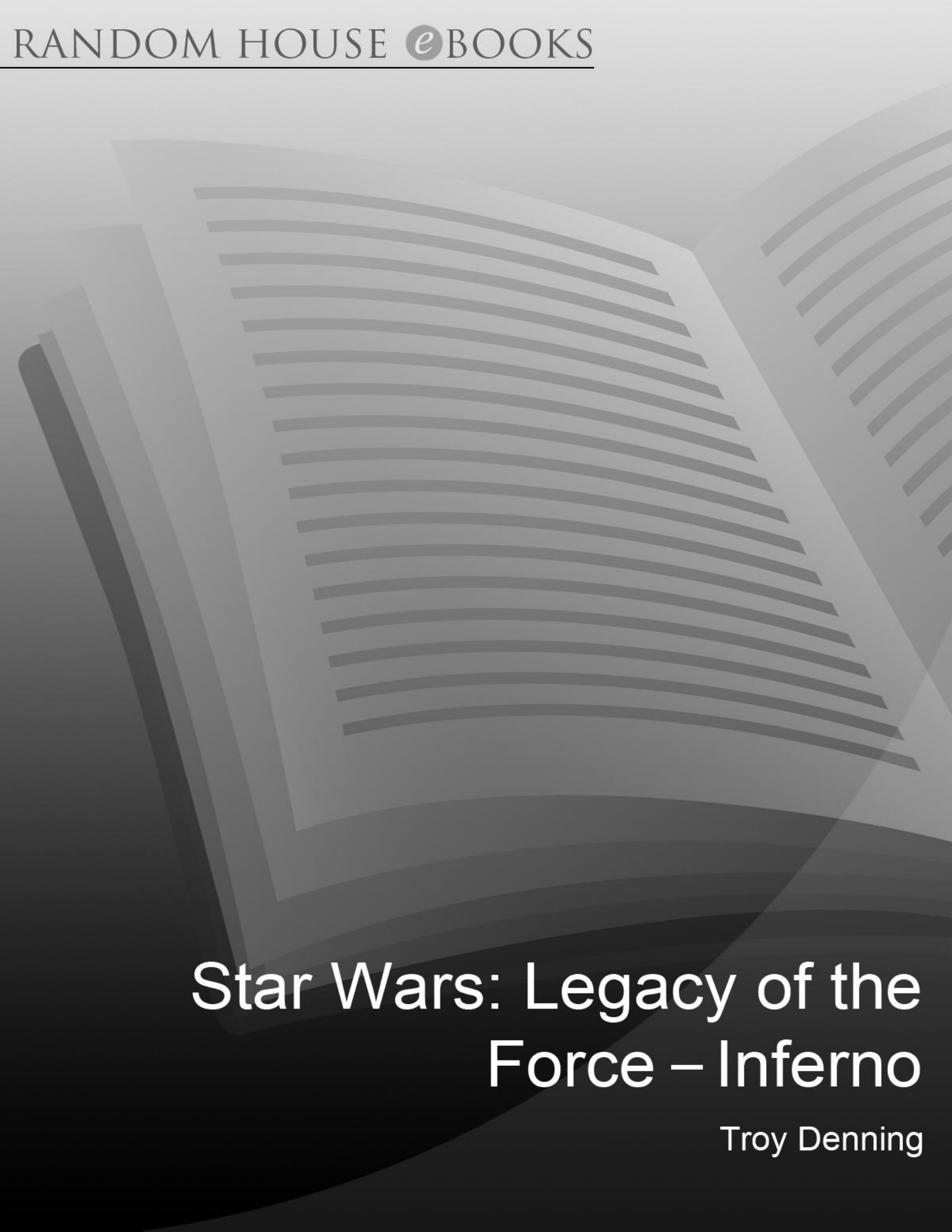


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Star Wars: Legacy of the Force – Inferno

Troy Denning

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About the Book

With Luke consumed with grief, Jacen Solo works quickly to consolidate his power and jumpstart his plan to take over the Jedi. Convinced he's the only one who can save the galaxy, Jacen will do whatever it takes, even ambush his own parents.

With the Rebel confederacy driving deep into the core to attack Coruscant and the Jedi under siege, Luke must reassert his position. Only he can lead the Jedi through the crisis, but it means solving the toughest problem Luke's ever faced. Does he fight alongside his nephew Jacen, a tyrant who's taken over the GA, or does he join the rebels to smash the Galactic Alliance he helped create?

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. His most recent Star Wars novels are the three books of the trilogy, *Star Wars: Dark Nest*. A former game designer and editor, he lives in southern Wisconsin with his wife, Andria.

By Troy Denning

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

Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Star by Star
Star Wars: Tatooine Ghost
Star Wars: Dark nest I: The Joiner King
Star Wars: Dark Nest II: The Unseen Queen
Star Wars: Dark Nest III: The Swarm War
Star Wars: Legacy of the Force: Tempest
Star Wars: Legacy of the Force: Inferno
Star Wars: Legacy of the Force: Invincible

Star Wars: Legacy of the Force – Inferno

Troy Denning



arrow books

For Jeffrey Olsen
Neighbor and friend

acknowledgments

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THE STAR WARS NOVELS TIMELINE



1020 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Bane: Path of Destruction



33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Maul: Saboteur*

32.5

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

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22.5

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Rebel Dawn

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Tales from the Empire
Tales from the New Republic

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The Mandalorian Armor
Slave Ship
Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura



6.5-7.5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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

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A Forest Apart*
Tatooine Ghost

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Dark Force Rising
The Last Command

X-Wing: Isard's Revenge

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Champions of the Force
I, Jedi

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X-Wing: Starfighters of Adumar

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Survivor's Quest



25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Dark Tide II: Ruin
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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
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Destiny's Way
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The Unseen Queen
The Swarm War



40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury
Revelation
Invincible
*An ebook novella

dramatis personae



Alema Rar; Jedi Knight (female Twi'lek)
Ben Skywalker; Junior GAG member (male human)
Han Solo; captain, *Millennium Falcon* (male human)
Jacen Solo; Sith Lord (male human)
Jae Juun; intelligence operative (male Sullustan)
Jagged Fel; bounty hunter (male human)
Jaina Solo; Jedi Knight (female human)
Leia Organa Solo; Jedi Knight (female human)
Luke Skywalker; Jedi Grand Master (male human)
Saba Sebatyne; Jedi Master (female Barabel)
Salle Serpa; GAG major (male human)
Tahiri Veila; Jedi Knight (female human)
Tarfang; master spy (male Ewok)
Tenel Ka; Hapan Queen Mother (female human)
Zekk; Jedi Knight (male human)

prologue

THE SCREAM AND roar of combat began to reverberate through the empty grashal, and wisps of battle smoke materialized in the green beams of their helmet lamps. Jacen—now Darth Caedus, he reminded himself—continued to pull into the past, one glove clamped around the arm of Tahiri's pressure suit, the other anchored to the rim of a blaster-pitted gestation bin. The brown stains on the bin's exterior grew wet and red, and crouching forms started to manifest in the surrounding darkness.

As he drew more heavily on the Force, the sallow light of glow-lichen began to shine down through the thickening smoke, revealing the cloning lab in which Jacen's brother, Anakin, had died. Where there had been only barren vacuum a few moments before, now a pulsing jungle of white nutrient vines corkscrewed up from the gestation bins that lined the grashal floor. Streaks of color and darkness were flashing past in both directions, the air swirling with razor bugs and the floor shaking with grenade detonations.

"I hope I'm ready for this," Tahiri said. Over the suit comm, her voice sounded brittle and uncertain. "Maybe my first flow-walk shouldn't have been into the middle of a battle."

Jacen knew it was not the battle that made Tahiri nervous, but he saw no advantage in forcing her to admit it. "We'll be fine," he said. "We're ghosts here. Even if a Yuuzhan Vong sees us, he can't do us harm."

"It's *us* doing harm that worries me," Tahiri replied. "What if we change something we shouldn't—something that alters the present?"

“That’s unlikely.” Actually, Jacen should have said *impossible*. Any change they made in the past would be corrected by the Force, and the flow would return to its present course. But he did not explain that to Tahiri. He needed her to believe they were taking a small but terrible chance, risking temporal catastrophe to deal with her unresolved grief. “I won’t let you do anything wrong. Just relax.”

“*Unlikely* isn’t very relaxing,” Tahiri replied. “Not when you’re talking about the fate of the galaxy.”

“Trust me,” Jacen said. “I’ve been flow-walking for years, and the galaxy hasn’t come to an end yet.”

“Not that we know of.”

Tahiri turned toward the back of the grashal, where Anakin and the rest of the strike team were fighting through a breach in the wall. Their brown jumpsuits were blood-crusted and tattered, and their faces were haggard with fear and exhaustion—yet also tight with determination and resolve. This had been the objective of their mission, the cloning lab where the Yuuzhan Vong created the voxyn that had killed so many Jedi, and they would not leave until it was destroyed.

The Force began to hum with Tahiri’s anger and sadness, and her hand drifted toward her lightsaber. Jacen could sense how she ached to do more than give Anakin the final kiss she had denied him at the time—how she longed to ignite her weapon and somehow prevent his approaching death.

A trio of thermal grenades detonated overhead, filling the dome with orange brilliance and spraying hot shrapnel in all directions. Nutrient vines fell in ropes of fire, and Yuuzhan Vong dropped to the floor in writhing heaps. Tahiri cringed and turned to dive for cover, but Jacen jerked her back. Shrapnel flew past without striking the pair, and flames licked at their pressure suits without melting anything.

“I *told* you we can’t be harmed here,” Jacen said.

"You also told me it was a coincidence we crossed paths on Anakin's anniversary day," Tahiri replied. "That doesn't mean I believe you."

Jacen frowned behind his visor. "You think I *arranged* to bump into you?"

"Come on, Jacen," Tahiri said. "I'm a smart girl."

Jacen hesitated, wondering how much she knew about what he had done a week earlier, whether she had linked their trip here to his aunt's murder on Kavan. It was foolish to think he could kill the wife of *Luke Skywalker* and avoid discovery indefinitely, yet he *had* to. Jacen had foreseen that the Confederation's boldness would soon put victory within the Alliance's grasp—but only if the Jedi did not interfere with his plans.

After a moment, Jacen said, "Okay, let's say I *did* arrange it. Why did you come?"

"Because I was tempted," Tahiri answered. "And I want to find out what you need from me."

"I don't need anything," Jacen lied. "I just thought this might help you move on."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"It's for Anakin, too," Jacen said. "I think my brother deserves this much . . . don't you?"

A guilty ripple rolled through the Force. "Not fair!" Tahiri protested. "And I still don't believe you."

Jacen raised the shoulders of his pressure suit in an awkward shrug. "Does that mean you don't want to go through with this?"

Tahiri sighed. "You know better than that."

"Then you have to trust my instructions," Jacen said. "You can't react to the past. The more you become a part of it, the more likely you are to be seen—and the more power it has to harm you."

"Okay, I understand." Over the suit comm, it was difficult to tell whether Tahiri's tone was resentful or embarrassed. "It won't happen again."

“Good.”

Jacen turned back to the battle, where the momentary silence that had followed the grenade explosions had been shattered by screaming blaster bolts and droning razor bugs. In the back of the grashal, Anakin was just rising to his feet as the strike team took advantage of the enemy’s disarray to overrun the cloning lab. When Jacen saw his own figure dodging through the battle, he remembered how sad he had been for his wounded brother, how wrong it had seemed for the war to take such a noble young life. It was like watching himself in a home holo, wondering how he could ever have been so naïve. Perhaps, once he united the galaxy, such idealism would no longer seem quite so foolish.

The boom of a longblaster sounded outside the grashal, then a trio of Jedi came rushing inside. The young Tahiri—then just fifteen—was in the lead. Her blond hair billowed behind her; the scars suffered during her imprisonment among the Yuuzhan Vong were still red on her forehead. She and the others had barely cleared the breach before a ball of yellow-orange fire followed them inside and exploded.

The shock wave hurled the Jedi in three different directions, but they quickly used the Force to bring their trajectories under control and come down safely. Young Tahiri tucked herself into a front roll and disappeared behind a gestation bin, then emerged from the other end returning to her feet. Anakin was already rushing to her side, his free hand cupped over his abdomen, his jaw clenched against the pain of his wound.

The voice of the older Tahiri came over the suit comm. “We need to move closer.”

“Fine, but stay in contact with me or the current will carry you off.” Still holding Tahiri’s arm, Jacen started toward his brother and the young Tahiri. “And whatever you do, don’t open your pressure suit. Our presences are still anchored in our own time, so you’ll decompress.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Tahiri replied drily. “But I had kind of guessed.”

Anakin and young Tahiri were now crouching together behind a gestation bin. Had his brother survived this battle, the pair would almost certainly have become lovers and then married. He sometimes wondered how that might have changed things, whether that extra bit of happiness and stability could somehow have kept the galaxy from spinning so wildly out of control.

As Jacen led the way around behind the pair, young Tahiri suddenly raised her arm and pointed across the aisle, toward a scorched bin overflowing with Yuuzhan Vong corpses. Next to the bin, the strike team’s meter-high healer, Tekli, stood over the scaly bulk of Tesar Sebatyne. She was sprinkling stinksalts on the Barabel’s forked tongue, trying to rouse him from his unconsciousness . . . and failing miserably.

Jacen continued to lead the way closer, moving very slowly and carefully. Flow-walkers tended to cause blurs around themselves both visually and in the Force, and the slower they moved, the less noticeable the effect would be.

As they approached, Anakin pointed toward Tekli and the wounded Barabel.

“Take him . . . and go,” he said to young Tahiri. “You may need to cut a way out.”

“*You?*” she responded. “I’m not going—”

“Do it!” Anakin snapped.

Her face fell, and even the older Tahiri began to radiate surprise and dismay into the Force.

Anakin’s tone softened almost as soon as he had spoken. “You need . . . to help Tekli. I’ll be along.”

Even through a pressure suit’s auditory sensors, Anakin’s voice sounded weak and anguished, and it was clear that he had known even then he was about to die. A growing tightness began to form in Jacen’s throat, and he was surprised at the effort of will required to make it go away.

Jacen had loved his brother—and apparently still did—but he could not let his emotions draw him into the past. As he had warned Tahiri, any reaction at all would make them easier to see, and if the other strike team survivors suddenly started to recall a pair of blurry, pressure-suited apparitions at the battle, someone might realize he had flow-walked here with Tahiri—and that would make her useless to him.

By the time Jacen had quelled his emotions, Anakin had stood again. He was gently pushing young Tahiri across the aisle toward Tekli, who was kneeling astride Tesar's scaly bulk and trying to slap him awake. The Force grew heavy with older Tahiri's sorrow, but Jacen said nothing to her about the dangers of reacting to the past. He had known all along that she would not be able to control her emotions at this moment—he was *counting* on it—and he would just have to hope Tekli and the other survivors were too busy with the battle to notice any flow-walking apparitions.

"Tesar is not responding," Tekli said, looking across the aisle. "I cannot move him and work on him both."

Young Tahiri lowered her brow in doubt, clearly suspecting the Chadra-Fan of trying to draw her away from Anakin, but she could hardly refuse to help. Blinking back a tear, she stretched up to kiss Anakin—then caught herself and shook her head.

This was the moment when young Tahiri had pulled back, telling Anakin that if he wanted a kiss, he would have to come back for it. The Force seemed ready to break with the anguish of older Tahiri, who quickly stepped forward and pushed her younger self into Anakin's arms.

Young Tahiri's mouth fell open, but before she could cry out, Anakin leaned down and silenced her with a kiss. The surprise drained instantly from her posture, and they remained together, body pressed to body, for what seemed an eternity—even to Jacen, who often saw eternity in his visions.

Knowing by the sullen weight of the Force—and by his own breaking heart—that they were being drawn ever more deeply into the past, Jacen pulled the older Tahiri back to his side. If they were still there when the kiss ended, Tekli would certainly see them. In thirteen years or so—when Jacen and Tahiri returned to their own time—the Chadra-Fan would begin to recall seeing them here in their pressure suits. Once she reported her memory flashes to the Council, the Masters would realize that Jacen had flow-walked Tahiri back to the battle and begin to ask themselves why, and his plan would be ruined.

Jacen began to back them away, slowly releasing his hold on the past. The scream and roar of battle started to quiet, and the sallow light of the grashal's glow-lichens began to dim. Before long, all he could see were two forms locked in eternal embrace, their presences shining across time to illuminate the cold darkness. And then even that light faded.

A single heartbroken warble sounded over the suit comm, and Tahiri clasped the arm of Jacen's pressure suit.

"Did we have to leave?" she asked. "I wanted to see him after, to see if the kiss made his death any . . . any easier."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't let us be seen." Jacen no longer felt like Jacen inside. He was using his brother's death to manipulate Tahiri—to *corrupt* her—and it made him feel brutal and dirty. But what choice did he have? The Jedi were hunting Mara's killer with all their resources, and he needed a way to track their progress, to keep them under control while he saved the Alliance. "You were getting caught up in the past. We both were."

The strength left Tahiri's grasp, but she continued to hold his arm. "I know. It was just so . . ." She stopped and turned her faceplate toward Jacen, leaving him to stare at the anonymous reflection of his own helmet. "I thought the kiss would be enough. But it isn't, Jacen. I need—"

"Tahiri, no." It wasn't Jacen speaking now, but his new self, the one he had created when he killed Mara. "Your

emotions—*my* emotions—make it too risky. We can't go back."

"I know, Jacen." Tahiri turned her back on him and started for the exit. "I just wish we didn't have to leave it that way. I wish I could be sure he died knowing how much I loved him."

Darth Caedus smiled sadly inside his helmet.

"I'm sure he knew." Caedus started after her. This was what it meant to be Sith: to use friends without hesitation, to sacrifice family for destiny, to live with a stained soul. "I mean, you *did* tell him, didn't you?"

one

TENEL KA SENSED the hole in the Force the instant she entered the bedchamber. It was lurking in the black depths of the corner farthest from the entrance, a void so subtle she recognized it only by the surrounding stillness. She moved quickly through the doorway, her spine tingling with a ripple of danger sense so delicate it made her blood race.

Before her lady-in-waiting could enter the room behind her, she looked back over her shoulder and called, "That will be all, Lady Aros. Ask DeDeToo to lock down the nursery."

"*Lock* it down, Majesty?" Aros stopped at the threshold, a slender silhouette still holding the evening gown Tenel Ka had just removed. "Is there something I need to—"

"Just a precaution," Tenel Ka interrupted. Her robe was still hanging inside her refresher suite, so she was standing in her underclothes. "I know our embassy should be secure, but this *is* Coruscant."

"Of course . . ." Aros dipped her chin. "The terrorists. This rach warren of a planet is absolutely teeming with them."

"Let's not be too disparaging, shall we?" Tenel Ka chided. She casually reached down and unfastened the thigh holster where she carried her lightsaber. "We *did* have to call on Colonel Solo to dispose of a few raches of our own recently."

"I didn't mean anything negative about the colonel," Aros said, practically cooing the reference to Jacen. After his recent heroics defending Tenel Ka against the traitors trying to usurp her throne, he had become something of a sex symbol to half the women in the Hapes Consortium . . . Tenel Ka included. "Quite the opposite. If not

for Colonel Solo, I'm *sure* Coruscant would have sunk into anarchy by now."

"No doubt," Tenel Ka said, casually shifting her grasp on the holster so that she held her lightsaber by its hilt. "Now if you'll excuse me, I believe I can turn down my own sheets tonight."

Aros acknowledged the order with a bow and withdrew into the anteroom. Tenel Ka used her elbow to depress a tap pad on the wall. Half a dozen wall sconces glimmered to life, revealing a chamber as ridiculously opulent as the rest of the embassy's Royal Wing. There were three separate seating areas, a life-sized HoloNet transceiver, and a huge hamogoni wood desk stocked with stacks of flimsiplast bearing the Hapan Royal Crest. On the far side of the chamber, a dreamsilk canopy shimmered above a float-rest bed large enough to sleep Tenel Ka and her ten closest friends.

Despite the two sconces flanking it, the room's farthest corner—the one near her refresher suite—remained ominously dark. Tenel Ka could not sense any sort of optical field keeping it that way, but then again, the only thing she *could* sense was . . . well, nothing. She reached out with the Force to make certain Aros was not eavesdropping from the other side of the door, then ignited her lightsaber and took a few steps toward the corner.

"You would be wise to show yourself," Tenel Ka said. "I have no patience for voyeurs . . . as you should well know by now."

"I'm a slow learner." The darkness melted away, revealing a tall, shadow-eyed figure with a melancholy echo of his father's famous lopsided grin. He was dressed in black GAG utilities and smelled faintly of hyperdrive fuel, as though he had come to her straight from a space hangar. "And I don't usually get caught. My camouflage powers must be slipping."

“No, Jacen. I am just growing better at sensing your presence.” Tenel Ka deactivated her lightsaber and tossed it on the bed, then smiled warmly and opened her arms to him. “I was hoping you would find time to call.”

Jacen cocked his brow, then let his gaze slide down her body. “So I see.”

“Well?” Tenel Ka asked. “Are you just going to stand there gawking? Or are you going to do something about it?”

Jacen chuckled, then stepped out of the corner and crossed to her. His Force presence remained undetectable—he was so accustomed to concealing himself that he did so even around Tenel Ka—but she could tell by the shine in his eyes how happy he was to see her. She slipped a hand behind his neck and drew his mouth to hers.

Jacen obliged, but his kiss was warm rather than hot, and she could tell that tonight his heart was not entirely hers. She stepped back, embarrassed to realize how insensitive she was being.

“Forgive me if I seem too joyful,” she said, able to perceive now the sadness that tinged his hard eyes, the grief that tainted his clenched jaw. “Tomorrow is Mara’s funeral. *Of course* you have other things on your mind.”

Jacen’s snort was so gentle that Tenel Ka almost did not hear it.

“It’s okay.” He took her hand, but the softness had vanished from his face, leaving in its place only the stoic, unreadable mask that he had worn since his escape from the Yuuzhan Vong. “I wasn’t thinking about Mara.”

Tenel Ka eyed him doubtfully.

“Well, not exclusively,” Jacen admitted. “I’m happy to see you, too.”

“Thank you, but I’m not offended,” Tenel Ka said. “Our thoughts *should* be on your aunt tonight. Have you found her killer yet?”

Jacen’s face flickered with emotion—whether it was anger or resentment was impossible to say—and something like

guilt flashed through the Force so quickly that Tenel Ka was still trying to identify it when Jacen closed down again.

"We're still working on that." Jacen's tone was defensive, and his gaze slid away in . . . could that be shame? "We don't have many leads, and I don't like the direction they're going."

"That is very cryptic," Tenel Ka observed. "Can you—"

"Not yet," Jacen said, shaking his head. "It's still early in the investigation, and I don't want to taint anyone's reputation."

Tenel Ka frowned at the implication. "You think it was someone *inside* the GA?"

Jacen flashed a mock scowl. "Did I *say* that?"

"Yes." Tenel Ka looped her hand through the elbow of his black utilities and changed the subject. "But it was thoughtless of me to ask about the investigation, especially with the funeral tomorrow. I hope you'll—"

"Don't apologize." Jacen detached himself and moved to the nearest couch, then sat on the arm. "The truth is, I *haven't* been doing very much to find her killer. The Alliance has higher priorities at the moment."

"The war?"

Jacen nodded. "I'm sure you're receiving the military's briefing holos."

"Of course." In fact, the holos had been arriving twice a day for nearly a week now, along with urgent requests for Hapan reinforcements, which Tenel Ka could not provide. "Don't tell me that Admiral Niathal has prevailed on you to talk me out of my last fleet?"

Instead of answering, Jacen slipped over the couch arm onto a cushion, then sat staring into the flame tube that was the focal point of the seating area.

"I see," Tenel Ka said, astonished that Jacen would agree to even attempt such a thing. He knew as well as she did that granting the Alliance request would place both their daughter and her throne in profound danger. "There is

nothing to send, Jacen. As it is, the Home Fleet is barely enough to secure the Consortium from my own nobles.”

“You still need to hear this.” Jacen continued to stare into the swirling tongues of blue inside the flame tube. “You’re aware that Corellia and Bothawui are moving against Kuat, right?”

Tenel Ka nodded. “While the Hutts and Commenor make preparations to attack Balmorra.” She retrieved her dressing gown from inside the refresher, then added, “I *do* watch those holos they keep sending me.”

“Sorry—just making sure,” Jacen said. “But what the briefings don’t say—what they *can’t* say—is that after the battle at Balmorra, the Confederation is going to mass its fleets at Kuat. Whoever wins there wins the war.”

“Military planners always think the next big space battle will end the war.” Tenel Ka slipped the dressing gown over her shoulders and returned to the seating area. “They’re usually wrong.”

“This doesn’t come from the planners,” Jacen said. “I’ve seen it, . . . in the Force.”

“Oh.” Tenel Ka dropped into a chair adjacent to Jacen’s, stunned by the implications of what she had just heard. If Jacen’s Force-vision was accurate—and she knew enough about his Force powers to think it would be—the Confederation would soon have a massive force in position to threaten Coruscant herself. “I see why you are worried.”

“*Worried* might be an understatement,” Jacen replied. “So would *terrified*. The Alliance just doesn’t have the strength to stop them yet.”

“*Yet?*” Tenel Ka asked. “Are you telling me that Thrackan Sal-Solo wasn’t the only one building secret fleets?”

Jacen shook his head. “Sorry. I’m talking about the Wookiees. Kashyyyk is certain to assign their assault fleet to our command, and that will tip the balance back in the Alliance’s favor.”

"I doubt the Confederation is going to wait *that* long," Tenel Ka said, almost bitterly. Alliance holochannels were filled with impatient speculation about the endless debate on Kashyyyk, with the commentary ranging from simple impatience to accusations of cowardice. "Are you telling me the public reports are misdirection?"

"Not a bad idea, but no," Jacen said. "I'm telling you that our agents assure us it's a matter of *when*, not if."

"In this instance, when *is* if," Tenel Ka said. "Wookiees are very stubborn. By the time they finish their deliberations, the Confederation will be storming Coruscant."

"I hope you're wrong." Jacen tore his eyes from the flame tube, then met Tenel Ka's gaze. For once, she could sense his emotions through the Force, could feel how frightened and worried he truly was. "But I just don't know."

"I see," Tenel Ka said, finally starting to realize what Jacen was trying to tell her. "And you didn't come to ask for the Home Fleet?"

Jacen shook his head. "Not really."

"I was afraid of that." Tenel Ka sank back in her chair, calling on the Force to keep her heart rate under control, her thoughts focused. "So you only came to warn me that the Galactic Alliance is about to collapse."

"Well, that's not the *only* reason." Jacen grinned and cocked an eyebrow.

Tenel Ka groaned. "This is no time for jokes, Jacen. Your timing is worse than when we were teenagers."

"Okay, then I could use some advice instead," Jacen said, accepting the rebuff as gracefully as he had when they were younger. "Have any?"

Tenel Ka's answer was immediate. "The Jedi could do something. Perhaps they could launch a StealthX raid, or perhaps Master Skywalker could speak to—"

"I asked for advice, not wishful thinking." Jacen's voice was suddenly sharp. "The Jedi won't lift a finger to help us. They're practically traitors themselves."

"Jacen, that's not true," Tenel Ka said, refusing to be intimidated. "The Jedi have supported the Galactic Alliance since its inception, and Master Skywalker is on the same side you are. If the Alliance is to be saved, you two must put aside your differences and work together."

A flash of fear flickered through Jacen's eyes, then he looked away, reminding Tenel Ka of some petulant courtier refusing to acknowledge a rebuke.

"And if we can't?" he asked.

"Can you stop the enemy's advance *without* the Jedi?"

Jacen shook his head. "Not at the moment—and maybe not *with* them."

"Then what choice is there?" Tenel Ka made the question a command. "The Jedi Council is unhappy about your coup, but the Masters will not stand idle while the Alliance falls—especially not if you grant concessions."

Jacen fell silent a moment, then turned to face Tenel Ka. "It's more complicated than that. Luke hasn't been himself since Mara died." His dark brows arched in concern. "He barely talks to anyone, and he's drawn in on himself so far he's practically cut off from the Force."

"Surely you don't expect him to remain unaffected by his wife's death?"

"It's more than grief," Jacen said. "You heard about Lumiya?"

"I heard that he truly killed her this time." Tenel Ka's answer was cautious, for the 'Net had been full of reports linking Lumiya's death to Mara's—until the Jedi Council had issued a terse statement asserting that Lumiya's demise involved other matters. "It's hard to believe the timing was purely coincidental."

"It wasn't," Jacen said. "I'm afraid it was a vengeance killing."

"A vengeance killing?" Tenel Ka shook her head in disbelief. "Even if Master Skywalker would do such a thing, it

doesn't make sense. The Jedi Council itself said that Lumiya had nothing to do with Mara's death."

"Luke didn't discover that until after he killed Lumiya—and *that's* when he began to draw in on himself." Jacen leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees and staring at the polished Iarmalstone between his boots. "I think he's having a crisis of confidence, Tenel Ka. I think he's stopped trusting himself . . . *and* the Force."

Tenel Ka frowned. She had the feeling that Jacen was forcing his emotions; that he was merely *trying* to be concerned while secretly relishing his uncle's mistake. And who could blame him? Master Skywalker *had* accused Jacen of some fairly terrible things lately—such as collaborating with a Sith and staging an illegal coup—so it would only be natural to gloat when his denouncer did something even worse.

After a moment, she said, "Perhaps you're right, Jacen. That would explain why Master Sebatyne turned me away when I tried to call on your uncle."

"Luke wouldn't see *you*?" Jacen was incredulous. "Then matters are worse than I thought. He can't be up to his duties."

"That is more than understandable." While it saddened Tenel Ka to think of Master Skywalker's pain—and Ben's—she shared Jacen's alarm. *Now* was a disastrous time for the Alliance to be without its Jedi. "But Master Skywalker is not the only member of the Jedi Council. You can still ask for their help."

"I can *try*," Jacen countered. "But I've already reached out to individual Masters."

"And?"

"They're all against me." Jacen spoke matter-of-factly, merely reporting the truth as he saw it. "They think I'm trying to take advantage of the situation. Until I have Luke's support, I can talk myself breathless. The Jedi are not going to cooperate."

Tenel Ka felt a sudden deflation as she realized just how correct Jacen was. It only made sense for the Masters to close ranks at a time like this, and the growing gulf of suspicion and ill will between Master Skywalker and Jacen was hardly a secret. *Of course* they would be suspicious of any attempt to press the Jedi into service—especially while their leader remained incapacitated.

“I see.” Tenel Ka rose and stood staring into the flame tube. “Perhaps if I talked to the Council—”

“And convince them *you’re* part of my plan?” Jacen stood behind her. “The Council is blinded by their suspicions. They refuse to see that I’m only doing what is best for the Alliance. Anything you say will be viewed as repayment for my help against Lady AlGray and the Corellians.”

Tenel Ka nodded. “You’re right, of course.” The true nature of their relationship remained a closely guarded secret, and only they knew that Jacen was the father of her daughter. But he *had* saved her throne, and Jedi Masters were not fools. Even if they believed she was sincere, they would suspect her judgment of being influenced by gratitude. She shook her head in despair and turned to Jacen. “What are you going to do?”

“We’ve given Admiral Bwua’tu command of the First and Sixth fleets, so maybe he can do something brilliant to stop the Corellians and Bothans before they reach Kuat.” Jacen tightened his lips, then said, “But honestly, our best hope is still the Wookiees—and that’s almost no hope at all.”

Tenel Ka nodded. “The briefing holo mentioned that they have rebuffed all attempts to hurry things.”

“They have.” He looked away for a long time, then finally met her gaze again. “If we can’t stop the Confederation, what happens to you?”

Tenel Ka answered immediately, for it was a question to which she had been giving much thought lately. “I’ll continue to hold my throne until the rebels consolidate their victory and turn their attention to Hapes. I’ll put up a hard

fight at first, to see if I can force a peace negotiation—but I *won't* subject my people to an invasion I have no hope of stopping.”

“I know you’ll do the best thing for *Hapes*,” Jacen said, sounding slightly amused. “I was asking about you and Allana.”

“About us?” Tenel Ka was surprised by the question, for the answer was as obvious as it was painful. “You must know the answer to that already.”

The color drained from Jacen’s face. “What about hiding? I could ask the Fallanassi to take you in.”

Tenel Ka smiled sadly. “That will work for a time, Jacen—perhaps even until the Confederation grows tired of looking for us. But no invader can rule Hapes without Hapan blood on the throne, and whoever Confederation installs as their puppet *won't* tire. The pretender will be too frightened of me or Allana trying to return, and she’ll keep looking until we’re dead.”

Jacen’s shoulders slumped, and he dropped back onto the couch and cradled his head. “Then we have no choice.”

“About what?” Tenel Ka asked, alarmed by the desperation in his voice. “Jacen, if you are considering using something like Alpha Red—”

“We don’t have anything like that—at least nothing that wouldn’t kill us, too.” He took his head out of his hands and looked up. “What I mean, Tenel Ka, is that you have to give me the Home Fleet.”

Tenel Ka felt her jaw drop. “Jacen, you *know* what will happen—”

“It will take even Hapan nobles time to organize a rebellion,” he said. “And the Alliance only needs your fleet until the Wookiees commit.”

Tenel Ka shook her head. “Jacen, I can’t risk a rebellion.”

“You can—and you *must*.” He rose and took her by the arm. “You said yourself that any pretender to your throne would never stop looking for you.”