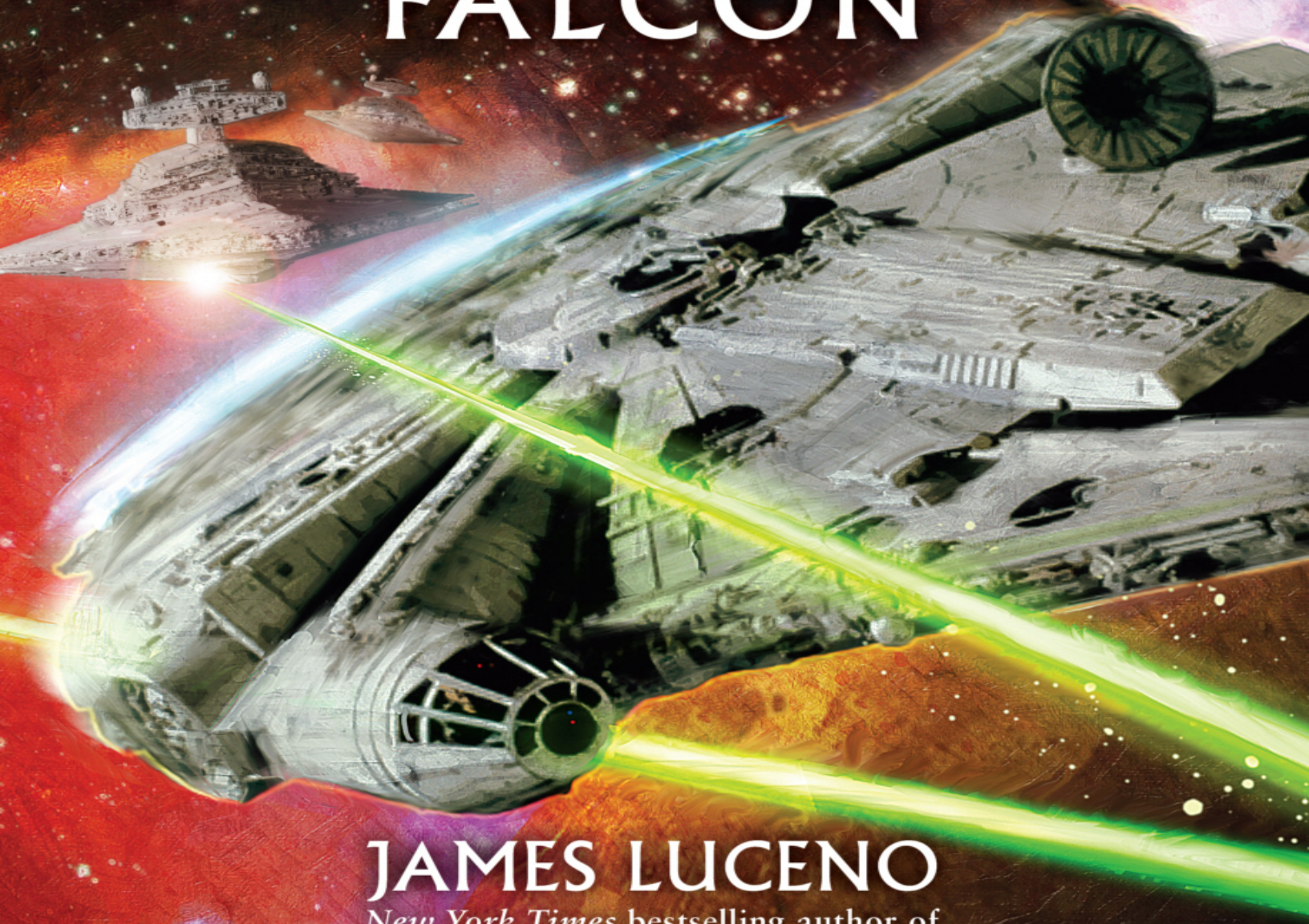


# STAR WARS™

## MILLENNIUM FALCON



**JAMES LUCENO**

*New York Times* bestselling author of  
*Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: The Unifying Force*



# Contents

About the Book  
About the Author  
Also by James Luceno  
Title Page  
The Star Wars Novels Timeline  
Introduction

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  
Chapter Thirty  
Chapter Thirty-one  
Chapter Thirty-two

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## About the Book

In an exciting, action-packed adventure spanning the time from *The Phantom Menace* to the end of the *Legacy of the Force* series, Han and Leia go on an adventure to search for clues to the *Millennium Falcon's* past ... and a possible treasure.

Shortly after the events of the *Legacy of the Force* series, Han and Leia encounter something hidden on the *Millennium Falcon* that dates back to the years before Han won the ship from Lando Calrissian in a game of Sabaac. In an effort to unravel the mystery, they follow the clues of the *Millennium Falcon's* history back to its very construction, and discover an elaborate - and failed - plot to overthrow the Emperor.

## About the Author

James Luceno is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Star Wars: The Unifying Force*, *Star Wars: Labyrinth of Evil*, *Star Wars: Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader*, and other *Star Wars* novels and non-fiction books. He lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with his wife and youngest child.

Also by James Luceno

The ROBOTECH series  
(as Jack McKinney, with Brian Daley)

The BLACK HOLE TRAVEL AGENCY series  
(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*  
*Rio Pasion*  
*Rainchaser*  
*Rock Bottom*

*Star Wars: CLOAK OF DECEPTION*  
*Star Wars: DARTH MAUL, SABOTEUR (ebook)*  
*Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Agents of Chaos I: Hero's Trial*  
*Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Agents of Chaos II: 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

JAMES LUCENO



arrow books

## 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

22-19

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

### STAR WARS: EPISODE II ATTACK OF THE CLONES

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

Republic Commando

Hard Contact

Triple Zero

True Colors

Order 66

Shatterpoint

The Cestus Deception

The Hive\*

MedStar I: Battle Surgeons

MedStar II: Jedi Healer

Jedi Trial

Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

Labyrinth of Evil

### STAR WARS: EPISODE III REVENGE OF THE SITH

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth

Vader

Coruscant Nights

Jedi Twilight

Street of Shadows

Patterns of Force

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  
The Force Unleashed



### 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

5

YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of  
Mindor



### 6.5-7.5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing:

Rogue Squadron

Wedge's Gamble

The Krytos Trap

The Bacta War

Wrath Squadron

Iron Fist

Solo Command

9

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 Seknia

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

Infemo

Fury

Revelation

Invincible

Millennium Falcon

Fate of the Jedi:

Outcast

Omen

Abyss

\*An ebook novella





*THE FIRST TIME Han laid eyes on her, standing with Lando on one of Nar Shaddaa's permacrete landing platforms a few short years before he had thrown in with the Rebel Alliance, he saw the battered old freighter not only for all she was but for all that she might one day become.*

*Staring at her like some lovesick cub. Eyes wide, mouth hanging open. Then quickly trying to get hold of himself so that Lando wouldn't know what he was thinking. Dismissing the ship as a hunk of junk. But Lando was no fool, and by then he knew all of Han's tells. One of the best gamblers that side of Coruscant, he knew when he was being bluffed. "She's fast," he had said, a twinkle in his eye.*

*Han didn't doubt it.*

*Even that far back it was easy to envy Lando all he already possessed, his extraordinary good fortune to begin with. But luck had little to do with it. Lando just didn't deserve this ship. He could barely handle a skimmer, let alone a light-fast freighter best flown by a pair of able pilots. He just wasn't worthy of her.*

*Han had never thought of himself as the covetous or acquisitive type, but suddenly he wanted the ship more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. After all the years of servitude and wandering, of close calls and failed partnerships, in and out of love, in and out of the Academy, victim of as many tricks as he'd played on others ... perhaps he saw the ship as a chance for permanence.*

*Circling her, fairly orbiting her, he nursed sinister designs. The old freighter drew him to her gravity, as she*

*clearly had all who had piloted her and added their own touches to the YT's hull, mandibles, the varied techno-terrain of her surface. He took the smell of the ship into his nostrils.*

*The closer he looked, the more evidence he found of attempts to preserve her from the ravages of time and of spaceflight. Dents hammered out, cracks filled with epoxatal, paint smeared over areas of carbon scoring. Aftermarket parts socked down with inappropriate fasteners or secured by less-than-professional welds. She was rashed with rust, bandaged with strips of durasteel, leaking grease and other lubricants, smudged with crud. She had seen action, this ship, long before Lando's luck at sabacc had made her his property. But in service to who or what, Han had no idea. Criminals, smugglers, pirates, mercenaries ... certainly all of those and more.*

*When Lando fired her up for Han's inspection, his heart skipped a beat. And minutes later, seated at the controls, savoring the response of the sublight engines, taking her through the paces and nearly frightening Lando to death, he knew he was fated to own her. He would get the Hutts to buy her for him, or pirate her if he had to. He'd add a military-grade rectenna and swap out the light laser cannons for quads. He'd plant a retractable repeating blaster in her belly to provide cover fire for quick getaways. He'd install a couple of concussion missile launchers between the boxy forks of her prow ...*

*Not once did it occur to him that he would win her from Lando. Much less that Lando would lose her on a bluff.*

*Piloting the modified SoroSuub he and Chewie leased from Lando had only added to his longing for the ship. He imagined her origins and the adventures she had been through. It struck him that he was so accepting of her from the start, he had never asked Lando how or when she had acquired the name Millennium Falcon.*



## **CORELLIAN ENGINEERING CORPORATION ORBITAL ASSEMBLY FACILITY 7 60 YEARS BEFORE THE BATTLE OF YAVIN**

WITH HIS SHIFT winding down, Soly Kantt's gaze drifted lazily between the chrono display mounted on the wall and a news feed running on the HoloNet. A tie score in last night's shock-ball match between Kuat and Commenor, and strife among some spacefaring folk known as Mandalorians. A lanky human with a family on Corellia and ten years on the job, Kantt had his soft hands clasped behind his head and his feet raised with ankles crossed on the console that constituted his private domain at CEC, Orbital 7. A holozine was opened in his lap, and a partially filled container of cold caf stood with two empties in the chair's cup holders. Beyond the transparisteel pane that crowned the gleaming monitoring deck moved a steady stream of YT-1300 freighters fresh off the assembly line, though not yet painted, and shepherded by a flock of guidance buoys slaved to the facility's cybernetic overseer.

Thirty-five meters long and capable of carrying a hundred metric tons of cargo, the YT had been in production for less than a standard year but had already proved to be an instant classic. Designed with help from Narro Sienar, owner of one of CEC's chief competitors in the shipbuilding business, the freighter was being marketed as an inexpensive and easily modified alternative to the steadfast YG-series ships. Where most of CEC's

starship line was regarded as uninspired, the YT-1300 had a certain utilitarian flair. What made the ship unique was its saucer-shaped core, to which a wide variety of components could be secured, including an outrigger cockpit and various sensor arrays. Stocked, it came loaded with a pair of front mandibles that elongated the hull design, and a new generation of droid brain that supervised the ship's powerful sublight and hyperspace engines.

Kantt had lost track of just how many YTs had drifted past him since he'd traded glances with Facility 7's security scanner eight hours earlier, but the number had to be twice what it was last month. Even so, the ship was selling so quickly that production couldn't keep pace with demand. Setting his feet on the floor, he stretched his arms over his head and was in the midst of a long yawn when the console loosed a strident alarm that jolted him fully awake. His bloodshot eyes were sweeping the deck's numerous display screens when a young tech wearing brightly colored coveralls and a comlink headset hurried in from the adjacent station.

"Control valve on one of the fuel droids!"

Kantt shot to his feet and leaned across the console for a better view of the line. Off to one side, bathed in the bright glow of a bank of illuminators, one of the YTs had a single fuel droid anchored to its port-side nozzle, where up and down the zero-g alley identical droids had already detached from the rest of the freighters. Kantt whirled around.

"Shut the droid down!"

Raised on his toes at a towering control panel, the tech gave his shaved head a shake. "It's not responding."

"Override the fuel program, Bon!"

"No luck."

Kantt swung back to the transparisteel pane. The droid hadn't moved and was probably continuing to pump fuel into YT 492727ZED. A form of liquid metal, the fuel that powered the freighters to sometimes dazzling speeds had

ignited a controversy from the moment the concept ship had made its appearance. It had nearly been a reason for scuttling the entire line.

Kantt dropped his gaze to the console's monitor screens and gauges. "The YT's fuel cells are at redline. If we can't get that droid to detach before warm-up—"

"It should be detaching now!"

Kantt all but pressed his face to the cool pane. "It's away! But that YT's going to fire hot!" Turning, he ran for the door opposite the one Bon had come through. "Come with me."

Single-file, they raced through two observation stations. Third in line was the data-keeping department, and Kantt knew from the instant they burst in that things had gone from bad to worse. Clustered at the viewport, the Dralls who staffed the department were hopping up and down in agitation and chittering to one another without letup, despite efforts by the clan's Duchess to restore order. Kantt forced his way through the press of small furry bodies for a look outside. The situation was even worse than he feared. The YT had entered the test area for the braking thrusters and attitude jets. Superfueled, the ship had rocketed out of line, knocking aside and stunning a dozen or more gravitic droids responsible for keeping the line in check. As Kantt watched, three more freighters escaped the line. The YT responsible clipped one of them in the stern, sending it into a forward spin. The spinning ship did the same to the one in front of it, but in counterrotation, so that when the two ships came full circle they locked mandibles and pirouetted as a pair into the curved inner hull of the observation station on the far side of the alley.

As the test-firing sequence continued, the enlivened YT jinked to port, then starboard, leapt out of line, then dived below it. Kantt watched only long enough to know that all thoughts of returning to Corellia in time for dinner were up in smoke. He'd be lucky to get home by the weekend.



Leaving the Dralls to bicker over how to balance the economic loss, Kantt and the technician stormed into the next station, where a mostly human group of midlevel executives was close to tearing their hair out. To a one, they looked to the newcomers for even a scrap of good news.

"A droid team is on the way," Bon said. "No problem."

Kantt gave the tech a quick glance and turned to the execs. "You heard him. No problem."

A red-faced man with shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows glared at him. "You don't think so?" His arm shot out, indicating the viewport. "See for yourself."

Kantt hadn't moved a muscle when two others grabbed hold of him and tugged him forward. The droid team had in fact arrived on the scene—a quartet of Cybot Galactica grapplers, angling for the bucking YT with clasping arms and waldoes extended. But the freighter was outwitting their every attempt at fastening to the engine access hatches. And though the line had been shut down, well behind 492727ZED a dozen identical units were heaped together where some of the displaced guidance buoys had ended their drift. Worse, the chain reaction of pileups had sent several fuel droids reeling from their respective freighters, and two of them were on a collision course.

Kantt squeezed his eyes shut, but the hellish flash that stabbed at his eyelids told him part of the story: one or perhaps both of the droids had exploded. His ears told him the rest, as gouts of molten metal and hunks of alloy began to pepper the transparisteel panel. Alarms blared throughout the monitoring stations, and streams of fire-suppression foam gushed into the alley from the semicircular structures that defined it. A collective moan of deep distress filled the room, and Kantt had a mental image of his bonus evaporating before his eyes. With it went the birthday earrings for his wife, his son's game deck, the vacation to Sacorria they'd been planning, and the case of

Gizer ale he was expected to supply for the shock-ball finals party.

Kantt thought for a moment when he opened his eyes that the nightmare was over, or if not, that the explosion had reduced the unruly YT to blackened parts. But not only had the ship avoided the firestorm and flak, it had also managed to weave through the subsequent chaos and was closing fast on the sublight engine test-fire station.

Kantt gave his head a clearing shake and slammed his palm down on the console's communicator button. "We need a live crew at Alley Four sublight test fire—*now!*"

Sucking in his breath, he planted his other palm on the console and leaned forward in time to see an emergency sled nose from an up-alley vehicle bay. Little more than an engine surmounted by a cage of vertical and horizontal poles, the sled carried six wranglers outfitted in yellow EVA suits, helmets, and jetpacks. All carried assortments of cutting torches, hydrospanners, and shaped-charge detonators that hung from their belts like weapons. Kantt had a friend on the team, who like the rest lived for emergency situations. But a rogue ship was something entirely new.

Initially the sled pilot appeared to be having as much trouble matching the YT's maneuvers as the grapppler droids had had. The freighter's sudden jukes and twists owed to nothing more than intermittent firings of the thrusters and attitude jets, but there were moments when the maneuvers struck Kantt as inspired. As if the ship were taking evasive action or in a race to reach the sublight engine test station ahead of its more-compliant ilk.

Dire thoughts edged into Kantt's mind of what might happen if the ship couldn't be reined in by then. Would the overfueled YT burn itself to a cinder? Detonate, taking the entire alley with it? Open a vacuum breach in the facility and launch for the stars?

Gradually, the sled pilot found the rhythm of the firings and was able to bring the skeletal vehicle alongside the YT. Rocketing from the sled, the wranglers alighted on the freighter, anchoring themselves to places on the hull with magclamps and suction holdfasts. Raised up on its stern like some unbroken acklay in a creature show, the YT refused to surrender any of its determination to shake them off. But slow and consistent effort allowed one of the wranglers to reach the dorsal hull access hatch and disappear into the ship. When he did, the execs hooted a cheer Kantt prayed wasn't premature.

Only when the ship quieted did he realize that he had been holding his breath, and he let it out with a long, plosive exhale, wiping sweat from his brow on the sleeve of his shirt. The cheering gave way to relieved backslapping and rapid exchanges as to how to get the line moving again. With waiting lists for the YT growing longer every day, production would have to be increased. Vacation leaves would have to be canceled. Overtime would become the norm.

Kantt and Bon didn't linger.

"Born of fire," the tech said as they were passing through the Dralls's station. "That YT," he added when Kantt glanced at him. "A hero's birth if I ever witnessed one. When has that happened?"

Kantt made a face. "It's a freighter, Bon. One of a hundred million."

Bon grinned. "If you ask me, more like one *in* a hundred million."



## **CORUSCANT DURING THE BATTLE OF CORUSCANT, 19 YEARS BEFORE THE BATTLE OF YAVIN**

"YOU GOTTA LOVE this ship," Reeze said.

"She knows her job, all right."

Jadak slipped the freighter in between a Corellian transport and a Santhe/Sienar passenger ship, then stood YT 492727ZED on her side to ease past the transport and continue to maneuver toward the front of the pack. Reeze muted the cockpit's enunciators so they wouldn't have to listen to the pilots and navigators who were cursing them out.

"Maybe they'll give us ownership after this run."

"We can hope," Jadak said.

"Ten years of sticking our necks out, Tobb. There should be a law."

"There should be, but there isn't. Besides, I'm just trying to help keep the galaxy on course. What's your excuse?"

"Like I told you, I want this ship to be ours."

Both pilots were human, Jadak a bit taller and twenty years younger, with a lighter complexion and a clipped beard that accented a square jaw. Reeze was graying at the temples but clear-eyed and as fit as an athlete. A traffic jam was the last thing they had expected to encounter at Coruscant, but the Separatists's attack on the galactic capital had come so unexpectedly that nearly everyone inbound had been caught up in it. Some had arrived in time

to hear the HoloNet announcement of Chancellor Palpatine's abduction and witness the reversion to realspace of the Republic Cruisers that made up the Open Circle Fleet. Together with the Home Fleet cruisers, the huge *Venator*-class ships had succeeded in keeping the battle confined to the upper reaches of Coruscant's envelope. A few deft pilots had managed to spin their ships out of the fray and jump back into hyperspace. But tens of thousands of other vessels—ships of all sizes and makes and purposes—were still holding at the forward line, waiting for the battle to end one way or another, so that they could either continue on to Coruscant or flee for the Outer Rim.

"Even if they did," Jadak went on, "how could we afford to keep her running?"

"Same as we've been doing. But for the private sector."

"Gainful employment?"

"I'll settle for employment. I'm not as particular as you."

Jadak frowned. "I've known too many smugglers. That life's not what it's cracked up to be."

Reeze barked a laugh. "Neither's this one."

Jadak had brought the YT to a point where they had a panoramic view of the fighting. More slugfest than coordinated battle, the clash pitted the big ships against one another, crimson hyphens of annihilation pulsing among them while flights of ARC-170, droid tri-fighters, and vulture fighters buzzed about in seeming pandemonium. The melee's backdrop was perpetually lighted Coruscant itself, the planet's scintillating urban rings ravaged in places where defensive shields had been breached or ships had gone to ground. The Republic with everything on the line, and Count Dooku's Confederacy of Independent Systems with nothing more to lose than a cyborg general and an army of droids.

Reeze whistled in surprise. "Front seat on the fall of civilization as we know it."



"Not likely. But all the more reason to deliver our cargo."

"So you say." Reeze gazed out the YT's circular viewport. "I see a problem in our getting downside in one piece. A bunch of problems, actually, and the words *laser cannon* figure into all of them."

Jadak swiveled his chair. "We can't be late, Reeze. They said it's important."

Reeze returned a glum nod. "*Late* being the operative word. As in the late Reeze Duurmun."

"I'll tell everyone you died a hero."

"What—you'll survive?" Reeze stared at his friend, then laughed. "Yeah. You probably will."

Jadak swung forward. "See what you can pick up on the battle net."

Reeze tugged the headset over his ears and keyed a coded entry into the communications suite. He listened to the comm chatter for a moment, then craned his neck to study something off to starboard and brought a new view of the battle to one of the instrument panel display screens. He tapped his forefinger against the screen to indicate the icon profile of a large battle cruiser, with a stalked observation deck aft and a flyout bridge.

Jadak read the alphanumeric data beneath the icon. "What am I looking at?"

"The *Invisible Hand*."

"General Grievous's flagship."

"That's where they were holding Palpatine."

"Were?"

"The Jedi rescued him. Kenobi and Skywalker. But the three of them are still on board."

Jadak took the YT through a quick spin to improve the view. In the middle distance, a Republic Cruiser was hammering away at the *Invisible Hand*'s waist, where its elongated prow met a bulbous aft section. Maybe in

retaliation for what the Republic ship had endured from the *Invisible Hand*'s flak arrays. JadaK glanced at the monitor.

"Looks like the captain of the *Guarlara* didn't get word that the Chancellor's on board."

"Could be because of signal jamming. Or maybe he just doesn't care."

JadaK scowled. "Palpatine's death would create as many problems as it would solve."

For several moments, the two men watched in silence as the *Guarlara* subjected the Separatist flagship to repeated laser cannon broadsides, blowing gaping holes in the hull and igniting fiery explosions that swept through the *Invisible Hand* stem to stern. JadaK couldn't imagine the cybernetic Grievous surviving the onslaught, let alone Palpatine and his saviors, the Force or no. When the flagship could endure no more, it listed, then fell victim to gravity and began a slow descent into Coruscant's atmosphere.

"She's dirt-bound," JadaK said.

"And already coming apart. Two to one she won't make it halfway."

"I'll take that bet."

With one hand clamped on the control yoke, JadaK tweaked the inertial compensator and shot the YT forward. No one tried to prevent them from plunging into the heart of the maelstrom. If they were hell-bent on becoming just another battle casualty, it was their business.

"We could at least try an end run, you know," Reeze said, one hand clamped to the chair's armrest.

JadaK countered it with a shake of his head. "The Seps have the rest of the planet blockaded. Our best shot's here, with the *Invisible Hand* breaking trail."

Reeze shot JadaK a look. "We're following her down?"

"Let's say, *in*."

Reeze nodded. "I'm good with *in*."

"Even if it means losing the bet?"

“Even if.”

If they were to ride the *Invisible Hand's* wake to the surface, first they had to reach her. That meant threading a path among the countless frigates and gunboats that stood in the way, dodging the fighters that continued to spill from the bellies of the KDY carriers and the curving arms of the Neimoidians' behemoth Lucrehulks, and avoiding the turbolaser fire that crosshatched near space. But they didn't doubt for a moment that the YT was up to the task. The ship had never let them down, and there was no reason to think she would fail them now.

An unknown quantity to the friend-or-foe interrogators of the warships they streaked past, the YT became a target of opportunity for one and all. Absent weapons of their own, Jadak and Reeze had to rely on the freighter's remarkable speed and near-preternatural agility. They pushed the ship for all she was worth, corkscrewing through churning clouds of fighter dogfights and executing twists and turns better left to Jedi Interceptors than forty-year-old light freighters—even one as upgraded and enhanced as the YT was. Power that wasn't being consumed by the YT's sublight engine was being gobbled up by the deflector shields, taxed by each glancing bolt the ship sustained.

Leaping out from behind one of Coruscant's crazed orbital mirrors, they raced to fall in behind the flaming deteriorating hulk the Separatist flagship had become, her blunt bow dipped toward Coruscant in a gesture of surrender, ablative shielding glowing red-hot, and sloughing pieces of armor like a monar serpent shedding scales.

“Cruiser's escape pods are away,” Reeze said.

Jadak magnified the forward view of the ship. Hands vised on the yoke as the YT slalomed through a fragment cloud of parts and components, Jadak watched in awe as

the warship altered vector for the planet's governmental district. The *Invisible Hand* was falling to be sure, but it was clear that someone still had the helm and was determined to guide the vessel in by deploying the drag fins and using the exterior hatches as needed to keep the ship from burning up in the atmosphere.

"Skywalker?" Reeze said.

"I doubt it's Palpatine—unless he's got talents he hasn't revealed."

Hundreds of warships too large to be annihilated by Coruscant's artillery and rocketry had penetrated the umbrella and cratered the urbanscape. But it was obvious that the standoff gunnery crews had been ordered to allow the *Invisible Hand* through, which in turn upped the YT's chances of making planetfall. All they had to do was remain close enough to the ship not to be spotted, but far enough from it not to be incinerated.

Jadak had his hand on the throttle when the entire aft portion of the *Invisible Hand* tumbled away in a mass of flaming wreckage. Only Reeze's last-moment evasive actions kept the YT from being atomized. Just as quickly, Jadak brought the freighter up on her side and barrel-rolling out of harm's way. But the hail of debris that slammed into the shields was worse than anything they had flown through earlier, and the deflectors might as well have yowled for all the alert tones the instrument panel issued.

Without warning, the YT veered sharply. Only the copilot chair's safety harness kept Reeze from landing in Jadak's lap. Status indicators flashed on the console, and another chorus of alarms filled the cockpit.

"Port braking thruster's taken a bad hit," Jadak said as he brought the YT back on course. "We'll check it out when we set down."

Reeze snugged the harness. "The eternal optimist."

"Someone in this cockpit's gotta be."

With half of the warship's mass lost to space, whoever had the controls was managing to keep the truncated forward portion on track for a controlled crash, probably on one of the old hardened landing strips in the governmental district. Repulsors howling, the YT continued to follow it down, shedding altitude and velocity. But with only twenty kilometers to go, icons began to paint the threat screen and proximity alarms wailed. Jadak saw flights of ships screaming up the well to render aid to the *Invisible Hand*.

"Fireships," Reeze said. "Couple of clone fighters, too."

"Time to make ourselves scarce."

"We've got that authorization code—"

"Better save it for when we really need it. Switch us over to terrain-following."

"Quick circumnavigation?"

"No time for that."

Jadak consulted the topographic display, then banked out of the warship's wake, main thrusters protesting and intense waves of heat assaulting them. Two of the clone fighters gave chase but ultimately peeled away to rejoin the *Invisible Hand*, which was fast approaching the landing strip.

The YT slewed west over the spaceport tower and the Jedi Temple, then out over The Works, through columns of oily black smoke billowing from crash craters and fires that had spread into some of the outlying districts.

"Looks like the alien sectors took the brunt of it," Reeze said.

"A lot of folks have been trying to get rid of those slums for decades."

"Grievous in league with the urban renewal lobbyists?"

"Why not?"

Jadak had never seen the striated airplanes so empty. But in among the emergency vehicles and police cruisers were clone-piloted ARC-170s on the prowl for intruders until martial law was lifted. In the time it took to bring the YT



about, several of the fighters had taken an interest in the freighter.

"About twenty gun emplacements have us in target lock," Reeze said.

"Open the comm."

"YT-Thirteen-hundred," someone said over the subspace comm. "Identify yourself and state your destination."

"*Stellar Envoy* out of Ralltiir," Jadak said toward the microphone. "Destination is the Senate Annex."

"The Senate is restricted airspace. If you've an authorization code, transmit it now, or turn about. Failure to comply will be met with lethal force."

Jadak nodded to Reeze. "Go ahead."

Reeze swiveled his chair and punched a code into the comm board.

"Transmitting authorization."

"*Stellar Envoy*," the same voice said a moment later, "you are cleared for the Senate Building."



CLIMBING THROUGH THE low-level traffic lines, the *Stellar Envoy* banked broadly as she approached the governmental district, which was delineated from the surrounding urban sprawl by a kilometers-deep canyon that encircled it like a moat. Some of Coruscant's most majestic towers ringed the area, rising like sandstone spires eroded over eons by wind and rain. Even deeper canyons radiated from the vaunted circle, and it was from one of these that the YT emerged, the dome of the Senate Annex dominating the foreground, the squat mushroom that housed the Senate Rotunda looming behind.

Just ahead of the *Stellar Envoy* and veering gently toward one of the annex's open-air upper-tier landing berths flew a blunt-nosed Senate speeder bus, trimmed in muted purple. The YT continued to ascend until she came even with the base of the annex, then leveled out and aimed for one of the minimal berths in the dome's lowest tier.

Jadak engaged the braking thrusters and repulsors, but the ship came down hard on her port-side landing gear despite his best efforts.

"We've gotta repair that jet," he said.

"I'll see to it."

Reeze shut down the engines, and the two of them unstrapped from their seats. Entering the narrow corridor that linked the outrigger cockpit to the freighter's circular core, Jadak palmed the control pad that lowered the starboard boarding ramp. Pinging and steaming sounds

rose from the ship as they walked down the ramp, an alloy carry case dangling from JadaK's right hand. The *Stellar Envoy's* whirring exhaust fans stirred the stale air.

The berth was dimly lit and empty of the load-lifter droids common to the upper tiers. Two beings in colorful Senatorial robes hurried forward to greet them. Des'sein was humanoid; Largetto, anything but. Both represented beleaguered worlds distant from the Core.

Off to one side stood a Kadas'sa'Nikto Jedi, whose long brown overcloak and tall boots made him appear even taller than his actual two meters. Clawed hands crossed in front of him; a lightsaber was clipped to his belt. He nodded gravely to JadaK. His gray-green face had the look of tanned leather. A toolbox of some sort rested at his feet.

Des'sein was the first to reach JadaK. "You have it?" he asked in a rushed voice, while Largetto glanced about nervously.

JadaK raised and proffered the carry case. "It's all in here. Everything you asked for."

Des'sein accepted the case and placed it atop a small table, his knobby fingers shaking as he worked the lock; Largetto leaned over him in anticipation. Opening the lid, the Senators activated a device inside the case and listened intently for a moment. Blinking lights reflected in Largetto's glossy black eyes.

Des'sein closed and locked the case and took a stuttering breath.

"This will prove of great value to our cause, Captain JadaK."

Largetto nodded in agreement. "Frankly, Captain, we feared that you wouldn't be able to land."

"You can thank the code you provided."

"You're being too humble. The code didn't pilot the ship."

JadaK inclined his head in a show of thanks.

A third Senator dashed into the landing bay from a doorway in the rear. A human with a bib of white beard and a topknot of dark hair, Fang Zar was breathless when he spoke.

"The Chancellor has been returned to us unharmed." He glanced at the Jedi. "Your confederates survived as well, Master Shé."

The small horns surrounding the Jedi's eyes twitched, but he said nothing.

"Chancellor Palpatine and his party arrived just ahead of Captain Jadak."

"The speeder bus," Reeze said from behind Jadak.

"Martial law has been rescinded," Zar went on. "And Count Dooku is dead."

Largetto grabbed hold of Des'sein's upper arm in excitement. "Then perhaps we won't have to act on the data Captains Jadak and Reeze have taken such pains to deliver."

"May the Force be with us," Fang Zar said.

"Yes. But we must carry on until such time that we can be sure of the Chancellor's intent." Des'sein looked at Jadak. "We have another assignment for your consideration."

Jadak and Reeze traded brief glances.

"We're all ears," Reeze said.

Des'sein lowered his voice. "We would ask you to deliver the *Stellar Envoy* to our allies on Toprawa."

Jadak's brow knitted. "Deliver?"

"Just so," Largetto said. "The Antarian Ranger who will take possession of the ship is called Folee. You will find her in Salik City, which is the capital of the western regions. Your code phrase is: *Restore Republic honor to the galaxy*. Will you repeat that for me, Captain?"

Jadak's mouth had fallen open. He closed it and swallowed hard. "Restore Republic honor to the galaxy. But ... this Folee, she's taking the ship?"

Des'sein regarded him. "Is there a problem?"

"It's just that we've grown, you know, kind of fond of her," Reeze said. "I mean, couldn't we maybe buy the *Envoy* from you and find another ship to deliver to Toprawa?"

"Impossible," Fang Zar said. "The *Stellar Envoy* is crucial to this mission."

Jadak tightened his lips in restraint. "If we're leaving the *Envoy* ... does that mean you're retiring us, too?"

"Not at all, Captain," Des'sein was quick to say. "Unless, of course, that is your wish."

"No," Jadak said. "But Toprawa's a long jump on the Hydian Way. I'm just wondering how we're supposed to return to the Core."

"We'll furnish you with sufficient funds for transport. More important, we'll have a better-behaved ship waiting for you when you return."

"Perhaps a faster one, as well," Largetto said.

"Not likely," Reeze muttered.

Jadak swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. "I hope this mission's worthy of her."

"Oh, it is, Captain," Fang Zar said. "We assure you."

Jadak blew out his breath and nodded resignedly.

Des'sein studied him for a moment. "May I take your gesture to mean that you're willing to execute the mission?"

Jadak looked to Reeze. "We wouldn't want anyone else to do it."

Des'sein turned to Master Shé, who lifted the toolbox and headed for the YT's boarding ramp, his brown overcloak dusting the permacrete floor.

"Master Shé needs to modify the ship slightly," Fang Zar explained. "But his work won't affect your flight."

Jadak watched the Jedi disappear into the ship. Then he turned back to Des'sein. "What phrase will Folee use to identify herself?"

Des'sein blinked in short-lived confusion. "Oh, I see. No, you're mistaken, Captain. She is expecting you. The phrase we've provided you is a mnemonic aid she will need to carry out her part of the mission."

"Mnemonic," Jadak said.

"A memory shortcut," Largetto said. "Folee will understand. And the *Envoy* will handle the rest of it."

Jadak rarely asked questions about his assignments, but curiosity got the better of him. "The *Envoy* has been programmed—"

"Think of the ship as a key," Fang Zar said. "The key to a treasure."

Jadak waited.

"A treasure sufficient to restore Republic honor to the galaxy," Des'sein said finally.

Senate Intelligence Bureau Director Armand Isard was scanning the crowd that had welcomed Supreme Chancellor Palpatine when his comlink chimed. The speeder bus had berthed moments earlier, and the Chancellor and his handpicked party were moving down the red-carpeted colonnade toward the atrium turbolifts. In passing, Isard noted that Jedi Skywalker had lingered behind to speak privately with Senator Amidala.

A muscular man who had a talent for going unnoticed in a crowd despite his height, Isard was dressed in an unadorned gray uniform. His black hair matched the luster of his knee-high boots. Leaving the red carpet for the relative solitude of the tier's forest of ornate columns, he depressed the comlink's accept button and glanced down at the device, whose small screen displayed the face of the bureau's assistant director.

"I just wanted to alert you to a little confab that's transpiring in one of the lower-tier berths," the assistant director said.

Isard's dark eyes continued to track the movements of the welcome committee. "Go on."

"Senators Des'sein, Largetto, and Zar have taken possession of a carry case delivered by the pilots of an old YT freighter."

The three Senators were well-known members of the Delegation of Two Thousand, a loyalist coterie opposed to the strong measures Chancellor Palpatine had enacted since the start of the war.

"Jedi Master J'ooپی Shé is also present."

"Technical division?"

"That's the one."

Isard walked while he spoke. "Interesting that they should be holding a private meeting while several of their cohorts are up here."

"Which ones?"

"Danu, Malé-Dee, Eekway ... the usual bunch. Do you have audio of the meeting?"

"No. Countermeasures were taken. But we were able to snake a snoop-cam through the landing bay's intake vents, so we have acceptable video."

"The carry case ..."

"Too soon to know what it contains. Our people are working on cleaning up the surveillance feeds."

"Do we have anything on the couriers?"

"Nothing yet. The freighter carries a Ralltiir registry, and is owned by a company called the Republic Group."

"That could be telling."

"I thought so, too. The pilots transmitted a valid authorization code to Senate Airplane Control."

Isard paused at the edge of the stark atrium, where the Chancellor and the others were awaiting a turbolift. The area was filling fast with Senators who had emerged from the shelters and wanted to offer their congratulations to Palpatine. Isard found the lack of security appalling. Fierce fighting had occurred in the vicinity of the annex while