

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Legacy of the Force - Invincible

Troy Denning

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Troy Denning

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgments

The Star Wars Novels Timeline

Dramatis Personae

Prologue

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

Epilogue

Copyright

About the Book

The final novel in the epic nine-book *Legacy of the Force* series, concluding the tale of Jacen Solo's journey to the dark side, and featuring Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Leia Organa Solo, Jaina Solo, and Ben Skywalker, Luke and Mara Jade's son.

About the Author

Troy Denning is the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Star Wars: Tatooine Ghost*, *Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Star by Star*, as well as *Waterdeep* (under the pseudonym Richard Awlinson) and nineteen other novels, including *Pages of Pain*, *Beyond the High Road*, and *The Summoning*. His most recent *Star Wars* novels are the three books of the trilogy, *Star Wars: Dark Nest*. A former game designer and editor, he enjoys hiking, mountain climbing, judo, and any sport that involves going fast with boards strapped to his feet. He lives in southern Wisconsin with his wife, Andria.

By Troy Denning

Waterdeep
Dragonwall
The Parched Sea
The Verdant Passage
The Crimson Legion
The Amber Enchantress
The Obsidian Oracle
The Cerulean Storm
The Ogre's Pact
The Giant Among Us
The Titan of Twilight
The Veiled Dragon
Pages of Pain
Crucible: The Trial of Cyric the Mad
The Oath of Stonekeep
Faces of Deception
Beyond the High Road
Death of the Dragon (with Ed Greenwood)
The Summoning
The Siege
The Sorcerer

Star Wars: THE NEW JEDI ORDER: Star by Star
Star Wars: TATOOINE GHOST
Star Wars: DARK NEST I: The Joiner King
Star Wars: DARK NEST II: The Unseen Queen
Star Wars: DARK NEST III: The Swarm War
Star Wars: LEGACY OF THE FORCE: Tempest
Star Wars: LEGACY OF THE FORCE: Inferno
Star Wars: LEGACY OF THE FORCE: Invincible



INVINCIBLE

TROY DENNING



arrow books

*For my parents
Robert and Jane Denning
and the rescue dogs
of the
Longears Ranch*

acknowledgments



Many people contributed to this book in ways large and small. I would like to thank them all, especially the following: Andria Hayday for her support, critiques, and many fine suggestions; James Luceno, Leland Chee, Howard Roffman, Amy Gary, Pablo Hidalgo, and Keith Clayton for their valuable contributions during our brainstorming sessions; Shelly Shapiro and Sue Rostoni for their many wonderful ideas, for their patience and insight, and especially for being so much fun to work with; my fellow writers, Aaron Allston and Karen Traviss, for all their hard work and their myriad other contributions to this book and the series; Laura Jorstad, for her careful copyediting under pressure (with my apologies); all the people at Lucasfilm and Del Rey who make writing *Star Wars* so much fun; and, finally, George Lucas for letting us take his galaxy in this exciting new direction.

Most of the jokes at the start of each chapter came from one of my favorite *Star Wars* collections, Kevin J. Anderson and Rebecca Moesta's *Young Jedi Knights* series. Jokes were also contributed by Andria Hayday and Sue Rostoni.

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



100 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Bane: Path of Destruction
Darth Bane: Rule of Two



33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Maul: Saboteur*

32.5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Cloak of Deception
Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

32 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE I THE PHANTOM MENACE

29 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Rogue Planet

27 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Outbound Flight

22.5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Approaching Storm

22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE II ATTACK OF THE CLONES

Republic Commando: Hard
Contact

21.5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Shatterpoint

21 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Cestus Deception
The Hive*
Republic Commando: Triple Zero
Republic Commando: True Colors

20 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

MedStar I: Battle Surgeons
MedStar II: Jedi Healer

19.5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Trial
Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

19 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Labyrinth of Evil

STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth
Vader

Coruscant Nights I: Jedi Twilight

10-0 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Han Solo Trilogy:

The Paradise Snare
The Hutt Gambit
Rebel Dawn

5-2 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Adventures of Lando
Calrissian

The Han Solo Adventures



STAR WARS: A New Hope YEAR 0

Death Star

STAR WARS: EPISODE IV A NEW HOPE

0-3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales from the Mos Eisley

Cantina

Allegiance

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

3.5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Shadows of the Empire

4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: EPISODE VI RETURN OF THE JEDI

Tales from Jabba's Palace

Tales from the Empire

Tales from the New Republic

The Bounty Hunter Wars:

The Mandalorian Armor

Slave Ship

Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura



6.5-7.5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing:

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

8

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Courtship of Princess Leia
A Forest Apart*
Tatooine Ghost

9

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Thrawn Trilogy:

Heir to the Empire
Dark Force Rising
The Last Command

X-Wing: Isard's Revenge

11

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Jedi Academy Trilogy:

Jedi Search
Dark Apprentice
Champions of the Force

I, Jedi

12-13

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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

14

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Crystal Star

16-17

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Black Fleet Crisis Trilogy:

Before the Storm
Shield of Lies
Tyrant's Test

17

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The New Rebellion

18

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Corellian Trilogy:

Ambush at Corellia
Assault at Selonia
Showdown at Centerpoint

19

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Hand of Thrawn

Duology:

Specter of the Past
Vision of the Future

22

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Fool's Bargain*

Survivor's Quest



25 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



40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force:

Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury
Revelation
Invincible

*An ebook novella

dramatis personae



Ben Skywalker; Jedi Knight (human male)
Boba Fett; Mandalorian bounty hunter, *Mand'alor* (human male)
Darth Caedus (formerly Jacen Solo); Sith Lord (human male)
Han Solo; captain, *Millennium Falcon* (human male)
Jagged Fel; Jedi support pilot (human male)
Jaina Solo; Jedi Knight (human female)
Leia Organa Solo; Jedi Knight (human female)
Lon Shevu; captain, Galactic Alliance Guard (human male)
Luke Skywalker; Jedi Grand Master (human male)
Mirta Gev; Mandalorian bounty hunter (human female)
Prince Isolder; father to the Hapan Queen Mother (human male)
Saba Sebatyne; Jedi Master (Barabel female)
Tahiri Veila; Sith apprentice (human female)
Taryn Zel; Hapan security operative (human female)
Tenel Ka; Hapan Queen Mother (human female)
Trista Zel; Hapan security operative (human female)
Zekk; Jedi Knight (human male)

prologue

A LONG TIME AGO . . .

Jaina Solo sits alone in the cold, her knees drawn tight to her chest and her arms wrapped around her legs to conserve body heat. She is fourteen, and she hasn't slept in days because her captors flood her cell with harsh bright light at odd intervals. She has never been so hungry, and her body aches from the daily beatings her tormentors call "training." She knows what they are trying to take from her, and she refuses to surrender it. But she is alone and frightened and in more pain than she has ever before endured, and her will is a strand of spider silk holding a crystal chandelier. One more beating, one more sleepless rest period, one more hour spent shivering on a bare durasteel bunk, and she may drop that chandelier. And that scares her more than dying, because it means submitting to her fear, embracing her anger . . . because it means turning to the dark side.

Then the place in her heart that belongs to her brother begins to warm, and she knows Jacen is thinking of her. She pictures him sitting in his own cell in another spoke of the space station, his brown hair wavy and tousled, his jaw clenched with earnest resolve, and the warm place in her heart starts to grow. She stops shivering, her hunger fades, and her fear turns to resolve.

This is the gift of their twin bond: that neither Jaina nor Jacen is ever truly alone. They share a connection through the Force that will always sustain them. When one grows weak, the other strengthens. When one hurts, the other

soothes. It is a bond that cannot be broken by any power in the galaxy, as much a part of them as the Force itself.

So Jaina puts aside her despair and turns her thoughts to escape, because when she and Jacen work together, nothing is impossible. They are on a space station, so they are going to have to steal a spacecraft. They will have to find a way to deactivate the hangar's containment field, perhaps through sabotage or by forging a launch authorization. And that means they are going to need some time before the guards realize they're gone—especially since they have to free their friend Lowbacca before fleeing.

The only way to tell time in the cell is to count heartbeats, and Jaina is too busy planning to do that. So when Jacen's place in her heart begins to grow larger and more full, she has no idea how much time has passed. But she has felt the sensation thousands of times before, and she knows what it means: her brother is coming.

Jaina's pulse begins to pound with excitement, and soon she can feel Jacen's pulse pounding to the same rhythm. He is very close now, coming down the corridor outside her cell—and she cannot sense any other presences accompanying him. She doesn't want him to know how frightened she has been—or how close she has come to breaking—so she begins a Jedi breathing exercise to calm herself.

Then she feels him stop two cells away.

Not there, dummy, Jaina thinks. Keep coming.

There is a flutter in Jaina's heart as Jacen grows confused, and she worries that her brother is about to open the wrong cell and ruin their escape. She reaches out to him in the Force, trying to physically pull him toward her, and soon the control pad outside her cell door begins to click.

Jaina breathes a sigh of relief, then folds her arms across her chest and leans back against the wall. She knows this is going to take awhile, because Jacen is really bad with machinery.

Somehow, though, he deactivates the alarm before he unlocks the cell, then manages to unlock the cell without activating the intercom to the control center. Finally, the door hisses open, and Jaina sees her twin brother standing outside, smirking at her with a replica of their father's famous lopsided grin.

"Hi, Jaina," he says. "I don't suppose you'd like to—"

"What took you so long?" Jaina demands, interrupting her brother's fun. He is always making jokes and wisecracks, and they are always lame. "I've been waiting for you."

She slips off her bunk and steps through the door past him, then looks down the corridor in both directions, searching for guards or other signs of trouble. Jacen isn't much better at planning than fixing machinery, so—however he managed to get this far—there is a good chance that the guards are on to him by now.

But the famous Solo luck seems to be with him today, and Jaina sees nothing but the closed doors of other cells. She would like to free the other captives, but she knows better than to try. Their wills have already been broken, and one of them would be sure to alert the guards. So Jaina simply closes her own door and leans closer to Jacen.

"What now?" she asks. "Have you figured out where Lowbacca is?"

Jacen flushes, then drops his gaze to the floor. "Not yet," he admits. "I was sort of hoping you might have a plan."

Jaina smiles. "Of course I do," she says. "Didn't I say I've been waiting?"

chapter one

What do you call the person who brings dinner to a rancor? The appetizer!

—Jacen Solo, age 14, Jedi academy on Yavin 4

THE TUNNEL DESCENDING into Nickel One's transportation warrens was typically Verpine: square, straight, and lined with so many tubes, ducts, and conduits that it was impossible to see native rock. It was also crazy-clean in that maybe-the-hive-mother-has-a-problem kind of way, with a spotless smoke-blue floor and gleaming aquamarine pipe—work which made it virtually identical to the rest of the passages Jaina had seen while touring the asteroid's defenses. Even with her Force abilities, she found it impossible to tell exactly where she and Boba Fett were inside the insect colony . . . and whether they had any chance of rejoining the Mandalorian garrison commandos before stormtroopers began landing.

It was three weeks after the battle of Fondor, and—following a series of threats and overtures from all sides of the Galactic Civil War—the Verpine had invited the Mandalorians to establish a base on Nickel One to deter anyone who might think of forcing the issue. Obviously, the deterrent hadn't worked. Just a standard hour earlier, Jaina and Fett had been inspecting the asteroid's defenses when an Imperial Remnant flotilla had unexpectedly arrived from hyperspace and made a feint toward the primary loading docks. Half an hour later, a full planetary invasion fleet had arrived and pounded Nickel One's surface defenses into slag and dust. Soon the actual troop-drop would begin, and even

the Verpine entertained no hopes of repelling it. The only question was where the Imperials would land first.

An urgent drone rose ahead, and the bitter taint of Verpine alarm pheromones grew thick in the tunnel's muggy air. The guide—a thick-limbed insect with the spiked carahide and heavy mandibles of the soldier caste—started to walk faster, and Jaina began to worry that a swarm of frenzied warriors would mistake her and Fett for the enemy. When Fett's hand drifted toward his holstered blaster, she knew she wasn't the only one concerned.

Still, she didn't dare suggest that their guide comm ahead to remind his fellow Verpine that she and Fett were on the hive's side. She knew how Fett would view such an obvious precaution—and maybe he was right. Maybe any appearance of weakness *was* a weakness.

Jaina had been training with the legendary bounty hunter for just a little more than a standard month, but she had come to know him well. At times, she could almost read his mind. When the Remnant flotilla had feinted toward the loading docks, she had predicted that he would pretend to fall for the ruse . . . and watched him send a wing of *Bes'ulike* out to “drive off” the enemy. When the actual invasion fleet had arrived, she had guessed that Fett would counterpunch hard. In fact, he had convinced Nickel One's High Coordinator to hurl her entire starfighter force at the Remnant's flagship, the *Dominion*, and the Super Star Destroyer had quickly become a flaming hulk.

Now, with the asteroid's capture a virtual certainty, Jaina knew Fett would not meet the invaders on the surface. He would opt for a far bloodier strategy, attacking them in the narrow access tunnels that led down from the air locks, making them pay in lives for every meter they advanced.

And Jaina knew that her training had just come to an end, because Boba Fett would not risk her—the tool of his vengeance against his daughter's killer—in a battle he could not win. As soon as they passed a hangar with a serviceable

starfighter still inside, he would cut Jaina loose and tell her to go hunt down her twin brother.

What Jaina did not know was whether she was ready. She could fight any three men in Keldabe and be the only one left standing. She could splat a dyeball on Fett's armor anywhere she wanted. She could outfly Mandalore's best pilots in any vessel they chose, and shoot down an entire squadron in elite combat simulations.

None of that meant she was good enough to bring down a Sith Lord.

And she had to be. If Mara had been frightened enough of her brother's transformation to attempt killing him, then it was up to Jaina to finish the job. Jacen—or Darth Caedus, as he called himself now—had to be stopped—for Mara and Ben and Luke, for her parents and Tenel Ka and Allana, for Kashyyyk and Fondor and the rest of the galaxy.

But was she ready?

After a few moments of descent, the alarm pheromones grew so thick that Jaina's eyes started to burn, and the Force sizzled with the excitement and outrage of thousands of insectoids. The drone ahead blossomed into a dull roar, and then the tunnel opened into the worst pedjam she had ever seen. Swarms of thick-limbed Verpine with spiked carahide and ryyk-sized mandibles were pouring into the main transportation depot, climbing over one another or using their shatter rifles like plow blades as they crowded into the cavern from a dozen different directions.

Jaina and Fett's escort pushed into the writhing mass and was immediately shoved first one way, then the other. Soon he became almost indistinguishable from the rest of the Verpine mass—even to Jaina, who, as a former Killik Joiner, could tell the insects apart far better than most humans. She grabbed hold of the guide's ammunition belt and held tight, using the Force to shoulder aside any warrior who tried to slip between them.

When they had made no appreciable progress after fifteen seconds, Fett butted his way to the guide's side. "At this rate, the Imperials are going to be inside before I can post my men. Is there another way to the command bunker?"

The guide rocked his tubular head, thinking, then blinked his bulbous eyes. "We might be able to cross the surface—"

"Forget it," Fett said.

There was no need to explain his reluctance—not to Jaina. With an invasion fleet bombarding Nickel One and an armada of assault shuttles about to descend on the surface, trying to cross fifty kilometers of asteroid in a dust-crawler was a long shot—and Fett always played the odds, especially when it came to risking his life.

"You've got clearance from the High Coordinator," Fett said. "Tell 'em to make a hole."

"I *am*," the guide replied. His voice was surprisingly thin and reedy for a being nearly the size of a Wookiee, most likely because it was so seldom used. Verpine usually "talked" using biologically generated radio waves, resorting to sound only when speaking to other species. "But the enemy has launched its first swarm of assault shuttles, and a thousand other combat directors and several battle coordinators are also demanding the right-of-way. We *all* have priority one clearance from Her Maternellence."

"I thought your kind was supposed to be organized," Fett growled. He pointed across the vault toward a loading area that Jaina could barely see through the swarm of huge insects ahead. "That our tube?"

"Yes—DownYellow Express FiftySeat," the guide said. "But they are running low on passenger capsules, so we may need to switch—"

"So we need to get there first," Fett growled.

He squared his shoulders and started to shove ahead, but Jaina had anticipated his impatience and was already using the Force to hold him back. "Ladies first," she said, gliding

past. “Now that you’re a Head of State, you might want to learn some manners.”

She began to use the Force to clear a path, her hand moving back and forth ever so slightly as she sent Verpine warriors tottering aside or stumbling to sudden halts. Fett grunted and followed close on her heels, with their guide—Osos Niskooen—peering over both their shoulders in astonishment.

A couple of rib-battering minutes later, they emerged from the swarm onto a yellow loading platform and found themselves teetering above a two-meter drop into a transportation tube. At the bottom, Jaina could see translucent waves of energy sweeping along a raised repulsor rail, carrying a steady stream of dust, stone, and refuse at speeds in excess of two hundred kilometers an hour.

The Verpine behind them continued to press forward, and now Jaina found herself holding the swarm back with the Force as a long durasteel capsule shot out of the adjacent tunnel and whooshed to a stop in front of the loading area. The capsule opened along its full length, the entire upper quarter sliding upward. Jaina got a brief glimpse of two rows of inward-facing seats before Verpine soldiers began to literally spill into the capsule.

“Come on, Jedi.”

Fett grabbed her and jumped into the writhing mass, elbowing and kicking alongside the rest of the passengers as he fought for a place. Jaina used the Force to keep a small area around them clear until a loud hiss sounded above their heads and the door slid closed. An instant later the capsule shot down the transport tube and the entire mass of occupants was thrown toward the rear of the passenger compartment.

As the capsule reached full speed, the Verpine quickly began to untangle themselves. Despite the loading chaos,

everyone seemed to have a seat. Jaina and Fett sat across from a soldier she thought she recognized as their guide.

“Niskooen?” she asked.

“Correct,” the insect replied. “Most humans have as much trouble distinguishing our scents as we do yours.”

“She’s had practice,” Fett said, turning his helmet toward Niskooen. “So what’s the situation topside?”

Niskooen fell silent for a moment as he consulted with his fellow Verpine, then said, “Our surface batteries have taken a heavy toll, and the enemy’s first assault shuttles are starting to land. Their whiteshells are beginning to debark.”

“I could guess that much,” Fett grumbled. “I mean *where*? Which air locks?”

Niskooen was quiet for a moment, then reported, “No air locks. The initial mass is swarming HighGround Rocky-Plain TwentyKilometer Left.”

Fett turned to Jaina. “The next time I do a base inspection, remind me to bring my own communications officer—or better yet, not to get caught in a surprise attack at all.”

“Like you’d listen to a Jedi,” Jaina retorted. She turned to Niskooen. “Isn’t that landing zone near your fusion plant’s exhaust ports? Twenty kilometers down the left side of the asteroid?”

“Correct,” Niskooen said. “We assume that’s how they intend to enter the hive.”

Fett’s alarm suddenly grew as sharp in the Force as the Verpine’s pheromones were in the air. “They won’t *enter*.”

Niskooen’s antennae straightened. “You think they hope to sabotage our primary power supply?”

“Hope isn’t the way I’d put it,” Fett said. He began to murmur into his helmet mike, trying to issue orders directly to the commando company he had stationed on Nickel One as a symbol of Mandalore’s commitment to its mutual-aid treaty with the Verpine. After a minute, he gave up trying to get a direct signal and turned back to Niskooen. “Can you relay a message to Moburi?”

"I can reach Commando Moburi through my hive mates," Niskooen replied. "There are still capsules coming behind us."

"Tell Moburi that he's in command until I get there," Fett said. "And that it may be awhile. The power grid is about to blow."

Fett's declaration sent a clatter of dismay through the capsule, but none of the Verpine questioned his certainty. First, when it came to killing and fighting, his reputation was unmatched. Second, insects of the soldier caste were too disciplined to question the pronouncement of a superior—even a superior from another swarm. And they probably knew that he was right, anyway. Eliminating the power plant would bring Nickel One's transportation to a screeching halt, and limiting an enemy's mobility was always a good idea.

Fett turned to Jaina. "What do your Jedi instincts tell you about this attack?"

"That someone wants the Verpine munitions industry for themselves," Jaina replied. "But you don't need Jedi instincts to know that. Verpine manufacturing is nearly self-contained, which makes it a tempting target; the Verpine have been supplying all sides since day one of the war, which makes them everyone's enemy; and they're unaligned, which makes them ripe for the picking."

"They're aligned with *us*." There was some bristle in Fett's voice, but Jaina could feel in the Force that there was no real irritation—he knew as well as she did that Mandalore was suddenly playing out of its league. "But who is the someone behind this? The Moffs I *didn't* kill already? Or did your brother send them?"

Jaina thought for a minute, then shrugged. "My gut tells me it's too early for Jacen to have the Moffs under control—but he is full of surprises."

Fett's helmet remained fixed on Jaina. "Not for you, I hope," he said. "Not anymore."

"The only surprise will be if there are no surprises," she replied. "But I have a few of my own now, too."

"Good answer."

Then he looked away, and Jaina could feel him gathering his resolve. Here it came.

"Listen, Solo," Fett began. "This isn't your fight. When we get to the command bunker, I want you to grab a Bessie and slip out of here."

"To where?" Jaina asked, pretending to be surprised. "To Mandalore to fetch Beviin?"

Fett's helmet swung back toward Jaina. "Beviin knows—or at least he will by the time you could get there."

"Then . . . oh," Jaina said, still acting. *Never let them know that you know*, especially when they might be your enemy one day. She paused for a moment, then asked, "Am I ready?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"You've killed more Jedi than I have."

Three seconds passed before Fett answered. "Not like your brother. Not anyone that powerful." His viewplate slid from Jaina back to Niskooen. "What's happening with the whiteshells?"

"They've penetrated our positions around the exhaust vents and—"

The Verpine's answer came to a halt when the capsule went dark, dropped to the tunnel floor, and began to buck, bounce, and knell as it clanged down the passage. Jaina felt herself starting to fly forward and used the Force to stick herself in place—then instantly regretted it as big spiny insect bodies began to slam into her from behind.

Fett's sleeve lamp came on three meters away, swirling and blinking as he tumbled forward with the other passengers. Jaina pulled her knees to her chest and tucked her chin, making herself small, and felt a sharp pang as something creased the durasteel wall behind her. A terrific screech sounded from the front of the cabin, followed by a

rush of dank air and an enormous clang from the ceiling at the rear of the capsule.

Then the noise stopped, and the Force began to churn with rolling waves of pain. Jaina snatched a glow rod off her belt and shined it toward the front of the passenger cabin, where she could just make out the glow of Fett's sleeve lamp buried beneath a couple of meters of crooked insect limbs and cracked thoraxes. The front of the capsule was gaping open where the bottom of the nose had been torn away, and the iron smell of insect blood was thick in the air.

"Fett?" Jaina started forward—and made it about halfway to the front of the cabin before she was stopped by an impenetrable tangle of thrashing insect parts. "You hurt?"

The light at the bottom of the heap remained stationary.

"Fett?" When there was still no answer, she began to clamber over the jumble of insects. Ignoring their pained squeals and dodging their angry mandible snaps, she called to him using a diminutive—one that she had never heard anyone but Goran Beviin use. "*Bob'ika?*"

The light suddenly swung in her direction. "You must have thought I was dead," Fett said. "So I'll forgive that—once."

"Sorry." Jaina laughed, then felt instantly guilty. The injured warriors around her were insects, but they felt real pain—as a former Killik Joiner, she understood that better than most. "Just checking."

"Come on." Fett's light turned toward the nose of the capsule, then began to move toward the gash. In its ambient glow, she could see that the self-contained body glove beneath his armor had been ripped in half a dozen places; a large flap was hanging down beneath the bottom rim of his helmet. "We need to get going."

"Right." Jaina didn't bother to ask about helping the wounded. Compassion was a weakness, and she knew better than to show a weakness in front of Boba Fett—especially a *jetiise* weakness. "Meet you outside."

She slipped off the body heap, then ignited her lightsaber and started to cut through the side of the capsule. By the time she had finished, Fett was standing a few meters down the tunnel, gathering up the Verpine who could still fight.

Ten of the fifty warriors the capsule had once held were now standing near him. An equal number lay dead or still inside the capsule, and the remainder were slumped or curled along the tunnel walls, being looked after by a pair of soldiers who were still functional but limping too badly to march.

"Niskooen?" she asked.

Fett shot a glance at the warriors gathered around him. "Any of you Niskooen?"

"Niskooen's thorax split open," replied one of the soldiers standing with Fett. "He is no more."

Fett grunted in acknowledgment, then tipped his helmet back to look up into the speaker's face. "What's your name, soldier?"

"Ss'ess," the Verpine replied. "Combat Director Ss'ess."

"Well, Combat Director Ss'ess, you're with us now." Fett pointed at the rest of the able-bodied soldiers. "So are they. Got it?"

Ss'ess clacked his mandibles.

"Good." Fett turned and started down the tunnel, not bothering to avoid the repulsor rail. Obviously, it was no longer a danger to anyone. "How far is the command bunker from here?"

"We're almost there," Ss'ess replied, starting after him. "It's only ten kilometers."

"Ten k's? Great." Fett broke into a gentle run, and Jaina noticed he was trying to hide a limp. "I was wondering how I'd get my exercise today."

"Don't you want a situation report?" Ss'ess asked, loping along behind him.

"We know the situation," Jaina said. The repulsor rail was too narrow to take more than one runner at a time and the

tunnel walls curved up a sharp slope, so she was forced to fall in behind Ss'ess. "The Imps blew your power plant, and enemy assault shuttles are landing everywhere. Unfortunately, your artificial gravity has its own energy supply, so we're going to have a long walk to wherever the battle starts."

Ss'ess looked back, his antennae raised in astonishment. "Did you see that in the Force?"

"Yeah—Jedi see everything," Fett said. "It's what makes 'em so irritating. Let me know when the whiteshells start blowing air locks."

Fett fell silent and continued to lead the way up the tunnel, breathing into his helmet rather than removing it and allowing anyone to see how hard he was working. Jaina imagined him wishing that he hadn't left his jetpacks aboard his ship and smiled. He might be her mentor—for now—but he had delivered her father to Jabba the Hutt frozen in carbonite, so it was nice to see him suffer just a little. Besides, given that her brother was the one who had tortured his daughter to death, she suspected that Fett felt much the same about her.

They had been running for nearly an hour when the tunnel branched up and down. Fett stopped and pretended to study his options while he caught his breath, then turned to shine his lamp in Ss'ess's face. "Which way?"

"Either. If we go up, we will pass the LongCrater Dust-Lake ThirtyKilometer Top air lock." Ss'ess looked down the descending tube, probably more to get Fett's lamp out of his eyes than to indicate direction. "This way, we will go through Client Hangar Two where your *Bes'ulike*—"

Ss'ess was interrupted by the clatter of stone collapsing in the upper passage. All the Verpine jumped and swung their long necks toward the sound, but Fett casually turned to look up the tunnel, no doubt scanning it with his helmet's built-in sensors.

Jaina merely reached out with the Force, trying to get some idea of the number and nature of whoever had breached the passage. She sensed nothing but a vague danger, amorphous and elusive.

Without looking away from the tunnel, Fett asked, "Ss'ess, didn't I tell you to let me know when the stormtroopers started blowing air locks?"

"And I will," Ss'ess replied. "When it happens."

Now Fett's helmet swung back around. "They haven't blown any air locks?" he demanded. "Not a single one?"

"Not one," Ss'ess confirmed. "You said to tell you when the whiteshells started. One is a start. I would have told you."

Jaina felt exasperation boiling off Fett like a steam cloud. "*Di'kut!*" he said, using one of the few Mandalorian words she had heard him use without Mirta's prompting. "Before you and your buggies die, I need you to relay a message to Moburi."

"We're going to die?" Ss'ess sounded more surprised than frightened. "How do you know?"

"Did I say something to make you think there's time to explain?" Fett demanded. "Focus, Ss'ess. You don't have long."

Jaina understood. If the stormtroopers weren't blowing the air locks, it was because they wanted to keep the asteroid's ventilation system sealed—and that could mean only one thing.

"Gas!"

"Don't sound so surprised, Jedi. It makes you look bad." Fett pulled an emergency breath mask from his equipment belt, then turned back to Ss'ess. "Tell Moburi to fall back to Client Hangar Two with everyone who can make it."

"You're breaking our contract?" Ss'ess gasped. "Boba Fett?"

"No." Fett raised his helmet high enough to push the breath mask through the torn body glove and up under his

visor. “We’re running out of time, Ss’ess.”

When Ss’ess’s antennae remained flat against his cheeks, Jaina explained, “There will be air scrubbers and hazmat suits in the hangar. He’s just trying to keep his men alive to counterattack.”

“I could use a few of you guys, too,” Fett said to Ss’ess. “Too bad you don’t have a photon’s chance in a black hole of lasting that long. You going to relay that message before you die?”

“Yes.” Ss’ess’s antennae swung away from his cheeks. “Thank you for your candor.”

A faint siffling began to whisper down the tunnel from which the clatter had come.

Fett glanced toward the sound, then turned back and pointed at Jaina’s equipment belt. “Guess you weren’t much of a student after all,” he said. “No breath mask?”

“Sure, I’ve got one,” Jaina said. “Just don’t need it.”

Fett cocked his helmet to one side. “This I’ve got to see.”

“Be my guest.”

Jaina would have liked to avoid showing this particular trick to any Mandalorian—and especially to Boba Fett—but the only way to keep the technique secret was to let the Verpine die. She knew what a Mandalorian would have done—but she was still a Jedi, and she wanted to stay one.

The siffling continued to grow louder. Jaina shined her glow rod up the tunnel and saw a glittering cloud of vapor drifting—no, pushing—down the passage. She raised her palm and began to pull the Force through herself, using it to push the dank air up the transport tube. The sound sharpened into a high-pitched buzz; then the cloud stopped advancing and began to glitter even more brightly.

Jaina’s stomach rolled with surprise. She felt Fett’s eyes watching her and unfurrowed her brow—too late to fool him, she knew, but at least the lecture on revealing surprise would only be perfunctory. She pulled harder on the Force, drawing it through herself faster and pushing more air up

the tunnel. The buzzing deepened to a drone, and a pearly glow rose within the cloud's heart.

"Haven't seen that before." The comment was muffled by Fett's breath mask, but not nearly enough to conceal the amusement in his voice. "So what's it do, exactly?"

Jaina bit back a sharp retort and pushed even harder, forcing so much air up the passage that her robes began to ruffle in the breeze. The drone rose rapidly in pitch, then suddenly ceased as the cloud flew apart in a blinding flash.

There followed a moment of stunned silence as Jaina and the others tried to blink the dazzle out of their eyes. Then, as her vision began to return, so did the siffle, fainter than before, but also somehow more urgent. She shined her glow rod up the passage and saw that the eruption had sprayed the glittering cloud onto the floor and walls—not the ceiling—in the form of a silver film.

And that film was sliding down the tunnel, coming fast and shaping itself into a dozen gleaming arrows, each pointed at one of the beings in Fett's makeshift fighting squad.

Fett pulled his breath mask from beneath his visor. "Neat trick." He took a T-21 borrowed from the Nickel One armory—he'd left his EE-3 aboard the ship, thinking he wouldn't need it on an inspection tour—off his back and pulled the actuating knob. "But I think you just made it mad."

Fett opened fire with the repeating blaster, and the Verpine followed his lead with their shatter rifles, all shooting at the arrows approaching them. The mag-pellets were no more effective than the blaster bolts, simply blunting the tip until the arrow reshaped itself into a fork or a trident or half a dozen blobs and continued forward.

Jaina had no idea what the stuff was—and it was coming too fast to waste time wondering. When she could not think of a Force technique that would be more effective than what Fett and the Verpine were doing, she simply activated her lightsaber and squatted, laying the blade as flat as she

could and using it like a broom to keep the stuff burned away from her.

The film divided and moved around her, staying out of reach until it had her completely encircled, then swept in from all sides. She launched herself into a Force flip, arcing over Fett's head into the tunnel that led down toward Client Hangar Two. She came down facing back up the passage.

Fett's boots and greaves were already covered in dull, creeping silver, and Jaina could see that some of it had slipped through a rip in the ankle seam. Behind him, Ss'ess and his soldiers had finally panicked and turned to spring down the tunnel, but the film was sliding after them, and it was obvious they wouldn't be able to stay ahead of it.

Jaina pointed at Fett's feet. "Boba, you've—"

"You, too." Fett gestured at her lightsaber hand. "Your arm."

Jaina looked down and saw a silver stain spreading down her sleeve onto her wrist and hand. She deactivated her blade and flipped her arm down, but it was like trying to shake off a tattoo.

"Fierfek!" Jaina felt herself growing angry; she had not spent the last five standard weeks trading bruises with the most notorious killer in the galaxy to have it end here. She had to survive long enough to go after her brother. "Any idea what it is?"

"What difference does it make?" Fett asked. "It's probably going to kill us—I already feel it starting to burn."

"Acid, then." Jaina pulled a canister of neutralizer from her equipment belt and popped off the cap, then felt her own hand begin to tingle—not burn. She looked over to see Fett holding a green stim-shot hypo, but doing nothing except looking at his feet. "You said *burn*!"

"Maybe it should have been sting." Fett continued to look at his feet. "What's the difference?"

Jaina started to tell him the difference was whether to use a neutralizer or a countertoxin—and that a stim-shot was