

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Dark Nest III: The Swarm War

Troy Denning

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About the Book

In the explosive conclusion to the *Dark Nest trilogy*, Luke Skywalker summons the heroes of the New Jedi Order from near and far as the Star Wars galaxy teeters on the edge of eternal war. Yet even the combined powers of the formidable Jedi may not be enough to vanquish the deadly perils confronting them.

The Chiss-Killik border war is threatening to engulf the entire galaxy - raising the awful spectre of the Killik sweeping across space to absorb all living creatures into a single hive mind. The only hope for peace lies with the Jedi - who must not only end the bloodshed between two fierce enemies but also combat the insidious evil spread by the elusive Dark Nest and its unseen queen.

Leia's newly acquired Jedi skills will be put to the ultimate test in the coming life-and-death battle. As for Luke, he will have to prove, in a lightning display of Force strength and swordplay, that he is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the greatest Jedi Master in the galaxy.

About the Author

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

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

STAR WARS: THE NEW JEDI ORDER: STAR BY STAR
STAR WARS: TATOOINE GHOST
STAR WARS: DARK NEST I: THE JOINER KING
STAR WARS: DARK NEST II: THE UNSEEN QUEEN
STAR WARS: DARK NEST III: THE SWARM WAR
STAR WARS: LEGACY OF THE FORCE III: TEMPEST
STAR WARS: LEGACY OF THE FORCE IX: INVINCIBLE
STAR WARS: LEGACY OF THE FORCE VI: INFERNO

STAR WARS

DARK NEST III
THE
SWARM WAR
TROY DENNING

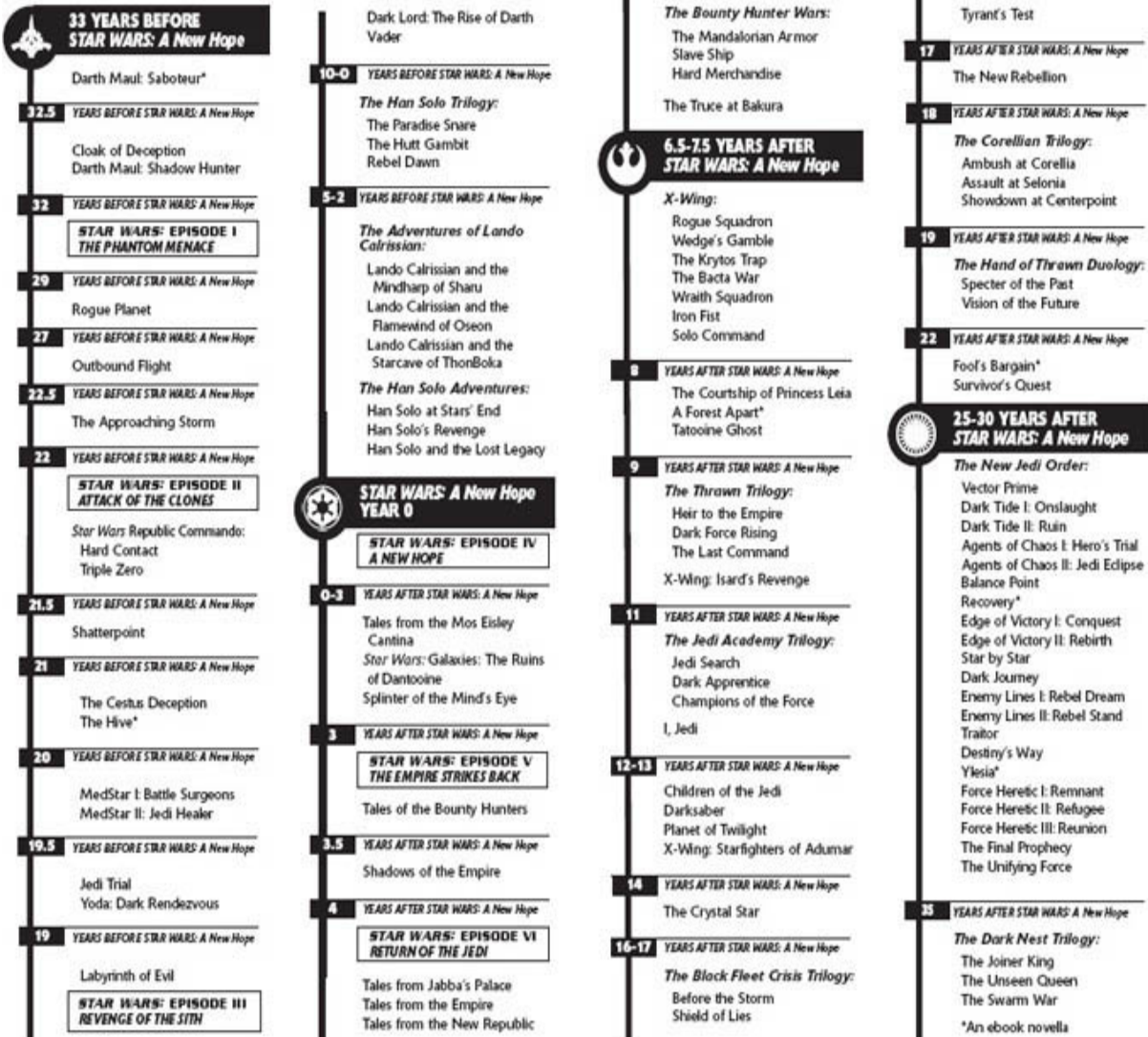


For David "DJ" Richardson
Good friend

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THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

na Rar: Gorog Night Herald (female Twi'lek)
Skywalker: child (male human)
PO: protocol droid
Omas: Galactic Alliance Chief-of-State (male human)
ran Horn: Jedi Master (male human)
la: War Profiteer (female Squib)
d Pellaeon: acting Galactic Alliance Supreme Commander
(male human)
og: mastermind (Killik)
es: War Profiteer (male Squib)
Solo: captain, *Millennium Falcon* (male human)
n Solo: Jedi Knight (male human)
uun: Galactic Alliance Intelligence agent (male Sullustan)
a Solo: Jedi Knight (female human)
Durrion: Jedi Master (male human)
Organa Solo: Jedi Knight, copilot, *Millennium Falcon*
(female human)
i Plo: Gorog Queen (female human . . . mostly)
bacca: Jedi Knight (male Wookiee)
e Skywalker: Jedi Grand Master (male human)
a Jade Skywalker: Jedi Master (female human)
D2: astromech droid
nar Thul: UnuThul (male human)
a Sebatyne: Jedi Master (female Barabel)
n: War Profiteer (male Squib)
ri Veila: Jedi Knight (female human)
ang: Galactic Alliance Intelligence Agent (male Ewok)

el Ka: Jedi Knight, Queen Mother (female human)
er Sebatyne: Jedi Knight (male Barabel)
: the Will (Killik)
aw: Communications Aide (Killik)
κ: Jedi Knight (male human)

PROLOGUE

The bomb lay half buried in the red sand, a durasteel manifestation of the brutality and unreasoning fear of its makers. It had fallen from orbit in a long fiery tumble, then planted itself tail-first atop the dune opposite the nest. Its heat shield was still glowing with entry friction, and the casing was so carbon-scored that the marks emblazoned on its side could not be read. But Jaina and Zekk needed no identifiers to know they were staring at a Chiss mega-weapon. The thing was the size of a beldon, with a bulge on its nose that could house anything from a baradium penetrating charge to the triggering laser of a planet-buster warhead.

When it grew clear that the bomb was not going to detonate—at least not *yet*—Jaina finally let out her breath.

“We need a better look at that thing,” she said.

Along with Jacen, Zekk, and the other three Jedi on their team, she was standing in the mouth of the Iesei dartship hangar, gazing up three hundred meters of steep, sandy slope toward the bomb. Every couple of seconds, a turbolaser strike would crack down from orbit, melting a rontosized crater of pink glass into the dune and raising a ten-story plume of dust that often obscured their view.

“We need to know what the Chiss have up their sleeves,” Zekk agreed.

“We *need* to get out of here,” Jacen countered. “Or am I the only one who still feels the Force-call?”

“No—” Zekk said.

“—we feel it, too,” Jaina finished.

The call had arisen a few hours earlier, in the middle of a StealthX assault that had failed to turn back the Chiss task force. The summons was coming from the direction of the known galaxy, a sense of beckoning and urgency that was growing more powerful by the hour, calling the Jedi Knights back toward Ossus, demanding they return to the Academy at once.

“We *all* feel it,” Tahiri said. She furrowed her scarred brow, then turned to Tesar and Lowbacca. “At least I think we do.”

The Barabel and the Wookiee nodded in agreement.

“It iz hard to ignore,” Tesar said.

“And we shouldn’t try,” Jacen replied. “Something bad must be happening for my uncle to summon us all like this. Even Luke Skywalker can’t pull on the Force that hard without suffering for it.”

“Maybe not,” Jaina said. “But it will only take a few minutes to look at that bomb. I think we have time.”

“It must be some kind of secret weapon,” Zekk added. “We’ll need an R-nine unit—”

“And some testing equipment,” Tesar finished. He and Lowbacca started toward the interior of the near-empty hangar, where a few dozen Killiks with rosy thoraxes and green-mottled abdomens were bustling over the team’s battered StealthXs—repairing and refueling, but not rearming. The StealthXs had run out of shadow bombs the previous day, and they had depleted the nest’s store of actuating gas that morning. “We will collect it and catch up.”

Jacen quickly moved to block their way. “No.”

Tesar’s neck scales rose and Lowbacca’s fur bristled, and they glared down at Jacen without speaking.

“Think about it—they’re *Chiss*,” Jacen said. “It could be a trap. Maybe that bomb isn’t meant to detonate until we’re out there trying to examine it.”

Tesar and Lowbacca clucked their throats and looked over their shoulders toward the bomb. They were not yet Joiners, but Jaina and Zekk could sense their thoughts well enough to know the pair were being influenced by Jacen's argument. And so was Tahiri, of course. She did not need to be a mindmate for Jaina and Zekk to know she had fallen under Jacen's sway. She was always rubbing her forearms over him, and whenever he looked her way, she suddenly had to blink.

Zekk let out a grudging chest rumble, then Jaina said, "We wish your thinking had been this clear at Supply Depot Thrago."

"We don't know that my thinking *was* unclear," Jacen said. "Not yet, anyway."

Zekk frowned. "Our raid was supposed to delay the war —"

"—not start it," Jaina finished.

Jacen shrugged. "The future is always in motion." He looked away, then added, "It's too late to undo what happened after the raid. We should respect Uncle Luke's summons and return to Ossus at once."

"And abandon Iesei?" Zekk asked. Jaina and Zekk had not been with Iesei long enough to join its collective mind—in fact, living with a nest other than Taat seemed to be weakening their own mental link—but Iesei felt like a sibling to them, and they were bound to it through the Will of the Colony. "With the Chiss preparing to land?"

"We won't save the nest by staying," Jacen said. "It's better to leave while we still can."

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Jaina asked.

When Jacen's only reply was a flash of anger, she tried to sense the answer through the Force-bond they shared as twins, but she felt nothing. And neither did Zekk, who still shared most of what she thought and felt. Since the raid on Thrago, Jacen had been shutting them both out—perhaps because Jaina and Zekk had grown so angry with him when

he took a reckless shot and nearly turned the raid into a massacre. Or maybe Jacen was hiding something. Jaina and Zekk could not tell. They only knew that his withdrawal from the twin bond was one of the biggest reasons they no longer trusted him.

After a moment, Jacen finally replied, "I'm in a hurry because it's prudent. If we stay, all we can do is kill a few dozen Chiss—and what good would *that* accomplish?"

Jaina and Zekk had no answer. They knew as well as Jacen did that Iesei would be wiped out to the last larva. The Chiss assault force was just too large and well equipped to be stopped.

But there was still the bomb. If they could find out what it was, there was no counting the number of other nests they might save.

"Jacen, no one is keeping you here," Jaina said. "Leave whenever you want."

"We're going to look at that bomb," Zekk added.

Jaina turned to Tesar. "Give us a one-minute head start. If Jacen is right about this being a trick—"

"—we will know soon enough," Tesar finished. "Go."

Lowbacca added a groan assuring them that he and Tesar would be close behind.

Jacen finally opened their twin bond, flooding the Force with his alarm and concern. "Jaina! Don't—"

Jaina and Zekk ignored him. Jacen only opened the twin bond when he wanted something, and right now what he wanted was for them to leave the bomb and start home. They turned away, springing out of the hangar mouth and dropping five meters down the slope of the nest-dune. Almost immediately it grew apparent that the bomb was no trick. A ripple of danger sense prickled their necks, then a barrage of turbolaser bolts crashed down from orbit and pelted their faces with hot sand. They dived away in opposite directions and somersaulted down the slope half a

dozen times, then rose to their feet and Force-leapt across a five-meter trough onto the opposite dune.

The turbolasers followed, filling the air with the fresh smell of ozone. The slope of the dune turned into a churning mass of sand, half spraying through the air while the rest growled down the slope in a series of eerie-sounding avalanches. Now working against gravity, Jaina and Zekk began to ascend toward the bomb in sporadic Force leaps. Sand scratched their eyes and filled their noses and throats, but they remained within the roiling cloud, trying to hide from the Chiss sensors and make themselves more difficult to target.

They were barely halfway to the bomb when they felt Jacen, Tahiri, and what remained of the Iesei nest racing up the slope behind them. The intensity of the barrage abruptly decreased as the Chiss gunners began to spread their fire, and the silhouettes of hundreds of Iesei appeared in the surrounding haze. The insects were scurrying up the hill on all sixes, their antennae waving as they overtook Jaina and Zekk.

A moment later the silhouettes of Jacen and Tahiri emerged from the sand cloud and came to Jaina's side.

"So the bomb *isn't* a trick," Jacen said. "This is still a bad idea."

"Then what are *you* doing here?" Zekk asked from behind Jaina.

"Looking after you two," Jacen said. "Uncle Luke won't be very happy if I go back without you."

Jaina frowned and started to protest; then a deafening bang echoed across the desert. The dune gave way beneath their feet, and the Jedi found themselves being swept down the slope in a giant sandslide.

For a moment Jaina and Zekk thought the Chiss gunners had finally hit the half-buried bomb. Then they heard the distant roar of engines and realized the bang had been a sonic boom. Jaina waved her hand, using the Force to clear

a hole in the dust cloud. A black plume of entry smoke was blossoming against the yellow sky, descending from the dark sliver of the Chiss assault cruiser that was raining fire down on them.

“Drop ship!” Jaina shouted. “Be ready!”

“Iesei, take cover!” Zekk added.

An instant later, an endless string of silver flashes erupted from the head of the smoke plume. The Killiks pushed their heads into the sand and began to dig, while the Jedi used the Force to pull themselves free of the sandslide and yanked their lightsabers off their utility belts.

A blue cascade of cannon bolts began to sweep across the dune, its deep *thump-thumping* an almost gentle counterpoint to the crashing roar of the turbolasers. Jaina and Zekk stood expectant for what seemed an eternity. There was no use trying to run or take cover. Drop ship weapons systems were designed to spread a carpet of death around their landing zones. Often, they laid fire as thick as twenty bolts a square meter.

An eerie chorus of squeals arose as the cannon strikes found the buried swarm of Iesei, and the haze grew heavy with the bitter smell of scorched chitin. More bolts began to sizzle down all around Jaina and Zekk, raising chest-high sand geysers and charging the air with static. They raised their lightsabers and yielded control to the Force, then started to whirl and dance across the dune, dodging incoming fire and deflecting it into the ground beside their feet.

Zekk took a cannon blast full on his blade and was driven to his knees. Jaina spun to his side and tapped two more bolts away, only to find herself badly out of position as a third dropped toward her head.

Zekk’s lightsaber swept up just centimeters from her face, catching the bolt on the blade tip and sending it zipping across the dune. Jaina spun away from another attack and glimpsed Jacen and Tahiri standing back-to-

back, Jacen holding his hand above their heads, cannon fire ricocheting away as though he held a deflector shield in his palm. *That* was something Jaina and Zekk had never seen before.

Then the fusillade was past, leaving in its place a slope of churned sand strewn with pieces of smoking chitin and flailing, half-buried Killiks. Jaina and Zekk started toward the crest again, but it was clear they would never reach it ahead of the Chiss drop ship. The sandslide had carried them to the bottom of the dune, and with most of the Iesei dead or dying, the turbolaser gunners were once again beginning to concentrate their fire on the Jedi.

Tesar and Lowbacca arrived from the hangar, Tesar floating an R9 unit behind him, Lowbacca carrying a rucksack full of equipment over his shoulder.

"This one does not like this," Tesar rasped. "Why do the Chiss send a drop ship instead of a fighter? Would it not be easier to hit the bomb with a missile than to recover it?"

"A concussion missile would leave pieces," Jaina said.

"And we can still learn a lot from pieces," Zekk added.

"If they want to protect their secret, they need to keep the bomb out of our hands completely," Jaina finished.

Lowbacca rowled another thought, suggesting that maybe the assault cruiser had run out of missiles. It had used thousands just fighting its way to the planet.

The drop ship completed its attack pattern, then stopped firing as it descended below the effective altitude for its fire-control apparatus. The vessel itself was a fiery wedge of ceram-metal composite at the tip of the smoke plume, no more than forty meters long and perhaps half that at the base. Jaina and Zekk and the others continued to ascend the slope in Force leaps, but there was no sign of any healthy Killiks—either the laser cannons had gotten them all, or the survivors were staying hidden.

The turbolaser strikes continued to come, obscuring the Jedi Knights' vision and slowing their progress, but failing

to stop them entirely. It was difficult enough to hit moving targets from orbit, without those targets having the Jedi danger sense to warn them when a strike was headed their way.

The team was halfway up the slope when the turbolaser barrage suddenly ended. Jaina and Zekk would have thought the drop ship was landing, except that the roar of its engines continued to build. They used the Force to clear another hole in the dust cloud. The drop ship was much closer than it sounded, but that was not the reason the barrage had stopped.

High overhead, above the dispersing column of entry smoke, the tiny white wedge of a Star Destroyer was sliding across the sky toward the assault cruiser. Small disks of turbolaser fire were blossoming around both vessels, and a pair of flame trails were already angling down toward the horizon where two damaged starfighters had plunged into the atmosphere.

"Is that an *Alliance* Star Destroyer?" Tahiri asked, coming to Jaina's side.

"It must be," Tesar said, joining them. "Why would the Chiss fire on each other?"

"They wouldn't," Jaina said.

She and Zekk reached out to the Star Destroyer in the Force. Instead of the Alliance crew they had expected, they were astonished to feel the diffuse presence of a Killik nest.

A familiar murk began to gather inside their chests. Then Zekk gasped, "Unu!"

Lowbacca groaned in bewilderment, wondering how a nest of Killiks had come by a Galactic Alliance Star Destroyer.

"Who knows? But it can't be good." Jacen stopped at Jaina's side. "Maybe *this* is why Uncle Luke is trying to call us home."

"Maybe," Jaina allowed. The murk inside began to grow heavy, and the mystery of the Star Destroyer's arrival

began to seem a lot less important than the bomb. “But we still have to find out what that bomb is.”

“We do?” Jacen demanded. “Or UnuThul does?”

“We *all* do,” Zekk said.

Jaina and Zekk continued toward the top of the dune. Without the barrage churning up sand and dust, the air was beginning to clear, and they could see the crimson wedge of the drop ship descending the last few meters to the sand. Its nose shield was still glowing with entry heat, and the multibarreled laser cannons that hung beneath the wings were hissing and popping with electromagnetic discharge.

Then the drop ship’s belly turret spun toward the Jedi and began to stitch the slope with fire from its twin charric guns. Jaina, Zekk, and the others raised their lightsabers and started to knock the beams back toward the vessel. Unlike blaster bolts—which carried very little kinetic charge—the charric beams struck with an enormous impact. Several times Jaina, Zekk, and even Lowbacca felt their lightsabers fly from their grasps and had to use the Force to recall the weapons.

The Jedi Knights continued up the dune in sporadic leaps, taking turns covering each other, seeking the protection of craters or mounds of sand when they could, but always advancing toward the crest of the dune and the bomb. When it grew apparent that the turret guns would not be enough to hold them at bay, the drop ship dipped its nose to give the laser cannons a good firing angle. The blue-skinned pilot came into view through the cockpit canopy. Sitting in the commander’s seat next to him was a steely-eyed human with a long scar over his right eye.

Jagged Fel.

Jaina stopped in her tracks, so astonished and touched by old feelings that a charric beam came close to sneaking past her guard. She had been the one to end their romance, but she had never quite stopped loving him, and the sight of him now—commanding the enemy drop ship—filled her

with so many conflicting emotions that she felt as though someone had tripped her primary circuit breaker.

Fel's gaze locked on Jaina, and a hint of sorrow—or maybe disappointment—flashed across his face. He spoke into his throat mike; then Zekk's large frame slammed into Jaina from the side and hurled them both into the glassy bottom of a turbolaser crater.

Before Jaina could complain, Zekk's fear and anger were boiling into her. Suddenly she was rebuking herself for trusting Fel, then she and Zekk were wondering how she could have been so foolish . . . and how their minds could have come unjoined at such a critical moment.

Sand began to rain down from above. They felt the crater reverberating beneath them and realized the dropship's laser cannons had opened fire.

"You're—*we're*—supposed to be over him!" Zekk said aloud.

"We *are* over him," Jaina said. She could feel how hurt Zekk was by the tumultuous emotions that seeing Fel had raised in her, and that made her angry—at Fel, at herself, at Zekk. Did Zekk think she could *make* herself love him? "We were just shocked."

Zekk glared at her out of one eye. "We have to stop lying to ourselves. It'll get us killed."

"*I'm* not lying," Jaina retorted.

She rolled away from Zekk, then scrambled up the crater's glassy wall and peered over its lip toward the drop ship. As she had expected, a squad of Chiss commandos had dropped out of the vessel's belly. Dressed in formfitted plates of color-shifting camouflage armor, they were racing along the crest of the dune toward the unexploded bomb. Instead of the recovery cables or magnetic pads that Jaina had expected, they were carrying several demolition satchels.

Zekk arrived at Jaina's side and peered up the slope. They wondered for a moment why the Chiss would go to

the trouble of landing a party to blow up the bomb. A few hits from the drop ship's laser cannons would have done the job more than adequately.

Then they understood. "Vape charges!" Zekk shouted.

The Chiss equivalent of thermal detonators, vape charges left nothing behind to analyze. They *disintegrated*. But they could not be delivered by missile. Like thermal detonators, they were infantry weapons. They had to be thrown or placed.

Jaina snaked a finger over the edge of the crater and pointed at one of the drop ship's laser cannons, then used the Force to scoop up a pile of sand and hurl it up the barrel. The weapon exploded, vaporizing one wing and ripping a jagged gash in the fuselage.

Fel's eyes widened in shock, and Jaina and Zekk lost sight of him as the drop ship rocked up on its side and flipped. It landed hard in the sand, and a chain of blasts shook the dune as the remaining laser cannons exploded. The vessel rolled back onto its belly and began to belch smoke.

A pang of sorrow shot through Jaina's breast, and Zekk said, "We can't worry about him, Jaina—"

"He wasn't worried about us," Jaina agreed. Her sorrow was quickly turning to rage—at Zekk and at herself, but most of all at Fel—and her hands began to tremble so hard she found it difficult to hold on to her lightsaber. "We know."

Now that the laser cannons had fallen silent, Jaina leapt out of the crater and led the charge toward the top of the dune. Half the Chiss commando squad stopped and started to lay fire down the slope, while the rest raced the last few meters to the bomb and began to string a linked line of vape charges around it.

Jaina and the other Jedi Knights continued their ascent, deflecting the charric beams back toward the Chiss who were working to set the charges. Four of these commandos

fell before their fellows realized what the Jedi were doing, but the survivors were too well trained to lose focus.

By the time Jaina and the others neared the crest of the dune, the charges had been placed and the survivors were scrambling to rejoin their companions. The squad leader fell back behind the rest of the squad and began to punch an activation code into a signaling unit built into the armor on his forearm.

Jaina pointed in the leader's direction and used the Force to tear his hand away from the buttons, and the rest of the Chiss turned their charric guns on her.

Zekk stepped in front of Jaina, deflecting beam after beam into the leader's chest armor. The impact drove him back toward the wreckage of the drop ship, finally splitting his armor when he came to a stop against the hull.

Then Tesar and Lowbacca and Tahiri were among the surviving commandos, batting their charric beams aside, kicking their guns from their hands and ordering them to surrender.

The Chiss did not, of course. Apparently more frightened of becoming Killik Joiners than of dying, they fought on with their knives, their hands, leaving the Jedi no choice but to kill, amputate, and Force-shove. Intent on securing the triggering device, Jaina and Zekk circled past the brawl and started toward the squad leader, who lay crumpled and immobile beside the drop ship.

And that was when a loud groan sounded from the hull. Jaina and Zekk paused, thinking the craft was about to explode. Instead, it rolled away from them, revealing a dark jagged hole where the near wing had once connected to the fuselage.

Realizing someone had to be using the Force, Jaina and Zekk glanced over their shoulders and found Jacen looking in the drop ship's direction. He smiled, then nodded past them toward the vessel.

When Jaina and Zekk turned around again, it was to find a coughing, brown-haired human staggering out of the fuselage. He was covered in soot, and he looked so stunned and scorched that it seemed a miracle he was moving at all.

“Jag?” Jaina gasped.

She and Zekk started forward to help, but Fel merely stooped down and depressed a button on the dead squad leader’s forearm.

The signaling unit emitted a single loud beep.

Fel did not even glance in Jaina and Zekk’s direction. He simply turned away and hurled himself over the far side of the dune.

Jaina and Zekk spun back toward their companions. “Run!”

Jaina’s warning was hardly necessary. The rest of the Jedi were already turning away from the confused commandos, Force-leaping toward the bottom of the dune.

Jaina and Zekk found Jacen and adjusted their own leap so they came down on the slope next to him.

“You planned that!” Jaina accused her brother.

“Planned *what?*” Jacen asked.

He leapt the rest of the way to the bottom of the dune, where he was joined by Tahiri, Tesar, and Lowbacca. Jaina and Zekk landed next to the group an instant later.

“The vape charges!” Zekk accused.

“You helped Jag!” Jaina added. As Jaina made her accusation, she and Zekk were turning back toward the bomb—now about three hundred meters above, still at the top of the dune. “You don’t *want* us to recover this weapon!”

“That’s ridiculous. I was only trying to save Jag’s life.” Jacen’s voice was calm and smooth. “I thought you would thank me for that.”

“Ask *Jag* to thank you,” Jaina snapped.

She and Zekk raised their hands, reaching out to grasp the vape charges in the Force, but they were too late. A

white flash swallowed the crest of the dune. They threw up their arms to shield their eyes, then heard a deep growl reverberating across the desert and felt the sand shuddering beneath their feet.

When they looked up, the top of the dune was gone—and so was the bomb.

ONE

STAR POND HAD calmed into a dark mirror, and the kaddyr bugs had fallen mysteriously silent. The entire Jedi academy had descended into uneasy stillness, and Luke knew it was time. He ended the meditation with a breath, then unfolded his legs—he had been floating cross-legged in the air—and lowered his feet to the pavilion floor.

Mara was instantly at his side, taking his arm in case he was too weak to stand. “How do you feel?”

Luke’s entire body felt stiff and sore, his head was aching, and his hands were trembling. He tested his legs and found them a little wobbly.

“I’m fine,” he said. His stomach felt as empty as space. “A little hungry, maybe.”

“I’ll bet.” Continuing to hold his arm, Mara turned to leave the meditation pavilion. “Let’s get you something to eat . . . and some rest.”

Luke did not follow her. “I can last another hour.” Through the Force, he could feel nearly the entire Jedi order gathered in the lecture hall, waiting to learn why he had summoned them. “We need to do this now.”

“Luke, you look like you’ve been hanging out in wampa caves again,” Mara said. “You need to rest.”

“Mara, it’s *time*,” Luke insisted. “Is Ben there?”

“I don’t know,” Mara said.

Although their son was finally beginning to show some interest in the Force, he continued to shut himself off from his parents. Luke and Mara were saddened and a little disturbed by Ben’s detachment, but they were determined

not to push. The turmoil in the Force during the war with the Yuuzhan Vong had left him somewhat mistrustful of the Jedi way of life, and they both knew that if he was ever going to follow in their footsteps, he would have to find his own way onto the path.

“Does Ben really need to be part of this?” Mara’s tone suggested the answer she wanted to hear.

“Sorry, but I think he does,” Luke said. “Now that Jacen has convinced him that it’s safe to open himself to the Force, Ben will have to make the same decision as everyone else. All the students will.”

Mara frowned. “Shouldn’t the children wait until they’re older?”

“We’ll ask them again when they become apprentices,” Luke said. “I don’t know whether I’m about to save the Jedi order or destroy it—”

“*I do,*” Mara interrupted. “The Masters are pulling the order in ten different directions. You have to do this, or they’ll tear it apart.”

“It certainly looks that way,” Luke said. With Corran Horn and Kyp Durrton at odds over the anti-Killik policies of the Galactic Alliance, it seemed as though every Master in the order was trying to impose his or her own compromise on the Jedi. “But whether this is successful or not, it’s going to change the Jedi order. If some students don’t want to be a part of that, it’s better for everyone to find out now.”

Mara considered this, then sighed. “I’ll have Nanna bring Ben over.” She pulled out her comlink and stepped to one side of the pavilion. “And I’ll let Kam and Tionne know you want the students there.”

“Good. Thank you.”

Luke continued to look out over the dark water. He had spent the last week deep in meditation, sending a Force-call to the entire Jedi order. It would have been easier to use the HoloNet, but many Jedi—such as Jaina and her

team—were in places the HoloNet did not cover. Besides, Luke was trying to make a point, to subtly remind the rest of the order that all Jedi answered to the same authority.

And the strategy had worked. In every arm of the galaxy, Masters had suspended negotiations, Jedi Knights had dropped investigations, apprentices had withdrawn from combat. There were a few Jedi stranded on off-lane worlds without transport and a couple unable to suspend their activities without fatal consequences, but for the most part, his summons had been honored. Only two Jedi Knights had willfully ignored his call, and their decision had surprised Luke less than it had hurt him.

A familiar presence drew near on the path behind the meditation pavilion, and Luke spoke without turning around. “Hello, Jacen.”

Jacen stopped at the entrance to the pavilion. “I’m sorry to disturb you.”

Luke continued to look out on the pond. “Come to explain why Jaina and Zekk aren’t here?”

“It’s not their fault,” Jacen said, still behind Luke. “We’ve had some, uh, disagreements.”

“Don’t make excuses for them, Jacen,” Mara said, closing her comlink. “If you felt Luke’s summons, so did they.”

“It’s not that simple,” Jacen said. “They may have thought I was trying to trick them.”

Luke finally turned around. “Tesar and Lowbacca didn’t seem to think so.” He had felt three other Jedi Knights return to Ossus along with Jacen. “Neither did Tahiri.”

“What can I say?” Jacen spread his hands. “I’m not *their* brother.”

Mara frowned. “Jacen, your sister used you as a pretext and we all know it. Let’s leave it at that.” She turned to Luke. “Nanna’s on the way with Ben, and Kam says the students have all been waiting in the lecture hall since this morning.”

"Thanks." Luke joined her and Jacen at the rear of the pavilion, then gestured at the path leading toward the lecture hall. "Walk with us, Jacen. We need to talk."

"I know." Jacen fell in at Luke's side, between him and Mara. "You must be furious about the raid on the Chiss supply depot."

"I was," Luke admitted. "But your aunt convinced me that if you were involved, there had to be a good reason."

"I was more than involved," Jacen said. "It was my idea."

"*Your* idea?" Mara echoed.

Jacen was silent a moment, and Luke could feel him struggling with himself, trying to decide how much he could tell them. He was trying to protect something—something as important to him as the Force itself.

Finally, Jacen said, "I had a vision." He stopped and looked into the crown of a red-fronded dbergo tree. "I saw the Chiss launch a surprise attack against the Killiks."

"And so you decided to *provoke* the Chiss just to be certain?" Luke asked. "Surely, it would have been better to warn the Killiks."

Jacen's fear chilled the Force. "There was more," he said. "I saw the Killiks mount a counterattack. The war spread to the Galactic Alliance."

"And *that's* why you attacked the Chiss supply depot," Mara surmised. "To protect the Galactic Alliance."

"Among other things," Jacen said. "I had to change the dynamics of the situation. If the war had started that way, it wouldn't have stopped. Ever." He turned to Luke. "Uncle Luke, I saw the galaxy die."

"Die?" An icy ball formed in Luke's stomach. Considering the turmoil the order had been in at the time, he was beginning to understand why Jacen had felt it necessary to take such dire action. "Because the Chiss launched a surprise attack?"

Jacen nodded. "That's why I convinced Jaina and the others to help me. To prevent the surprise attack from