

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Dark Nest II: The Unseen Queen

Troy Denning

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About the Book

The epic new Star Wars odyssey enters a new frontier as the heroes of the New Jedi Order confront a monstrous evil – insidious, unseen and insatiable...

Despite being given new worlds to populate, the insectoid Killiks have not found peace. An unknown enemy has been attacking the new nests – and the Killiks hold the Jedi responsible. Travelling back to the Unknown Regions to unravel the mystery, the Skywalkers and Solos discover an evil far more familiar than they ever expected ... and even more terrifying. Why does the dark nest want to kill Mara? Will Jacen's apocalyptic vision trigger another galactic war or prevent one? And perhaps, most ominous of all, what deadly secrets are the Killiks hiding?

To find out, Luke, Mara, Han and Leia must embark on a perilous journey into the uncharted void between right and wrong. The ferocious Unknown Terrors are only the beginning of the awesome challenges that lie ahead in their quest to fathom the unfathomable. For an obscure dispute is about to explode into chaos, pitting Jedi against Jedi – and threatening the very galaxy itself.

About the Author

Troy Denning is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Star Wars: Tatooine Ghost* and *Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Star by Star*, as well as *Waterdeep* (under the pseudonym Richard Awlinson), *Pages of Pain*, *Beyond the High Road*, *The Summoning*, and many other novels. A former game designer and editor, he lives in southern Wisconsin with his wife, Andria.

Also 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
AGES OF PAIN
CRUCIBLE: THE TRIAL OF CYRIC THE MAD
THE OATH OF STONEKEEP
AGES OF DECEPTION
BEYOND THE HIGH ROAD
OATH OF THE DRAGON (with Ed Greenwood)
THE SUMMONING
THE SIEGE
THE SORCERER

TAR WARS: THE NEW JEDI ORDER: STAR BY STAR
TAR WARS: TATOOINE GHOST
TAR WARS: DARK NEST I: THE JOINER KING
TAR WARS: DARK NEST II: THE UNSEEN QUEEN
TAR WARS: DARK NEST III: THE SWARM WAR

STAR WARS™

DARK NEST II
THE
UNSEEN QUEEN

TROY DENNING



**For Doug Niles
A Treasured Friend**

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THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



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 IV
A NEW HOPE

Star Wars 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*

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

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:

Lando Calrissian and the
Mindharp of Sharu
Lando Calrissian and the
Flamewind of Oseon
Lando Calrissian and the
Starcave of ThonBoka

The Han Solo Adventures:

Han Solo at Stars' End
Han Solo's Revenge
Han Solo and the Lost Legacy

STAR WARS: A New Hope
YEAR 0

STAR WARS: EPISODE IV
A NEW HOPE

0-3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales from the Mos Eisley
Cantina
Star Wars: 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
Wrath 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

I, Jedi

The Jedi Academy Trilogy:

Jedi Search
Dark Apprentice
Champions of the Force

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

25-30 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope

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
*An ebook novella

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

lema Rar; Joiner (female Twi'lek)
en Skywalker; child (male human)
-3PO; protocol droid
al Omas; Galactic Alliance Chief of State (male human)
orran Horn; Jedi Master (male human)
orog; mastermind (Killik)
an Solo; captain, *Millennium Falcon* (male human)
icen Solo; Jedi Knight (male human)
e Juun; captain, *DR919a* (male Sullustan)
ina Solo; Jedi Knight (female human)
yp Durrion; Jedi Master (male human)
eia Organa Solo; copilot, *Millennium Falcon* (female human)
owbacca; Jedi Knight (male Wookiee)
uke Skywalker; Jedi Master (male human)
lara Jade Skywalker; Jedi Master (female human)
ek Bwua'tu; admiral (male Bothan)
2-D2; astromech droid
aynar Thul; crash survivor (male human)
aras; entrepreneur (Killik)
aba Sebatyne; Jedi Master (female Barabel)
ahiri Veila; Jedi Knight (female human)
arfang; copilot, *DR919a* (male Ewok)
enel Ka; Queen Mother (female human)
esar Sebatyne; Jedi Knight (male Barabel)
nu; the Will (Killik)
ekk; Jedi Knight (male human)

PROLOGUE

Like thieves all across the galaxy, Tibanna tappers worked best in darkness. They slipped and stole through the lowest levels of Bespin's Life Zone, down where daylight faded to dusk and shapes softened to silhouettes, down where black curtains of mist swept across purple, boiling skies. Their targets were the lonely platforms where honest beings worked through the endless night de-icing frozen intake fans and belly-crawling into clogged transfer pipes, where the precious gas was gathered atom by atom. In the last month alone, the tanks at a dozen stations had been mysteriously drained, and two Jedi Knights had been sent to bring the thieves to justice.

Emerging into a pocket of clear air, Jaina and Zekk saw BesGas Three ahead. The station was a saucer-shaped extraction platform, so overloaded with processing equipment that it seemed a wonder it stayed afloat. The primary storage deck was limned in blue warning strobes, and in the flashing light behind one of those strobes, Jaina and Zekk saw an oblong shadow tucked back between two holding tanks.

Jaina swung the nose of their borrowed cloud car toward the tanks and accelerated, rushing to have a look before the processing facility vanished behind another curtain of mist. The shadow was probably just a shadow, but down here at the bottom of the Life Zone, heat and pressure and darkness all conspired against human vision, and every possibility had to be investigated up close.

Spin-sealed Tibanna gas had a lot of uses, but the most important was to increase the yield of starship weapons. So if somebody was stealing Tibanna gas, especially as much as had been disappearing from Bespin in recent weeks, the Jedi needed to find out who they were—and what they were doing with it.

As Jaina and Zekk continued to approach, the shadow began to acquire a tablet-like shape. Zekk readied the mini tractor beam, and Jaina armed the twin ion guns. There was no need to remark that the shadow was starting to look like a siphoning balloon, or to complain that the strobe lights were blinding them, or even to discuss what tactics they should use. Thanks to their stay with the Killiks, their minds were so closely connected that they scarcely knew where one began and the other ended. Even after a year away from the Colony, ideas and perceptions and emotions flowed between them without effort. Often, they could not even tell in whose mind a thought had formed—and it did not matter. They simply shared it.

A blue glow flared among the holding tanks, then a small tapper tug shot into view, its conical silhouette wavering against the pressure-blurred lights of the station's habitation decks. An instant later three siphoning balloons—the one Jaina and Zekk had spotted and two others—rose behind it, chased by long plumes of Tibanna gas still escaping from siphoning holes in the holding tanks.

Jaina opened fire with the ion guns, narrowly missing the tug, but spraying the station's central hub. Ion beams were safer to use around Tibanna gas than blaster bolts, since all they did was disable electronic circuitry, so the barrage did not cause any structural damage. But it did plunge two levels of habitation deck into a sudden blackout.

Zekk swung the tractor beam around and caught hold of a siphoning balloon. The tappers released it, and the balloon came flying straight at the cloud car. Zekk

deactivated the beam immediately, but Jaina still had to swing wide to avoid being taken out by the huge, tumbling bag of supercooled gas.

Jaina let out a tense breath. “Too—”

“—close!” Zekk finished.

By the time she brought the cloud car back around, the last two balloons were following the tug up into a dark, churning cloud. Jaina raised their nose and sent another burst of ionized energy streaming after the tappers, but Zekk did not reactivate the beam.

They agreed—the capture attempt had looked realistic enough. Now the quarry needed room to run. Jaina backed off the throttles, and they began a slow spiral up after the thieves.

A moment later, a fuzzy pinpoint of yellow appeared deep inside the cloud, rapidly swelling into a hazy tongue of flame that came shooting out into clear air almost before Jaina could bring the ion guns around. She pressed both triggers and began to sweep the barrels back and forth. She was not trying to hit the missile—that would have been impossible, even for a Jedi. Instead, she was simply laying a blanket of ionized energy in its path.

Zekk reached out and found the missile in the Force, then gently guided it into one of Jaina’s ion beams. Its electrical systems erupted into a tempest of discharge lightning and overload sparks, then failed altogether. Once the tempest died down, Zekk used a Force shove to deflect it from the extraction platform. The dead missile plunged past, barely a dozen meters from the edge of the storage deck, then vanished into the seething darkness of the Squeeze Zone.

Jaina frowned. “Now, that was—”

“—entirely uncalled for,” Zekk finished.

With all that supercooled Tibanna pouring out onto the storage deck, even a small detonation would have been enough to blow the entire platform out of the sky. But that

had probably been the idea, Jaina and Zekk realized: payback for calling in Jedi—and a warning to other stations not to do the same.

“Need to get these guys,” Zekk said aloud.

Jaina nodded. “Just as soon as we know who they’re working for.”

Judging they had allowed the thieves a large enough lead to feel comfortable, Jaina and Zekk stretched out into the Force in an effort to locate them. It was not easy. Even at these depths, Bespin was surprisingly rich in life, from huge gasbag beldons to their mighty velker predators, from vast purple expanses of “glower” algae to the raawks and floaters that scavenged a living from extraction platforms like BesGas Three.

Finally, Jaina and Zekk found what they were searching for, a trio of presences exuding relief and excitement and more than a little anger. The three thieves felt insect-like, somehow more in harmony with the universe than most other beings. But they remained three distinct individuals, each with a unique presence. They were not Killiks.

And that made Jaina and Zekk a little sad. They would never have changed the decision that had gotten them banished from the Colony. It had prevented the outbreak of a savage war, and they did not regret it. But being apart from Taat—the nest they had joined at Qoribu—was like being shut off from themselves, like being cast aside by one’s sweetheart and friends and family without the possibility of return. It was a little bit like becoming a ghost, dying but not departing, floating around on the edges of the living never quite able to make contact. So they *did* feel a little sorry for themselves sometimes. Even Jedi were allowed that much.

“Need to get these guys,” Jaina said, reiterating a call to action that she felt sure was more Zekk than her. He had never had much use for regrets. “Ready?”

Silly question. Jaina accelerated after the tappers, climbing up into a storm so violent and lightning-filled that she and Zekk felt as if they were back in the war again, fighting a pitched battle against the Yuuzhan Vong. After a standard hour, they gave up trying to maintain a steady altitude and resigned themselves to having their stomachs alternately up in their throats and down in their guts. After three hours, they gave up trying to stay right-side up and concentrated on just making forward progress. After five hours, they emerged from the storm into a bottomless canyon of clear, still air—only to glimpse the tappers entering a wall of crimson vortexes where two bands of wind brushed against each other in opposite directions. Amazingly, the tug still had both siphoning balloons in tow.

Jaina and Zekk wondered whether the tappers knew they were being followed, but that seemed impossible. This far down in the atmosphere, Bespin's magnetic field and powerful storms prevented even rudimentary sensor equipment from working. Navigation was strictly by compass, gyroscope, and calculation. If the tug was going through that wind wall, it was because it was on its way to deliver its stolen Tibanna.

Jaina and Zekk waited until the tappers had vanished, then crossed the cloud canyon and carefully accelerated into the same vortex. The wind grabbed them immediately, and it felt as if they'd been fired out of a turbolaser. Their heads slammed back against their seats, the cloud car began to groan and tremble, and the world beyond their canopy became a blur of crimson vapor and stabbing lightning. Jaina let go of the control stick, lest she forget herself and tear the wings of their craft by attempting to steer.

An hour later, Jaina and Zekk sensed the tappers' presences drifting past to one side and realized they had made it across the Change Zone. Still keeping her hand off the stick, Jaina pushed the throttles to full. The cloud car

shot forward screaming and bucking; then the vapor outside faded from crimson to rosy, and the ride grew suddenly smooth.

Jaina eased off the throttles until the cloud car's repulsor drive finally fell silent, then began to circle through the rosy fog at minimum speed.

"Well, that was—"

"—fun," Zekk agreed. "Let's never do it again."

Once their stomachs had settled, Jaina brought the cloud car around and they crept back through the pink fog, unable to see a hundred meters beyond their noses, still using the presences of the tappers to guide them. It felt like they had overshot the thieves by a considerable distance, but it was impossible to say whether that distance was a hundred kilometers or a thousand. The Force did not have a scale.

After a quarter hour, they began to suffer the illusion that they were simply floating in the cloud, that they were not moving at all. But the instruments still showed their velocity at more than a hundred kilometers per standard hour, and it felt as if they were closing rapidly on their quarry.

Jaina wondered where they were.

Zekk said, "The gyrocomputer calculates our position as three-seven-point-eight-three north, two-seven-seven-point-eight-eight-six longitude, one-six-nine deep."

"Is that in—"

"Yes," Zekk answered. They were about a thousand kilometers into the Dead Eye, a vast region of still air and dense fog that had existed in Beshpin's atmosphere at least since the planet's discovery.

"Great. Only nineteen thousand kilometers to the other side," Jaina complained. "Do the charts show—"

"Nothing," Zekk said. "Not even a marker buoy."

"Blast!" This, they said together.

Still, it felt like they were catching up to the tappers quickly. There had to be *something* out there.

"Maybe they've just stopped to—"

"No," Jaina said. "That gas was already—"

"Right," Zekk agreed. "They've got to—"

"And soon."

The stolen Tibanna gas had already been spin-sealed, so the tappers had to get it into carbonite quickly or see it lose most of its commercial value. And charts or no charts, that meant there was a facility somewhere in the Dead Eye. Jaina eased back on the throttles some more. It felt as if they were right on top of the thieves, and in this fog—

The corroded tower-tanks of an ancient refinery emerged from the pink haze ahead, and Jaina barely had time to flip the cloud car up on edge and bank away. Zekk, who was just as surprised but a lot less busy, had a moment to glance down through the open roof of a ruined habitation deck. The rest of the station remained hidden in the fog beneath, showing just enough ghostly corners and curves to suggest the lower decks had not fallen off ... yet.

Focusing on the presences of the three Tibanna tappers, Jaina carefully spiraled down around the central tower complex while Zekk looked for ambushes. Much of the outer skin had long since rusted away, exposing a metal substructure caked and pitted with corrosion. Finally, the ruins of the loading deck came into view. Crooked arms of pink fog reached up through missing sections of flooring, and the docking berths were so primitive that they were serviced by loading ramps instead of lift pads.

A berth close to a missing section of floor held the conical tug Jaina and Zekk had been chasing. The vehicle was standing on three struts, with the boarding ramp lowered. The two siphoning balloons lay on the deck behind the tug, empty and flattened. There was no sign of the crew.

Jaina and Zekk circled once, then landed near the empty siphoning balloons. At once, they felt a rhythmic quiver—the station’s repulsorlift generator was straining.

The hair rose on the back of Jaina’s neck. “We need to make this fast.”

Zekk had already popped the canopy and was leaping out onto the deck. Jaina unbuckled her crash webbing and followed him over to the tug, her lightsaber held at the ready but not ignited. The repulsorlift generator was in even worse condition than she had thought. The quiver was cycling up to a periodic shudder, and the shudder lasted a little longer and grew a little stronger every time it came.

Jaina and Zekk did not like the sound of that. It seemed odd that it should fail now, after so many centuries of keeping this station afloat. But perhaps power was being diverted to the carbonite freezing system—since that was clearly what the tappers were using this place for.

When they reached the tug, it grew apparent they would need to rethink that theory. They could feel the tappers inside the vessel, listless, far too content, almost unconscious. While Jaina stayed outside, Zekk ascended the ramp to investigate, and she received through their shared mind a complete perception of what he was finding.

The ramp opened onto an engineering deck, which—judging by the debris and nesting rags strewn about the floor—also doubled as crew quarters. It felt like the tappers themselves were on the flight deck, one level above. The air was filled with a cloying odor that Jaina and Zekk both recognized all too well, and the floor was piled high with waxy balls containing a dark, muddy liquid filled with stringy clots.

“Black membrosia?” Zekk asked.

There was only one way to be certain, but Zekk had no intention of tasting the stuff. After a brush with the dark side as a teenager, he held himself to a strict standard of

restraint, and he never engaged in anything that even hinted of corruption or immorality.

So, after a last check to make sure nothing was creeping up on them out of the fog, Jaina ascended the boarding ramp. She picked up one of the balls and plunged her thumb through the wax, then withdrew it and licked the black syrup. It was much more cloying than the light membrosia of their own nest, with a rancid aftertaste that made her want to scrape her tongue ... at least until her vision blurred and she was overcome by a feeling of chemical euphoria.

"Whoa. Definitely membrosia." Jaina had to brace herself against a wall, and she and Zekk were filled with a longing to rejoin their nest in the Colony. "Strong stuff."

Jaina could feel how much Zekk wanted to experience another taste—even through *her* mind—but the dark membrosia was almost narcotic in its potency, and now was hardly the time to have her senses dulled. She pinched the thumb hole shut and set the ball aside, intending to retrieve it on the way out.

"Bad idea."

Zekk used the Force to return the ball to the pile with the others. He could be such a zealot sometimes.

The image of a vast chamber filled with waxes of stringy black membrosia came to Jaina's mind, and she recalled where black membrosia came from.

The Dark Nest had survived.

"And we need to know—"

"Right." Jaina led the way up the ladder to the flight deck. "What Dark Nest membrosia is doing *here*."

"Yes—"

"And what it has to do with Tibanna tapping."

Zekk sighed. Sometimes he missed finishing his own sentences.

On the flight deck, Jaina and Zekk found three Verpine slumped at their flight stations in a membrosia-induced

stupor. The floor surrounding all three tappers was littered with empty waxes, and their long necks were flopped on their thoraxes or over their shoulders at angles unnatural even for insects. The long fingers and limbs of all three were fitfully jerking, as though in a dream, and when the pilot managed to turn his head to look toward them, tiny sparkles of gold light appeared deep inside his bulbous eyes.

"Won't get any answers here for a while," Jaina said.

"Right," Zekk said. "But they didn't unload those siphoning balloons themselves."

Jaina and Zekk left the tug and returned to the siphoning balloons, then followed a new transfer hose over to a section of missing deck. The line descended through the hole and disappeared into the fog, angling down toward the top of the unipod—where the carbonite freezing facilities were usually located.

Jaina and Zekk looked at each other, silently debating whether it would be better to slide along the hose or work their way down through the central hub of the station ... and that was when the repulsorlift generator finally stopped shuddering.

They felt their stomachs rise and hoped that they were just reacting to the sudden stillness—that the sudden silence was not the bad sign they feared.

Then the blue glow of a large repulsor drive flared to life below.

"Rodders!" Jaina cursed.

The blue glow of the departing vessel swung around, briefly silhouetting the hazy lance of the station's unipod, then quickly receded into the fog.

"They shut the generator down!" Zekk said.

Jaina and Zekk turned to race to their cloud car, then remembered the tappers and started for the tug instead.

Their knees buckled as the deck suddenly lurched upward beneath them; then a strut collapsed beneath the

tug, and it tumbled across the platform. Jaina and Zekk were too confused to react—until they noticed that they were also starting to slide.

The station was tipping.

Jaina spun back toward their cloud car and found it sliding across the deck, rocking up on its struts and about to tumble over. She thrust an arm out, holding Zekk with her other hand, and used the Force to pluck the vehicle up and bring it over. She caught hold of the cockpit and started to pull herself inside, then realized Zekk was still a deadweight in her other hand.

He was staring toward a missing section of deck, holding his arm out. But his Force grasp was empty, and Jaina could feel how angry he was with himself for missing the tug.

“Get over it!” She pulled herself into the cloud car’s cockpit, dragging him after her. “They’re Tibanna toppers. They’re not worth dying for!”

ONE

WOTEBA.

The last time Han Solo had been here, the planet had had no name. The air had been thick and boggy, and there had been a ribbon of muddy water purling through the marsh grass, bending lazily toward the dark wall of a nearby conifer forest. A jagged mountain had loomed in the distance, its pale summit gleaming against the wispy red veil of a nebular sky.

Now the air was filled with the aroma of sweet membrosia and slow-roasted nerf ribs, and the only water in sight was rippling down the face of an artificial waterfall. The conifer forest had been cut, stripped, and driven into the marsh to serve as log pilings beneath the iridescent tunnel-houses of the Saras nest. Even the mountain looked different, seeming to float above the city on a cushion of kiln steam, its icy peak almost scraping the pale-veined belly of the Utegetu Nebula.

"Interesting, what the bugs have done to the place," Han said. He was standing in the door of the glimmering hangar where they had berthed the *Falcon*, looking out on the nest along with Leia, Saba Sebatyne, the Skywalkers, and C-3PO and R2-D2. "Not so creepy after all."

"Don't call them bugs, Han," Leia reminded him. "Insulting your hosts is never a good way to start a visit."

"Right, we wouldn't want to insult 'em," Han said. "Not for a little thing like harboring pirates and running black membrosia."

He crossed a spinglass bridge and stopped at the edge of a meandering ribbon of street. The silver lane was packed with chest-high Killiks hauling rough lumber, quarried moire-stone, casks of bluewater. Here and there, bleary-eyed spacers—human and otherwise—were staggering back to their ships at the sore end of a membrosia binge. On the balconies overhanging the tunnel-house entrances, glittered-up Joiners—beings who had spent too much time among Killiks and been absorbed into the nest’s collective mind—were smiling and dancing to the soft trill of spinning wind horns. The only incongruous sight was in the marshy, two-meter gap that served as the gutter between the hangar and the street. A lone insect lay facedown in the muck, its orange thorax and white-striped abdomen half covered in some sort of dull gray froth.

“Raynar must know we’ve arrived,” Luke said. He was still on the bridge behind Han. “Any sign of a guide?”

The bug in the gutter lifted itself on its arms and began to drum its thorax.

“I don’t know,” Han answered, eyeing the bug uncertainly. When it began to drag itself toward the bridge, he said, “Make that a maybe.”

The Killik stopped and stared up at them with a pair of bulbous green eyes. “*Bur r rruubb, ubur ruur.*”

“Sorry—don’t understand a throb.” Han knelt on the street’s glimmering surface and extended a hand. “But come on up. Our protocol droid knows over six million—”

The insect spread its mandibles and backed away, pointing at the blaster on Han’s hip.

“Hey, take it easy,” Han said, still holding out his hand. “That’s just for show. I’m not here to shoot anybody.”

“*Brubr.*” The Killik raised a pincer-hand, then tapped itself between the eyes. “*Urrubb uu.*”

“Oh, dear,” C-3PO said from the back of the bridge. “She seems to be *asking* you to blast her.”

The bug nodded enthusiastically, then averted its eyes.

"Don't get crazy," Han said. "You're not that late."

"I think it's in pain, Han." Mara knelt on the street beside Han and motioned the insect to come closer. "Come here. We'll try to help."

The Killik shook its head and tapped itself between the eyes again. "*Buurubuur, ubu ru.*"

"She says *nothing* can help," C-3PO said. "She has the Fizz."

"The Fizz?" Han echoed.

The Killik thrummed a long explanation.

"She says it is very painful," C-3PO said. "And she would appreciate it if you would end her misery as soon as possible. UnuThul is waiting in the Garden Hall."

"Sorry," Han said. "I'm not blasting anyone this trip."

The Killik rumbled something that sounded like *rodder*, then started to drag itself away.

"Wait!" Luke extended his hand, and the Killik rose out of the mud. "Maybe we can rig an isolation ward—"

The rest of the offer was drowned out as Saras porters turned to point at their nest-fellow's frothy legs, drumming their chests and knocking the loads out of one another's arms. The Joiner dancers vanished from their balconies, and startled spacers staggered toward the gutter, squinting and reaching for their blasters.

Luke began to float the Killik back toward the bridge. It clacked its mandibles in protest and thrashed its arms, but its legs—hidden beneath a thick layer of froth—dangled motionlessly beneath its thorax. A steady drizzle of what looked like dirt specks fell from its feet into the gutter.

Han frowned. "Luke, maybe we'd better leave—"

A blaster bolt whined out from down the street, taking the Killik in midthorax and spraying a fist-sized circle of chitin and froth onto the hangar's milky exterior. The insect died instantly, but another uproar erupted on the street as angry spacers began to berate a wobbly Quarren holding a powerful Merr-Sonn Flash 4 blaster pistol.

"Ish not my fault!" The Quarren waved the weapon vaguely in Luke's direction. "Them Jedi wash the ones flyin' a Fizzer 'round."

The accusation diverted the angry looks toward Luke, but no one in the group was membrosia-smeared enough to harangue a party that included four beings dressed in Jedi robes. Instead the spacers staggered toward the hangar's other entrances as fast as their unsteady legs could carry them, leaving Han and the Jedi to stare at the dead Killik in astonished silence. Normally, they would have at least taken the killer into custody to await local law enforcement, but these were hardly normal circumstances. Luke just sighed and lowered the victim back into the gutter.

Leia seemed unable to take her eyes off it. "From the way those spacers reacted, this is fairly common. Did Raynar's message say anything about an epidemic?"

"Not a word," Mara said, standing. "Just that Unu had discovered why the Dark Nest attacked me last year, and we needed to discuss it in person."

"I don't like it," Han said. "Sounds more convenient all the time."

"We know—and thanks again for coming," Mara said. "We appreciate the backup."

"Yeah, well, don't mention it." Han returned to his feet. "We've got a personal interest in this."

Strictly speaking, the pirate harboring and membrosia running in which the Killiks were engaged was not Han and Leia's concern. But Chief of State Omas was using the trouble as a pretext to avoid keeping his side of a complicated bargain with the Solos, saying that until the nests of the Utegetu Nebula stopped causing so much trouble for the Galactic Alliance, he could not muster the votes he needed to give the Ithorians a new homeworld.

Han would have liked to believe the claim was just a big bantha patty, but someone had leaked the terms of the deal

to the holopress. Now both the Solo name and the Ithorian homeworld had become linked in the public mind with the pirate raids and “tarhoney” dens that were blighting the frontier from Adumar to Reecee.

Once the street traffic had returned to normal, Luke said, “We seem to be out a guide. We’ll have to find Raynar ourselves.”

Han started to send C-3PO into the street to ask directions from a Killik, but Luke and the other Masters simply turned to Leia with an expectant look. She closed her eyes for a moment, then turned down the street and confidently began to lead the way deeper into the shimmering nest. Fairly certain that she knew exactly where she was going, Han fell in beside C-3PO and R2-D2 and followed the others in silence. Sometimes hanging out with Jedi was almost enough to make him feel inadequate.

For a quarter of a standard hour, the nature of Saras nest did not change. They continued to meet long lines of Killik porters coming in the opposite direction, to crave the roasted nerf they smelled in the air, to marvel at the iridescent sheen of the sinuous tunnel-houses—and to gasp at the purling beauty of the endless string of fountains, sprays, and cascades they passed.

Most of the Killik nests Han had visited had left him feeling creepy and a little sick to his stomach. But this one made him feel oddly buoyant and relaxed, perhaps even rejuvenated, as though the most pleasant thing in the galaxy would be sitting on a tunnel-house balcony, sipping golden membrosia, and watching the Joiners dance.

It made Han wonder what the bugs were up to *now*.

Gradually, the streets grew less crowded, and the group began to notice more froth-covered bodies in the gutter. Most were already dead and half disintegrated, but a few remained intact enough to raise their heads and beg for a merciful end. Han found himself torn between the desire to stop their suffering and a reluctance to do something so

drastic without understanding the situation. Fortunately, Luke was able to take the middle road, using the Force to render each victim unconscious.

Finally, Leia stopped about ten meters from an open expanse of marsh. The street continued, snaking through a brightly mottled sweep of bog flowers, but the road surface turned dull and frothy ahead, and the ends of the nearby tunnel-houses were being eaten by gray foam. In the center of the field stood a massive spinglass palace, its base a shapeless mass of ash-colored bubbles and its crown a braided tangle of iridescent turrets swimming with snakes of color.

"Tell me that's not where Raynar was waiting," Han groaned. "Because there's no way we're going—"

"Raynar Thul could not be waiting there," a gravelly voice said from a nearby tunnel-house. "You should know that by now, Captain Solo. Raynar Thul has been gone a long time."

Han turned around and found the imposing figure of Raynar Thul standing in the tunnel-house entrance. A tall man with regal bearing, he had a raw, melted face with no ears, hair, or nose, and all of his visible skin had the shiny, stiff quality of a burn scar. He wore purple trousers and a cape of scarlet silk over a breastplate of gold chitin.

"Guess I'm a slow learner that way," Han said, smiling. "Good to see you again, uh, UnuThul."

Raynar came into the street. As always, he was followed by the Unu, a motley swarm of Killiks of many different shapes and sizes. Gathered from hundreds of different nests, they accompanied Raynar wherever he went and acted as a sort of collective Will for the Colony.

"We are surprised to see you and Princess Leia here." Raynar made no move to take the hand that Han extended. "We did not summon you."

Han frowned, but continued to hold out his hand. "Yeah, what's the deal with that? Our feelings were kind of hurt,

seeing how we're the ones who gave you this world."

Raynar's eyes remained cold. "We have not forgotten." Instead of shaking hands, he reached past Han's wrist and rubbed forearms in a buggish greeting. "You may be sure of that."

"Uh, great." Han tried to hide the cold shudder that ran up his spine. "Glad to hear it."

Raynar continued to rub arms, his keloid lip rising into a faint sneer. "There is no need to be afraid, Captain Solo. Touching us will not make you a Joiner."

"Never thought it would." Han yanked his arm away. "You're just enjoying it way too much."

Raynar's sneer changed to a small, taut smile. "That is what we have always admired most about you, Captain Solo," he said. "Your fearlessness."

Before Han could respond—or ask about the gray foam eating the Saras nest—Raynar stepped away, and Han found himself being stared down by one of the Unu, this one a two-meter insect with a red-spotted head and five blue eyes.

"What are *you* looking at?" Han demanded.

The insect snapped its mandibles closed a centimeter from Han's nose, then drummed something sharp with its thorax.

"The Colony certainly seems impressed with your courage, Captain Solo!" C-3PO reported cheerily. "She says she is either looking at the bravest human in the galaxy—or the dumbest."

Han frowned at the bug. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The Killik looked away and walked past him, leading the rest of the Unu to join Raynar and the Skywalkers. Han motioned C-3PO and R2-D2 to his side, then shouldered his way through the softly droning mass to stand with Saba and Leia.

"I'm not liking the buzz around here," he whispered to Leia. "It's beginning to feel like a setup."

Leia nodded, but kept her attention fixed on the center of the gathering, where Raynar was already exchanging greetings with the Skywalkers.

"... apologize for receiving you in the street," he was saying to Luke. "But the Garden Hall we built to welcome you was ..." He glanced toward the marsh. "... destroyed."

"No apologies are necessary," Luke answered. "We're happy to see you anywhere."

"Good." Raynar motioned them up the street, toward a small courtyard only a couple of meters from the marsh. "We will talk in the Circle of Rest."

Alarm warnings began to knell inside Han's head. "Shouldn't we go someplace safer?" he asked. "Farther away from that froth?"

Raynar turned to Han and narrowed his eyes. "Why would we do that, Captain Solo?"

"Are you kidding me?" Han asked. "Why *wouldn't* we? I've seen what that foam does."

"Have you?" Raynar asked. Han's vision began to blur around the edges, and soon all that remained visible of Raynar's face were the cold, blue depths of his eyes. "Tell us about it."

Han scowled. "What do you think you're doing? Don't you try that Force stuff ..." A dark weight began to gather inside his chest, and words began to spill out of Han of their own accord. "There was a bug outside our hangar covered in gray froth. It was disintegrating before our eyes, and now we get here and see the same thing happening to your—"

"Wait a minute!" Leia's voice came from in front of Han. "You think *we* know something about this 'Fizz'?"

"You and Captain Solo *are* the ones who gave us this world," Raynar said. "And now we know why."