashyyyk a funeral would have been held—though for honor family members only. What Wookiees did with their dead remained a closely guarded secret. Some experts speculated that the dead were cremated; others,

that they were either buried within tree knots or lowered by kshyy vines into the murky depths from which the species had risen. Still others claimed that the dead were hacked to pieces with sacred ryyk blades and scattered on select wroshyr branches to be carried off by predatory katarns or kroyie birds.

C-3PO understood that he may not have been allowed to attend the funeral, in any case. Everyone attending the memorial was a member of Chewbacca's extended family, but it was unlikely that the affiliation applied to him—much less to his counterpart, R2-D2. For all their espousal to machines, intelligent and otherwise, flesh and bloods could be extremely proprietary about matters of kinship and family.

Close to Ralrra squatted Chewbacca's father, Attichitcuk, along with Chewbacca's auburn-furred sister, Kallabow. Alongside them sat Chewbacca's widow, Mallatobuck, and their son, Lumpawarrump, who had taken the name Lumpawaroo—Waroo for short—on the successful completion of his rite of passage. Interspersed among the Wookiee contingent stood assorted friends, kin-brothers, cousins, nieces, and nephews—Lowbacca among the latter, a Jedi Knight.

The humans numbered only six: Master Luke, Mistress Leia, Master Han, and the three Solo offspring, Anakin, Jacen, and Jaina. Conspicuously absent was Lando Calrissian, who, much to Master Han's disquiet, had sent word that unexpected—and unspecified—developments would prevent his attending. Master Luke's wife, Mara, might have attended if a sudden relapse in her mysterious malady hadn't forced her to remain on Coruscant.

The exquisitely carved table at the center of the circle rested on a carpet of wroshyr tree leaves, its pedestal base entwined with dark-green kshyy vines and its round top strewn with kolvissh blossoms, wasaka berries, Orga root, and the glossy yellow petals of the syren plant. The cool air

was redolent with the aroma of smoldering tree-resin incense.

[Here on Kashyyyk, Chewbacca's mettle made itself known at an early age,] Ralrra continued. [With his late friend Salporin]—he paused to glance at Salporin's widow, Gorrlyn—[Chewbacca left the nursery ring to venture down along the Rryatt Trail to the Well of the Dead, in the heart of the Shadow Forest. Armed only with a ryyk blade, he braved mock shyrr, jaddyk moss, needlebug, trap-spinnerr, and shadow-keeperr to harvest strands from the heart of the flesh-eating syren, thus earning the right to wearr a baldric, carry a weapon, and confirm the name he chose to be known by. Here, too, Chewbacca ventured into the great Anarrad pit—not once or even twice, but five times, taking down the taloned katarn on three of those hunts and once receiving a wound from the beast in return.] Ralrra indicated a spot on his shaggy torso. [Here, on the left side of his chest.

[In preparation for his marriage, which took place atop this very branch, Chewbacca descended to the fifth level and there with bare hands captured a quillarat and presented it to Malla as an expression of his love. And when it came time for Waroo's initiation, Chewbacca was steadfast in his support and encouraging of his son's quest of the scuttle grazerr.]

While some of Chewbacca's accomplishments on his homeworld were familiar to C-3PO, his memory lacked anything in the way of corroborative data, so he summoned recollections of his own experiences with the Wookiee and was immediately inundated with a rapid-fire sequence of images, some of them dating back twenty-five standard years.

His first sight of Chewbacca, standing like a cinnamon-colored tower outside Docking Bay 94 in the Mos Eisley spaceport on Tatooine ... Chewbacca as a sore loser in dejarik holoboard contests ... Chewbacca on Bespin's Cloud

City, incorrectly reattaching C-3PO's head after it had been used by Ugnaughts as a plaything in a game of Wookiee in the Middle ... Master Han's assertion that Chewbacca was always thinking with his stomach ... The many, many times Chewbacca was referred to as "flea-bitten furball," "overgrown mophead," "walking carpet," or "noisy brute," occasionally by C-3PO himself—in imitation of humans, of course—and always with affection, given Chewbacca's scrupulous character and great size.

A sudden flutter gripped C-3PO, and he found that he was unable to summon additional recollections. An unnatural and most discomfiting heat surged through his circuitry, prompting him to run a diagnostic program, which ultimately left the source of the glitch unrevealed.

Ralrra woofed, brayed, and barked.

[Natural curiosity compelled Chewbacca to leave Kashyyyk at an early age, but like all of us he was soon enslaved by the Empire. Fortunately, Chewbacca regained his freedom at the hands of a man of like strength and honorr—ourr revered brotherr Han Solo. And in the company of Han Solo, to whom he had pledged his life, Chewbacca was to play a crucial role in the Rebellion, and in the events that led eventually to the downfall of Emperor Palpatine.]

C-3PO focused his photoreceptors on Master Han, whose eyes were red-rimmed and narrowed, and whose right hand Mistress Jaina had taken between her own. The dark-blue military-style trousers Master Han was wearing were similar to the tattered pair he had attempted to preserve for posterity, but which only the previous day had proved incapable of conforming to Master Han's slightly increased waistline and had torn irreparably. Present during the incident—the cause of no small measure of vexation to Master Han—C-3PO had assisted in affixing to the outside seams of the replacement trousers twin embellishments known as Corellian Bloodstripes.

Across from the father and daughter stood Master Jacen and Mistress Leia, her head resting on her elder son's shoulder and her cheeks glistening with tears. Near them squatted Master Anakin, brooding and withdrawn, along with Master Luke, certainly no stranger to death, having lost both his natural and adoptive parents, as well as Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda, two of his Jedi mentors.

[Chewbacca went on to become a soldierr in the New Republic,] Ralrra boomed and rumbled. [He aided in Kashyyyk's liberation afterr the Battle of Endorr. But he remained first and foremost devoted to Han Solo, as friend and indebted protectorr, and as guardian to Han Solo's spouse and three children.] Ralrra turned to Han. [It was Chewbacca's honorr to have been able to come to his friend's rescue on several occasions, even as recently as the crisis involving the Yevetha, when he freed Han Solo from imprisonment aboard a Yevethan warship.]

Once more C-3PO tightened the focus of his photoreceptors on Master Han, who lowered his head in abject grief, as Jaina stroked his shoulders. Master Han's relationship with Chewbacca was similar to C-3PO's with R2-D2, though it seemed at times that the two droids had been together even longer than had the human and the Wookiee.

R2-D2 must have been regarding Master Han, as well, for the astromech suddenly rotated his monocular receptor to C-3PO and warbled tremulously, almost as if he, too, had picked up an enigmatic flutter.

C-3PO changed the cant of his head.

The past several months had afforded ample opportunities to study humans in grief, but for all his observations he was no closer to understanding the process than he had been before Chewbacca's death on that dreadful world. All living beings eventually died, when not from the effects of age, then as the result of accidents or illnesses almost too myriad to catalog. Death was in some

ways analogous to deactivation or memory erasure, but in fact it was something quite different, a total ceasing-to-be—the end to all adventuring, indeed. In the face of that revelation, C-3PO felt compelled to wonder if he hadn't been wrong all along about his lot in life. If, as he so often declared, droids were made to suffer, what then of flesh and bloods?

Perhaps it was better not to know.

As constructed, C-3PO was incapable of shedding tears or enduring heartbreak, as it was called, but his programming did allow him to experience sorrow of a sort, if not nearly to the depth experienced by humans and other living beings. And it was suddenly clear that sorrow was the source of the flutter that continued to plague him. Try as he might, he could not summon a sound thought, and with each glance at Master Han his dismay increased.

As the one closest to Chewbacca—and perhaps because he was a very *human* being—Master Han seemed to be suffering the most, alternating between anguish and rage, despondency and agitation. The man C-3PO had once dismissed as impossible was now deeply distraught, as unreachable as if he were encased in carbonite, and there seemed nothing C-3PO could do to put the matter right. Being fluent in millions of forms of communication did not guarantee an understanding of human behavior, let alone human emotions. C-3PO was only a droid, after all, and not very knowledgeable about such things.

There had been an incident during Master Han's courtship of then Princess Leia when Master Han had had occasion to place a hand on C-3PO's arm and say, "You're a good droid, Threepio. There's not many droids I like as much as I like you." He had gone on to ask C-3PO's advice on matters of the heart, and C-3PO had gladly provided a poem for Master Han to use as ammunition in his contest with Prince Isolder for the princess's hand.

But curse my metal body, C-3PO said to himself. Why hadn't his maker equipped him with the necessary programming to come to Master Han's aid now? Instead, all he could offer was mindless philosophizing!

[Adventure is as alluring and potentially dangerous a thing as the heart of the syren plant,] Ralrra roared plaintively. [But even Chewbacca's final act was one of sacrifice, giving his life to save someone dear to him.] The aged Wookiee looked at young Anakin, then at Master Han and Mistress Leia. [And as ever he kept his claws retracted in battle. Now, in the same way the branches of the wroshyr seek out and support one another, Chewbacca's spirit merges with and gives sustenance to our own, strengthening us for the challenges we have yet to confront.]

Warfare had figured in C-3PO's existence for so long that a new invasion shouldn't have come as a surprise. But there was something different about the Yuuzhan Vong and the harrowing war they were waging on a galactic scale. It wasn't merely that they didn't distinguish among species or among worlds—New Republic, Imperial Remnant, or nonaligned—or even that their biotic warships and weapons packed such awesome destructive power. What worried C-3PO most was that this most recent conflict was one in which not even droids were spared. And that meant that, like it or not, he might yet arrive at a true understanding of grief and death.

The circular table was covered with foodstuffs—bowls of xachibik broth, barbecued trakrrrn ribs, forest-honey cakes, salad garnished with rillrrnnn seeds, and flasks of wines, juices, and liquors. Humans and Wookiees were conversing in groups, recounting tales of Chewbacca's exploits that brought laughter, tears, or moments of sober reflection. The breeze had picked up, stirring leaves and enlivening wind chimes.

Han sat dejectedly on a short-legged wooden stool, resting his elbows on his knees. "Y'know, I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but I think I actually envy Threepio."

Jaina followed her father's gaze to where the droid was standing with his squat counterpart, looking completely at a loss. "It's better not to have a heart, you mean."

"At times like this, anyway." Han exhaled wearily and ran his right hand down over his face.

Jaina motioned to the table. "Let me get you something to eat, Dad. You must be starved."

He managed a smile. "Thanks, sweetie, but I'm not hungry."

"You should have something anyway," she said in a maternal way.

Han brightened slightly and reached for her hand. "You help yourself, I'm fine."

She frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." He gestured with his chin. "Get going. Eat enough for the both of us."

Reluctantly, Jaina headed for the table. Han watched her for a long moment as she mingled with her siblings, Luke, and Lowbacca. Observing them, he wondered what he might do if he could use the Force the way the Jedi did. Would he remain on the light side, or would he avail himself of the sinister powers of the dark side to teach the Yuuzhan Vong a thing or two about vengeance? Violent and ghastly images blossomed in his mind like explosions, but he put a quick end to them. He had had months of such images already, and they had come to nothing. No amount of vengeful thinking was going to bring Chewie back.

He glanced at his hands and found them balled into fists. While he'd spent the past six months isolated and incapacitated, often in the dark or secreted inside a tapcaf on Coruscant, the Jedi had at least been taking the fight to the enemy, and that was exactly what he needed to do.