

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Legacy of the Force V – Sacrifice

Karen Traviss

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About the Book

SACRIFICE is the fifth book in the 9-book Legacy of the Force series, a bold new Star Wars story arc for fans of the New Jedi Order and the franchise's most popular characters: Luke, Han, and Leia. This is the middle book in the series and the second of three hardcovers. The adventure continues, and one of our storylines comes to a crucial and shocking climax.

Things come to a head in the galaxy of the Skywalker and Solos when Jacen Solo makes a horrifying decision from which there is no going back. For Luke, Han and Leia, nothing will ever be the same again...

About the Author

British writer Karen Traviss received critical acclaim for her first two novels *City of Pearl* and *Crossing the Line*, published by HarperCollins in the USA. A former defense correspondent and TV newspaper journalist, Karen has also worked as a police press officer, an advertising copywriter and a journalism lecturer. She has served in both the Royal Naval Auxiliary Service and the Territorial Army. A graduate of the Clarion East Class of 2000, she has had short stories published in *Asimov's*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *On Spec*. She is also the author of *Star Wars: Republic Commando: Hard Contact* and *Star Wars: Republic Commando: Triple Zero*, and is the beloved of stormtroopers everywhere.

Also by Karen Traviss

City of Pearl
Crossing the Line
The World Before
Matriarch
Ally

Star Wars: REPUBLIC COMMANDO
Hard Contact
Triple Zero
True Colors
Order 66 (forthcoming)

Star Wars: LEGACY OF THE FORCE
Bloodlines
Sacrifice
Revelation

Star Wars: BOBA FETT: A PRACTICAL MAN (E-book)

Star Wars: THE CLONE WARS
Star Wars: THE CLONE WARS:
No Prisoners

Star Wars: IMPERIAL COMANDO:
501st



SACRIFICE

HAREN TRAVISS



arrow books

*Dedicated to the memory of Sergeant 1st Class Daniel
Crabtree, Company B, 2nd Battalion, 19th Special Forces
Group (Airborne)—father, husband, soldier, police officer,
and Star Wars fan: one of our own.*

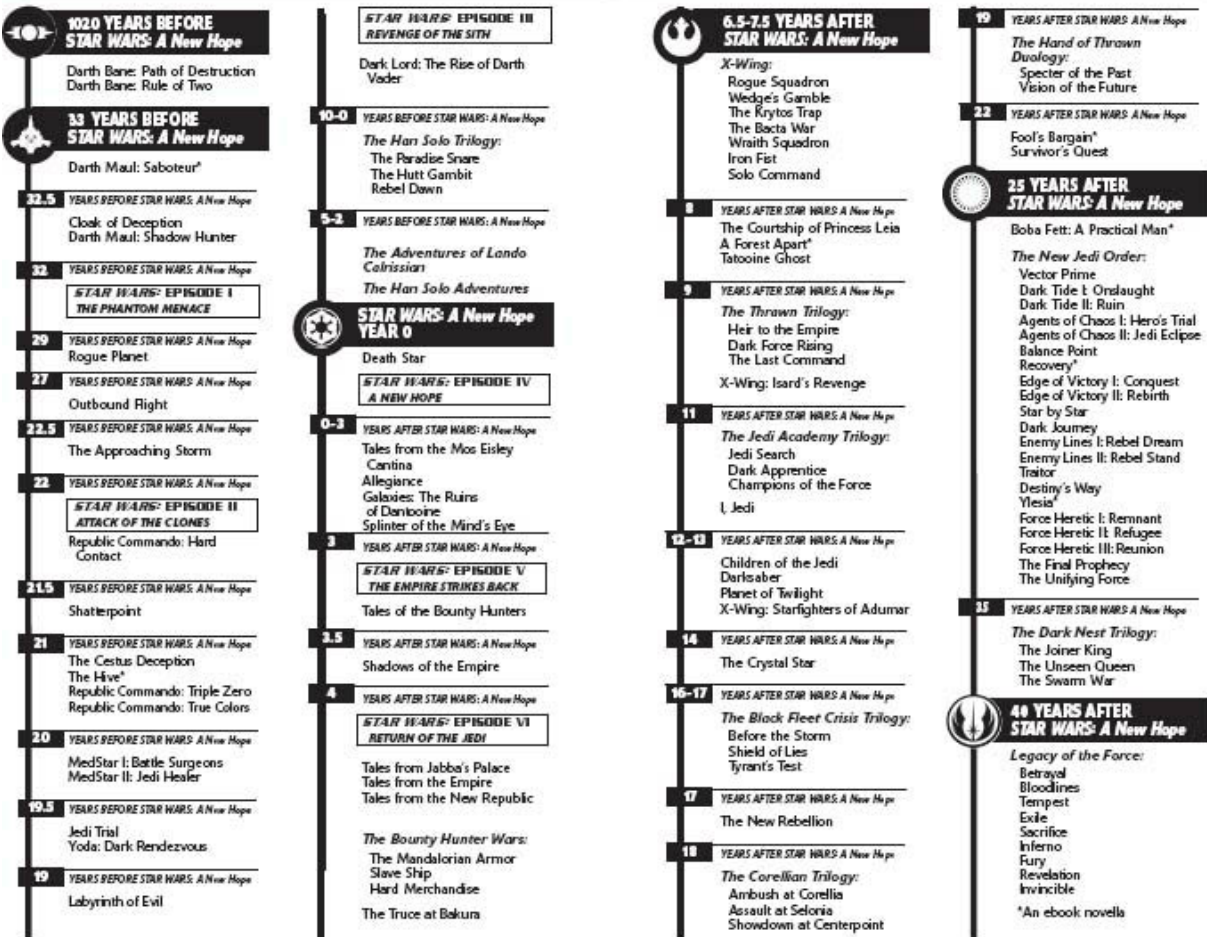
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You folks really do know the power of the dark side. . . .

THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



Dramatis Personae



Ben Skywalker; junior GAG officer (human male)
Boba Fett; Mandalore and semi-retired bounty hunter (human male)
Cassian Andor; Chief of State, Galactic Alliance (human male)
Mon Calamari; admiral, Galactic Alliance (Mon Calamari female)
Cassian Andor; Mandalorian soldier (human female)
Cham Syndulla; Prime Minister, Corellia (human male)
Cham Syndulla; Mandalorian soldier (human male)
Cham Syndulla; Mandalorian soldier (human male)
Han Solo; Jedi Knight (human male)
Leia Solo; Jedi Knight (human female)
Qui-Gon Jinn; GAG corporal (human male)
Leia Organa Solo; Jedi Knight, copilot, *Millennium Falcon* (human female)
Qui-Gon Jinn; GAG captain (human male)
Qui-Gon Jinn; Jedi Grand Master (human male)
Qui-Gon Jinn; Dark Lady of the Sith (human female)
Qui-Gon Jinn; Jedi Master (human female)
Qui-Gon Jinn; Mandalorian soldier (human male)
Qui-Gon Jinn; bounty hunter, Boba Fett's granddaughter (human female)
Qui-Gon Jinn; Mandalorian soldier (human male)

Prologue

THE SKYWALKERS' BEDROOM, ROTUNDA ZONE, CORUSCANT: 0300 HOURS

This is going to be another sleepless night.

But should I have killed him?

Maybe I should try some meds. Warm milk, even.

I've taken a lot of lives. Ever since Ben asked us how many, I've been counting. Maybe Luke's been adding up the tally, too. But he hasn't mentioned it since.

Where's Ben?

I was better placed than anyone to assassinate Palpatine. Now I look back on it and wonder how history would have turned out if I'd come to my senses and killed him when I had the chance. I'd have been a traitor then; I'd be a hero now. And he'd still be dead either way. Perspective is a funny thing.

How many people died because I didn't make that call? I didn't even realize that I could.

Ben, I feel you're alive. But where are you? It's been days.

So . . . how *would* I have known when it was the only option left? When things had gone too far, and someone *had* to do it? And how come Luke is sleeping like a comatose nerf? I wish I could. If I switch on the holonews, though, even without the audio, it might disturb him. Meditation isn't working, either. Maybe I should just get up and go for a walk.

Ben . . . if Jacen doesn't know where you are, what are you up to?

I have to stop doing this.

He's a smart kid and he's been trained by the best. He'll be okay. And maybe he knows now that killing someone is a split second, a heartbeat, a thing you're trained to do until you don't stop to debate it, and then it can't ever be undone. Now that he's killed for himself, and knows the mark it leaves in your head, perhaps he won't judge me or his father harshly.

That's his legacy from Mom and Dad: assassin, freedom fighter, soldier, call it what you will. It all ends in a body count. Ben's joined the family business.

But I don't know what he's doing or even where he is right now. I'm worried sick. I don't care how strong his Force powers are. Jedi die like everyone else, and it's a big and pitiless galaxy, and he's just a kid. *My kid.*

Ben, if you can feel me, reach back. Let me know you're okay.

Luke never believes me when I tell him he snores. He snores, all right.

Ben . . .

"You okay?" Luke's awake. He can do that without warning. Bang—he just snaps alert. "It's the middle of the night."

"I know."

"You're worrying about Ben."

"No, he can look after himself." Why do I say that? Luke knows what I'm thinking. "I shouldn't have eaten so late."

"I'm worried about him, too." He punches the pillow into a more comfortable shape and buries his head in it. "But he's okay. I can still feel him."

Nothing is okay now.

Luke knows it. I know it. The whole family knows it.

There's a war going on across the galaxy, but it's the war within my family that I care about most. My son's a stranger most days.

And Jacen . . .

I don't think I know Jacen Solo at all.

And Lumiya . . .

She tried to kill my kid. For that, sweetheart, you're going to have to answer to me. I'm coming for you, and soon.

I think I can get some sleep now. I feel more relaxed already.

Chapter One

*He will choose the fate of the weak.
He will win and break his chains.
He will choose how he will be loved.
He will strengthen himself through sacrifice.
He will make a pet.
He will strengthen himself through pain.
He will balance between peace and conflict.
He will know brotherhood.
He will remake himself.
He will immortalize his love.*

—“Common Themes in Prophecies Recorded in the Symbology of Knotted Tassels;” by Dr. Heilan Rotham, University of Pangalactic Cultural Studies.
Call for papers: the university invites submissions from khipulogists and fiber-record analysts on the subject of the remaining untranslated tassels from the Lorrd Artifact. Symposium dates may change, subject to current security situation.

SITH MEDITATION SPHERE, HEADING, CORUSCANT—ESTIMATED

IT WAS *ODD* having to trust a ship.

Ben Skywalker was alone in the vessel he'd found on Zioist, trusting it to understand that he wanted it to take him home. No navigation array, no controls, no pilot's seat .

. . nothing. Through the bulkheads he could see stars as smeared points of light, but he'd stopped finding the ship's transparency unsettling. The hull was *there*. He could both see it and not see it. He felt he was in the heart of a hollowed red gem making its sedate way back to the Core.

And there was no yoke or physical control panel, so he had to *think* his command. The strange ship, more like a ball of rough red stone than a vessel made in a shipyard, responded to the Force.

Can't you go faster? I'll be an old man by the time I get back.

The ship felt instantly annoyed. Ben listened. In his mind, the ship spoke in a male voice that had no sound or real form, but it spoke: and it wasn't amused by his impatience. It showed him streaked white lights streaming from a central point in a black void, a pilot's view of hyperspace, and then an explosion.

"Okay, so you're going as fast as you can . . ." Ben felt the ship's brief satisfaction that its idiot pilot had understood. He wondered who'd made it. It was hard not to think of it as alive, like the Yuuzhan Vong ships, but he settled for seeing it as a droid, an artifact with a personality and—yes, *emotions*. Like Shaker.

Sorry, Shaker. Sorry to leave you to sort it all out.

The astromech droid would be fine, he knew it. Ben had dropped him off on Drewwa. That was where Shaker came from, like Kiara, and so they were both home now. Astromechs were good, reliable, *sensible* units, and Shaker would hand her over to someone to take care of her, poor kid . . .

Her dad's dead and her whole life's upended. They were just used to lure me to Ziest so someone could try to kill me. Why? Have I made that many enemies already?

The ship felt irritated again, leaving Ben with the impression that he was being whiny, but he said nothing. Ben didn't enjoy having his thoughts examined. He made a

conscious effort to control his wandering mind. The ship knew his will, spoken or unspoken, and he still wasn't sure what the consequences of that might be. Right then, it made him feel invaded, and the relief at finding the ancient ship and managing to escape Ziost in it had given way to worry, anger, and resentment.

And *impatience*. He had a comlink, but he didn't want to advertise his presence in case there were other ships pursuing him. He'd destroyed one. That didn't mean there weren't others.

The Amulet wasn't that important, so why am I a target now?

The ship wouldn't have gone any faster if he'd had a seat and a yoke to occupy himself, but he wouldn't have felt so lost. He could almost hear Jacen reminding him that physical activity was frequently displacement, and that he needed to develop better mental discipline to rise above fidgeting restlessness. An unquiet mind wasn't receptive, he said.

Ben straightened his legs to rub a sore knee, then settled again cross-legged to try meditating. It was going to be a long journey.

The bulkheads and deck were amber pumice, and from time to time, the surfaces seemed to burn with a fire embedded in the material. Whoever had made it had had a thing about flames. Ben tried not to think *flame*, in case the ship interpreted it as a command.

But it wasn't that stupid. It could almost think for him.

He reached inside his tunic and felt the Amulet, the stupid worthless thing that didn't seem to be an instrument of great Sith power after all, just a fancy bauble that Kiara's dad had been sent to deliver. Now the man was dead, all because of Ben, and the worst thing was that Ben didn't know why.

I need to find Jacen.

Jacen wasn't stupid, either, and it was hard to believe he'd been duped about the Amulet. Maybe it was part of some plan; if it was, Ben hoped it was worth Faskus's life and Kiara's misery.

That's my mission: put the Amulet of Kalara in Jacen's hands. Nothing more, nothing less.

Jacen could be anywhere now: in his offices on Coruscant, on the front line of some battle, hunting subversives. Maybe this weird Force-controlled ship could tap in and locate him. He'd be on the holonews. He always was: Colonel Jacen Solo, head of the Galactic Alliance Guard, all-around public hero holding back the threats of a galaxy. *Okay, I'm feeling sorry for myself. Stop it.* He couldn't land this ship on a Coruscant strip and stroll away from it as if it were just a TIE fighter he'd salvaged. People would ask awkward questions. He wasn't even sure what it was. And that meant it was one for Jacen to sort out.

"Okay," Ben said aloud. "Can you find Jacen Solo? Have you got a way of scanning comlinks? Can you find him in the Force?"

The ship suggested he ought to be able to do that himself. Ben concentrated on Jacen's face in his mind, and then tried to visualize the *Anakin Solo*, which was harder than he thought.

The sphere ship seemed to be ignoring him. He couldn't feel its voice; even when it wasn't addressing him or reacting to him, there was a faint background noise in his mind that gave him the feeling the vessel was humming to itself, like someone occupied with a repetitive task.

"Can you do it?" *If it can't, I'll try to land inside the GAG compound and hope for the best.* "You don't want Galactic Alliance engineers crawling all over you with hydrospanners, I bet."

The ship told him to be patient, and that it had nothing a hydrospanner could grip anyway.

Ben occupied himself with trying to pinpoint Jacen before the ship could. But Jacen's trick of hiding in the Force had become permanent; Ben found he was impossible to track unless he wanted to be found, and right then there was nothing of him, not a whisper or an echo. Ben thought he might have more luck persuading the ship to seek holonews channels—or maybe it was so old that it didn't have the technology to find those frequencies.

Hey, come on. If it managed to destroy a freighter on the power of my thoughts alone, it can find a holonews signal.

Ah, said the ship.

Ben's mind was suffused with a real sense of discovery. The ship dropped out of hyperspace for a moment and seemed to cast around, and then it felt as if it had found something. The starfield—visible somehow, even though the fiery, rocky bulkheads were still there—skewed as the ship changed course and jumped back into hyperspace. It radiated a sense of happy satisfaction, seeming almost . . . excited.

"Found him?"

The ship said it had found what it was seeking. Ben decided not to engage it in a discussion of how it could find a shutdown Jacen hiding in the Force.

"Well, let me know when we get within ten thousand klicks," Ben said. "I can risk using the comlink then."

The ship didn't answer. It hummed happily to itself, silent but filling Ben's head with ancient harmonies of a kind he'd never imagined sounds could create.

COLONEL JACEN SOLO'S CABIN, STAR
DESTROYER ANAKIN SOLO, EXTENDED COURSE,
HEADING 000—CORUSCANT, VIA THE CONTRUUM
SYSTEM

None of the crew of the *Anakin Solo* seemed to find it odd that the ship was taking an extraordinarily circuitous course back to Coruscant.

Jacen sensed the general resigned patience. It was what they expected from the head of the Galactic Alliance Guard, and they asked no questions. He also sensed Ben Skywalker, and it was taking every scrap of his concentration to focus on his apprentice and locate him.

He's okay. I know it. But something didn't go as planned.

Jacen homed in on a point of blue light on the bridge repeater set in the bulkhead. He felt Ben at the back of his mind the way he might smell a familiar but elusive scent, the kind that was so distinctive as to be unmistakable. Unharméd, alive, well—but something wasn't *right*. The disturbance in the Force—a faint prickling sharpness at the back of his throat that he'd never felt before—made Jacen anxious; these days he didn't like what he didn't know. It was a stark contrast with the days when he had wandered the galaxy in search of the esoteric and the mysterious for the sake of new Force knowledge. Of late, he wanted certainty. He wanted order, and order of his own making.

I wasn't ridding the galaxy of chaos then. Times have changed. I'm responsible for worlds now, not just myself.

Ben's mission would have taken him . . . where, exactly? Ziost. Pinpointing a fourteen-year-old boy—not even a ship, just fifty-five kilos of humanity—in a broad corridor coiling around the Perlemian Trade Route was a tall order even with help from the Force.

He's got a secure comlink. But he won't use it. I taught him to keep transmissions to a minimum. But Ben, if you're in trouble, you have to break silence . . .

Jacen waited, staring through the shifting displays and readouts that mirrored those on the operations consoles at the heart of the ship. He'd started to lose the habit of waiting for the Force to reveal things to him. It was easy to

do after taking so much into his own hands and forcing destiny in the last few months.

Somewhere in the *Anakin Solo*, he felt Lumiya as a swirling eddy eating away at a riverbank. He let go and magnified his presence in the Force.

Ben . . . I'm here, Ben . . .

The more Jacen relaxed and let the Force sweep him up—and it was now hard to let go and be swept, much harder than harnessing its power—the more he had a sense of Ben being *accompanied*. Then . . . *then* he had a sense of Ben seeking him out, groping to find him.

He has something with him. Can't be the Amulet, of course. He'll be angry I sent him on an exercise in the middle of a war. I'll have to explain that very, very carefully . . .

It had just been a feint to get him free of Luke and Mara for a while, to give him some space to be himself. Ben wasn't the Skywalkers' little boy any longer. He would take on Jacen's mantle one day, and that wasn't a task for an overprotected child who'd never been allowed to test himself far from the overwhelmingly long shadow of his Jedi Grand Master father.

You're a lot tougher than they think. Aren't you, Ben?

Jacen felt the faint echo of Ben turn back on him and become an insistent pressure at the back of his throat. He took a breath. Now they both knew they were looking for each other. He snapped out of his meditation and headed for the bridge.

"All stop." The bridge was in semi-darkness, lit by the haze of soft green and blue light spilling from status displays that drained the color from the faces of the handpicked, totally loyal crew. Jacen walked up to the main viewport and stared out at the stars as if he might see something. "Hold this station. We're waiting for . . . a ship, I believe."

Lieutenant Tebut, current officer of the watch, glanced up from the console without actually raising her head. It gave her an air of disapproval, but it was purely a habit. "If you could narrow that down, sir . . ."

"I don't know what kind of ship," Jacen said, "but I'll know it when I see it."

"Right you are, sir."

They waited. Jacen was conscious of Ben, much more focused and intense now, a general mood of business-as-usual in the ship, and the undercurrent of Lumiya's restlessness. Closing his eyes, he felt Ben's presence more strongly than ever.

Tebut put her fingertip to her ear as if she'd heard something in her bead-sized earpiece. "Unidentified vessel on intercept course. Range ten thousand kilometers off the port beam."

A pinpoint of yellow light moved against a constellation of colored markers on the holomonitor. The trace was small, perhaps the size of a starfighter, but it *was* a ship, closing in at speed.

"I don't know exactly what it is, sir." The officer sounded nervous. Jacen was briefly troubled to think he now inspired fear for no apparent reason. "It doesn't match any heat signature or drive profile we have. No indication if it's armed. No transponder signal, either."

It was one small vessel, and this was a Star Destroyer. It was a curiosity rather than a threat. But Jacen took nothing for granted; there were always traps. This didn't feel like one, but he still couldn't identify that *otherness* he sensed. "It's decelerating, sir."

"Let me know when you have a visual." Jacen could almost taste where it was and considered bringing the *Anakin Solo* about so he could watch the craft become a point of the reflected light of Contruum's star, then expand into a recognizable shape. But he didn't need to; the

tracking screen gave him a better view. "Ready cannons and don't open fire except on my order."

In Jacen's throat, on a line level with the base of his skull, there was the faint tingling of someone's anxiety. Ben knew the *Anakin Solo* was getting a firing solution on him.

Easy, Ben . . .

"Contact in visual range, sir." Tebut sounded relieved. The screen refreshed, changing from a schematic to a real image that only she and Jacen could see. She tapped her finger on the transparisteel. "Good grief, is that Yuuzhan Vong?"

It was a disembodied eye with double—well, *wings* on each side. There was no other word to describe them. Membranes stretched between jointed fingers of vanes like webbing. The dull amber surface seemed covered in a tracery of blood vessels. For a brief moment, Jacen thought it was precisely that, an organic ship—a living vessel and ecosystem in its own right, of the kind that only the hated Yuuzhan Vong invaders had created. But it was somehow too regular, too constructed. Clustered spires of spiked projections rose from the hull like a compass rose, giving it a stylized cross-like appearance.

Somewhere in his mind, Lumiya had become very alert and still.

"I knew the Yuuzhan Vong well," said Jacen. "And that's not quite their style."

The audio link made a fizzing sound and then popped into life.

"This is Ben Skywalker. *Anakin Solo*, this is Ben Skywalker of the Galactic Alliance Guard. Hold your fire . . . please."

There was a collective sigh of amused relief on the bridge. Jacen thought that the fewer personnel who saw the ship—and the sooner it docked in the hangar, to be hidden with sheeting from curious eyes—the better.

"You're alone, Skywalker?" Technically, Ben was a junior lieutenant, but *Skywalker* would do: *Ben* wouldn't, not now that he had the duties of a grown man. "No passengers?"

"Only the ship . . . sir."

"Permission to dock." Jacen glanced around at the bridge crew and nodded to Tebut. "Kill the visual feed. Treat this craft as classified. Nobody discusses it, nobody saw it, and we never took it onboard. Understood?"

"Yes, sir. I'll clear all personnel from Zeta Hangar area. Just routine safety procedure." Tebut was just like Captain Shevu and Corporal Lekauf: utterly reliable.

"Good thinking," Jacen said. "I'll see Skywalker safely docked. Give me access to the bay hatches."

Jacen made his way down to the deck, resisting the urge to break into a run as he took the shortest route through passages and down durasteel ladders into the lower section of the hull, well away from the busy starfighter hangars. Droids and crew going about their duty seemed surprised to see him. When he reached Zeta Hangar, the speckled void of space was visible through the gaping hatch that normally admitted supply shuttles, and the reflection he caught sight of in the transparisteel air lock barrier was that of a man slightly disheveled from anxious haste. He needed a haircut.

He could also sense Lumiya.

"So what brings you down here?" he asked, deactivating the deck security holocam. "Hero's homecoming?"

She emerged from the shadow of an engineering access shaft, face half veiled. Her eyes betrayed a little fatigue: the faintest of blue circles ringed them. The fight with Luke must have taken it out of her.

"The ship," she said. "Look."

A veined sphere ten meters across filled the aperture of the hatch, its wing-like panels folded back. It hovered silently for a moment and then settled gently in the center of the deck. The hatch doors closed behind it. It was a few

moments before the hangar repressurized and an opening appeared in the sphere's casing to eject a ramp.

"Ben did very well to pilot it," Lumiya said.

"He did well to locate me."

She melted back into the shadow, but Jacen knew she was still there watching as he walked up to the ramp. Ben emerged from the opening in grubby civilian clothing. He didn't look pleased with himself; if anything, he looked wary and sullen, as if expecting trouble. He also looked suddenly *older*.

Jacen reached out and squeezed his cousin's shoulder, feeling suppressed energy in him. "Well, you certainly know how to make an entrance, Ben. Where did you get this?"

"Hi, Jacen." Ben reached into his tunic, and when he withdrew his hand a silver chain dangled from his fist: the Amulet of Kalara. It exuded dark energy almost like a pungent perfume that clung and wouldn't go away. "You asked me to get this, and I did."

Jacen held out his hand. Ben placed the gem-inlaid Amulet in his palm, coiling the chain on top of it. Physically, it felt quite ordinary, a heavy and rather vulgar piece of jewelry, but it gave him a feeling like a weight passing through his body and settling in the pit of his stomach. He slipped it inside his jacket.

"You did well, Ben."

"I found it on Ziest, in case you want to know. And that's where I got the ship, too. Someone tried to kill me, and I grabbed the first thing I could to escape."

The attempt on Ben's life didn't hit Jacen as hard as the mention of Ziest—the Sith homeworld. Jacen hadn't bargained on that. Ben wasn't ready to hear the truth about the Sith or that he was apprenticed—informally or not—to the man destined to be the Master of the order. Jacen felt no reaction from Lumiya whatsoever, but she had to be hearing this. She was still lurking.

"It was a dangerous mission, but I knew you could handle it." *Lumiya, you arranged this. What's your game?* "Who tried to kill you?"

"A Bothan set me up," Ben said. "Dyur. He paid a courier to take the Amulet to Ziost, framed him as the thief, and the guy ended up dead. I got even with the Bothan, though—I blew up the ship that was targeting me. I hope it was Dyur's."

"How?"

Ben gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. "It's armed. It seems to have whatever weapons you want."

"Well done." Jacen got the feeling that Ben was suspicious of the whole galaxy right then. His blue eyes had a gray cast, as if someone had switched off the enthusiastic light in him. *That* was what made him look older; a brush with a hostile world, another step away from his previous protected existence—and an essential part of his training. "Ben, treat this as top secret. The ship is now classified, like your mission. Not a word to anyone."

"Like I was going to write to Mom and Dad about it . . . what I did on my vacation, by Ben Skywalker, age fourteen and two weeks." *Ouch.* Ben was no longer gung-ho and blindly eager to please . . . but that was a good thing in a Sith apprentice. Jacen changed tack; birthdays had a way of making you take stock if you spent them somewhere unpleasant. "How did you fly this? I've never seen anything like it."

Ben shrugged and folded his arms tight across his chest, his back to the vessel, but he kept looking around as if to check that it was still there. "You think what you want it to do, and it does it. You can even talk to it. But it doesn't have any proper controls." He glanced over his shoulder again. "It talks to you through your thoughts. And it doesn't have a high opinion of me."

A Sith ship. Ben had flown *a Sith ship* back from Ziost. Jacen resisted the temptation to go inside and examine it.

"You need to get back home. I told your parents I didn't know where you were, and hinted they might have made you run off by being overprotective."

Ben looked a little sullen. "Thanks."

"It's true, though. You know it is." Jacen realized he hadn't said what really mattered. "Ben, I'm proud of you."

He sensed a faint glow of satisfaction in Ben that died down almost as soon as it began. "I'll file a full report if you want."

"As soon as you can." Jacen steered him toward the hangar exit. "Probably better that you don't arrive home in this ship. We'll shuttle you to the nearest safe planet, and you can get a more conventional ride on a passenger flight."

"I need some credits for the fare. I'm fed up with stealing to get by."

"Of course." Ben had done the job, and proved he could survive on his wits. Jacen realized the art of building a man was to push him hard enough to toughen him without alienating him. It was a line he explored carefully. He fished in his pocket for a mix of denominations in untraceable credcoins. "Here you go. Now get something to eat, too."

With one last look at the sphere ship, Ben gave Jacen a casual salute before striding off in the direction of the store's turbolift. Jacen waited. The ship *watched* him: he felt it, not alive, but aware. Eventually he heard soft footsteps on the deck behind him, and the ship somehow seemed to ignore him and look elsewhere.

"A Sith meditation sphere," said Lumiya.

"An attack craft. A fighter."

"It's ancient, absolutely *ancient*." She walked up to it and placed her hand on the hull. It seemed to have melted down into a near hemisphere, the vanes and—Jacen assumed—systems masts on its keel tucked beneath it. Right then it reminded him of a pet crouching before its

master, seeking approval. It actually seemed to glow like a fanned ember.

"What a magnificent piece of engineering." Lumiya's brow lifted, and her eyes creased at the corners; Jacen guessed that she was smiling, surprised. "It says it's found me."

It was an unguarded comment—rare for Lumiya—and almost an admission. Ben had been attacked on a test that Lumiya had set up; the ship came from Ziost. Circumstantially, it wasn't looking good. "It was searching for *you*?"

She paused again, listening to a voice he couldn't hear. "It says that Ben needed to find you, and when it found you, it also recognized me as Sith and came to me for instructions."

"*How* did it find me? I can't be sensed in the Force if I don't want to be, and I didn't let myself be detected until—"

A pause. Lumiya's eyes were remarkably expressive. She seemed very touched by the ship's attention. Jacen imagined that nobody—nothing—had shown any interest in her well-being for a long, long time.

"It says you created a Force disturbance in the Gilatter system, and that a combination of your . . . *wake* and the fact you were looking for the . . . *redheaded child* . . . and the impression that the crew of your ship left in the Force made you trackable before you magnified your presence."

"My, it's got a lot to say for itself."

"You can have it, if you wish."

"Quaint, but I'm not a collector." Jacen heard himself talking simply to fill the empty air, because his mind was racing. *I can be tracked. I can be tracked by the way those around me react, even though I'm concealed.* Yes, *wake* was the precise word. "It seems made for you."

Lumiya took a little audible breath, and the silky dark blue fabric across her face sucked in for a moment to reveal the outline of her mouth.

"The woman who's more machine, and the machine that's more creature." She put one boot on the ramp. "Very well, I'll find a use for this. I'll take it off your hands, and nobody need ever see it."

These days, Jacen was more interested by what Lumiya didn't say than what she did. There was no discussion of the test she'd set for Ben and why it had taken him to Ziost and into a trap. He teetered on the edge of asking her outright, but he didn't think he could listen to either the truth or a lie; both would rankle. He turned to go. Inside a day, the *Anakin Solo* would be back on Coruscant and he would have both a war and a personal battle to fight.

"Ask me," she called to his retreating back. "You know you want to."

Jacen turned. "What, whether you intended Ben to be killed, or who I have to kill to achieve full Sith Mastery?"

"I know the answer to one but not the other."

Jacen decided there was a fine line between a realistically demanding test of Ben's combat skills and deliberately trying to kill him. He wasn't sure if Lumiya's answer would tell him what he needed to know anyway.

"There's another question," he said. "And that's how long I have before I face my own test."

The Sith sphere ticked and creaked, flexing the upper section of its webbed wings. Lumiya stood on the edge of the hatch and looked around for a moment, as if she was nervous about entering the hull.

"If I knew *when*, I might also know *who*," she said. "But all I feel is *soon*, and *close*." Something seemed to reassure her, and she paused as if listening again. Perhaps the ship was offering its own opinion. "And you know that, too. Your impatience is burning you."

Of course it was: Jacen wanted an end to it all—to the fighting, the uncertainty, the chaos. The war beyond mirrored the struggle within.

Lumiya was telling the truth: *soon*.

MEETING OF THE CLANS, MANDALMOTORS HALL, KELDABE, CAPITAL OF MANDALORE

A hundred or so of the hardest-looking males and females that Fett had ever seen were gathered in the stark charcoal-gray granite building that MandalMotors had donated to the community.

The hardest face of all was that of his granddaughter. Mirta Gev watched him from the side of the meeting hall with his father's eyes.

My own eyes.

Fierfek, she really did have the Fett eyes. Maybe he was seeing what wasn't really there, but the look bored through into his soul anyway. It was a look that said: *You failed*. He didn't hear the murmur of voices around him, just the soundless accusations that his daughter Ailyn was dead, that he had never been there for her until it was too late, and that he might also be too late to start being a worthy Mandalore. His father had groomed him to be the best, and even if he'd never mentioned being Mandalore one day, it went with the legacy. *Jaster's* legacy.

Better be quick, then. I'm dying. I've got business to take care of. Priorities: a cure, then find out what happened to my wife, what happened to Sintas Vel.

It wasn't that Mirta wouldn't tell him.

She didn't *know*. She had the heart-of-fire gem he'd given Sintas as a wedding gift, but it had turned up at a dealer's shop. It was just bait. And he'd taken it.

But, Fett being Fett, it was more than bait. It was a motivator: it was another piece of evidence.

It's never too late to find out. I thought it was, but it's not.

The hubbub of the chieftains of the clans, heads of companies, and an assortment of veteran mercenaries faded voice by voice into silence. They watched him warily.