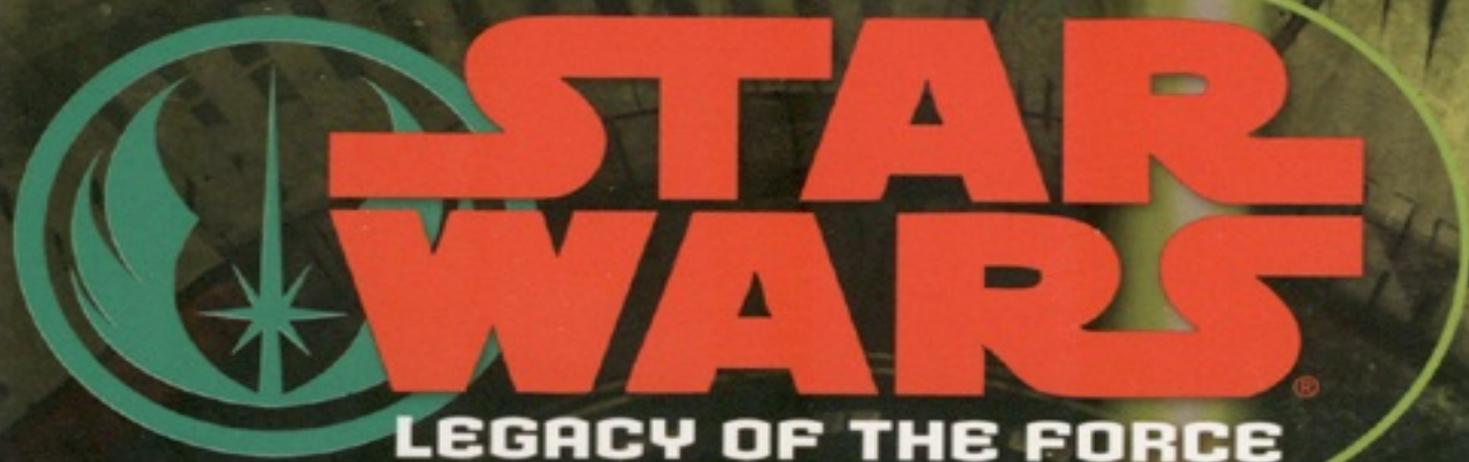


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BETRAYAL

— AARON ALLSTON



BETRAYAL

AARON ALLSTON



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Other Books by This Author

Introduction to the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe

Excerpt from *Star Wars: Legacy of the Force: Bloodlines*

Introduction to the Old Republic Era

Excerpt from *Star Wars: Darth Bane: Path of Destruction*

Introduction to the Rise of the Empire Era

Excerpt from *Star Wars: Republic Commando: Hard Contact*

Introduction to the Rebellion Era

Excerpt from *Star Wars: Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor*

Introduction to the New Republic Era

Excerpt from *Star Wars: X-Wing: Rogue Squadron*

Introduction to the New Jedi Order Era

Excerpt from *Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Vector Prime*

Introduction to the Legacy Era

Excerpt from *Star Wars: Dark Nest I: The Joiner King*

Excerpt from *Star Wars: Crosscurrent*

Timeline

dramatis personae



Aidel Saxan; Prime Minister, Corellia (human female)
Ben Skywalker (human male)
Brisha Syo (human female)
C-3PO; protocol droid
Cal Omas; Chief of State, Galactic Alliance (human male)
Cha Niathal; admiral, Galactic Alliance (Mon Calamari female)
Gilad Pellaeon; admiral, Supreme Commander of the Galactic Alliance (human male)
Han Solo; captain, *Millennium Falcon* (human male)
Heilan Rotham; professor (human female)
Jacen Solo; Jedi Knight (human male)
Jaina Solo; Jedi Knight (human female)
Kolir Hu'lya; Jedi Knight (Bothan female)
Leia Organa Solo; Jedi Knight; copilot, *Millennium Falcon* (human female)
Luke Skywalker; Jedi Grand Master (human male)
Lysa Dunter; ensign, Galactic Alliance (human female)
Mara Jade Skywalker; Jedi Master (human female)
Matric Klauskin; admiral, Galactic Alliance (human male)
Nelani Dinn; Jedi Knight (human female)
R2-D2; astromech droid
Syal Antilles; ensign, Galactic Alliance (human female)
Tahiri Veila; Jedi Knight (human female)
Thann Mithric; Jedi Knight (Falleen male)
Thrackan Sal-Solo; Chief of State, Corellia (human male)
Tiu Zax; Jedi Knight (Omwati female)
Toval Seyah; Galactic Alliance scientist-spy (human male)

Tycho Celchu; general, Galactic Alliance (human male)

Wedge Antilles; general, Corellian Defense Force (human male)

Zekk; Jedi Knight (human male)

chapter one

CORUSCANT

“He doesn’t exist.” With those words, spoken without any conscious thought or effort on his part, Luke Skywalker sat upright in bed and looked around at the dimly illuminated chamber.

There wasn’t much to see. Members of the Jedi order, even Masters such as Luke, didn’t accumulate much personal property. Within view were chairs situated in front of unlit computer screens; a wall rack holding plasteel staves and other practice weapons; a table littered with personal effects such as datapads, notes scrawled on scraps of flimsi, datachips holding reports from various Jedi Masters, and a crude and not at all accurate sandglass statuette in Luke’s image sent to him by a child from Tatooine. Inset into the stone-veneer walls were drawers holding his and Mara’s limited selection of clothes. Their lightsabers were behind Luke, resting on a shelf on the headboard of their bed.

His wife, Mara Jade Skywalker, had more personal items and equipment, of course. Disguises, weapons, communications gear, falsified documents. A former spy, she had never given up the trappings of that trade, but those items weren’t here. Luke wasn’t sure where she kept them. She didn’t bother him with such details.

Beside him, she stirred, and he glanced down at her. Her red hair, kept a medium length this season, was an unruly mess, but there was no sleepiness in her eyes when they opened. In brighter light, he knew, those eyes were an amazing green. “Who doesn’t exist?” she asked.

“I don’t know. An enemy.”

“You dreamed about him?”

He nodded. “I’ve had the dream a couple of times before. It’s not just a dream. It’s coming to me through currents in the Force. He’s all wrapped up in shadows—a dark hooded cloak, but more than that, shadows of light and ...” Luke shook his head, struggling for the correct word. “And ignorance. And denial. And he brings great pain to the galaxy ... and to me.”

“Well, if he brings pain to the galaxy, you’re obviously going to feel it.”

“No, to me personally, in addition to his other evil.” Luke sighed and lay

down again. “It’s too vague. And when I’m awake, when I try to peer into the future to find him, I can’t.”

“Because he doesn’t exist.”

“That’s what the dream tells me.” Luke hissed in aggravation.

“Could it be Raynar?”

Luke considered. Raynar Thul, former Jedi Knight, presumed dead during the Yuuzhan Vong war, had been discovered a few years earlier—horribly burned during the war, mentally transformed in the years since through his involvement with the insectoid Killik race. That transformation had been a malevolent one, and the Jedi order had had to deal with him. Now he languished in a well-protected cell deep within the Jedi Temple, undergoing treatment for his mental and physical afflictions.

Treatment. Treatment meant change; perhaps, in changing, Raynar was becoming something new, and Luke’s presentment pointed toward the being Raynar would someday become.

Luke shook his head and pushed the possibility away. “In this vision, I don’t sense Raynar’s alienness. Mentally, emotionally, whoever it is remains human, or near human. There’s even the possibility that it’s my father.”

“Darth Vader.”

“No. Before he was Darth Vader. Or just when he was becoming Vader.” Luke’s gaze lost focus as he tried to recapture the dream. “What little of his face I can see reminds me of the features of Anakin Skywalker as a Jedi. But his eyes ... as I watch, they turn a molten gold or orange, transforming from Force-use and anger ...”

“I have an idea.”

“Tell me.”

“Let’s wait until he shows up, then crush him.”

Luke smiled. “All right.” He closed his eyes and his breathing slowed, an effort to return to sleep.

Within a minute the rhythm of his breathing became that of natural sleep.

But Mara lay awake, her attention on the ceiling—beyond it, through dozens of floor levels of the Jedi enclave to the skies of Coruscant above—and searched for any hint, any flicker of what it was that was causing her husband worry.

She found no sign of it. And she, too, slept.

ADUMAR

The gleaming pearl-gray turbolift doors slid open sideways, and warm air bearing an aroma that advertised death and destruction washed over Jacen Solo, his cousin Ben Skywalker, and their guide.

Jacen took a deep breath and held it. The odors of this subterranean factory were not the smells of corrupted flesh or angrenous wounds—smells Jacen was familiar with—but those of labor and industry. The great chamber before them had been a missile manufacturing center for decades, and no amount of rigorous cleaning would ever be quite able to eliminate the odors of sweat,

machine lubricant, newly fabricated composite materials, solid fuel propellants, and high explosives that filled the air.

Jacen expelled the breath and stepped out of the turbo-lift, then walked the handful of steps up to the rail overlooking the chamber. He walked rapidly so that his Jedi cloak would billow a little as he strode, so that his boot heels would ring on the metal flooring of this observation catwalk, and so his apprentice and guide would be left behind for a moment. This was a performance for his guide and all the other representatives of the Dammant Killers company. Jacen knew he was carrying off his role quite well; the company officials he'd been dealing with remained properly intimidated. But he didn't know whether to attribute his success to his bearing and manner, his lean, brooding, and handsome looks, or his name—for on this world of Adumar, with its history of fascination with pilots, the name of Jacen's father, Han Solo, went a very long way.

His guide, a slender, balding man named Testan ke Harran, moved up to the rail to Jacen's right. Contrasting with the dull grays and blues that were common on this factory's walls and its workers' uniforms, Testan was a riot of color—his tunic, with its nearly knee-length hem and its flowing sleeves, was the precise orange of X-wing fighter pilot uniforms, though decorated with purple crisscross lines breaking it down into a flickering expanse of small diamond shapes, and his trousers, belt, and scarf were a gleaming gold.

Testan stroked his lustrous black beard, the gesture a failed attempt to conceal the man's nervousness. Jacen felt, rather than saw, Ben move up on the other side of Testan.

"You can see," Testan said, "ar workars enjoy very fan conditions."

Ben cleared his throat. "He says their workers enjoy very fine conditions."

Jacen nodded absently. He understood Testan's words, and it had taken him little time to learn and understand the Adumari accent, but this was another act, a ploy to keep the Adumari off-balance. He leaned forward to give the manufacturing floor below his full attention.

The room was large enough to act as a hangar and maintenance bay for four full squadrons of X-wing snubfighters. Tall duracrete partitions divided the space into eight lanes, each of which enclosed an assembly line; materials entered through small portals in the wall to the left, rolled along on luminous white conveyor belts, and eventually exited through portals on the far right. Laborers in gray jumpsuits flanked the belts and worked on the materials as they passed.

On the nearest belt, immediately below Jacen, the materials being worked on appeared to be compact visual sensor assemblies. The conveyor belt brought in eight such units and stopped. Moving quickly, the laborers plugged small cables into the units and turned to look into monitors, which showed black-and-white images of jumpsuited waists and worker hands. The workers turned the units this way and that, confirming that the sensors were properly calibrated.

One monitor never lit up with a view from the sensor. The worker on that

unit unplugged it and set it on a table running parallel to the conveyor belt. A moment later, the other workers on this section unplugged their sensor units and the conveyor belt jerked into motion again, carrying the remaining seven units to the next station.

One lane over, the conveyor belt remained in constant motion, carrying sensor unit housings along. The workers on that belt, fewer in number than the sensor testers, reached out occasionally to turn a housing, to look inside, to examine the exterior for cracks or warping. Some workers, distributed at intervals along the line, rapped each housing with a small rubber-headed hammer. Jacen assumed they were listening for a musical tone he could not possibly hear at this distance over the roar of noise from the floor.

Another lane away from him, the workers were clad not in jumpsuits but in full-coverage hazardous materials suits of a lighter and more reflective gray than the usual worker outfit. Their conveyor belt carried white plates bearing irregular balls the size of a human head but a nearly luminous green. The belt stopped as each set of eight such balls entered the lane, giving the workers time to plunge needlelike sensors into each ball. They, too, checked monitors for a few seconds before withdrawing the needles to allow the balls to continue on. Jacen knew that poisonous green—it was the color of the high explosive Adumari manufacturers used to fabricate the concussion missiles they exported.

While Jacen made his initial survey, Ben kept their guide occupied. “Do you wax your beard?” he asked.

“I do not.”

“It just seems very shiny. Do you oil it?”

Testan’s voice was a little more irritated in tone. “I do not oil it. I condition it. And I brush it.”

“Do you brush it with butter?”

Jacen finally looked to the right, past Testan and at his cousin. Ben was thirteen standard years of age, not tall but well muscled, with a fine-featured freckled face under a mass of flame-red hair. Ben turned, his face impassive, to look at Jacen, then said, “The Jedi Knight acknowledges that this factory seems to meet the minimum, the absolute minimum, required safety and comfort standards of a Galactic Alliance military contractor.”

Jacen nodded. The nod meant *Good improvisation*. He was exerting no Force skill to communicate words to Ben; Ben’s role was to pretend to act as his mentor’s translator, when his actual function was to convince the locals that adult Jedi were even more aloof and mysterious than they had thought.

“No, no, no.” Testan drew a sleeve over his brow, dabbing away a little perspiration. “We are well above minimum standards. Those duracrete barriers? They will vent any explosive force upward, saving the majority of workers in case of calamity. Worker shifts are only two-fifths the day in length, unlike the old days.”

Ben repeated Testan’s words, and Jacen shrugged.

Ben imitated his motion. The gesture caused his own Jedi robe to gape

open, revealing the lightsaber hanging from his belt.

Testan glanced at it, then looked back at Jacen, clearly worried. “Your apprentice—” Unsure, he looked to Ben again. “You are very young, are you not, to be wearing such a weapon?”

Ben gave him a blank look. “It’s a practice lightsaber.”

“Ah.” Testan nodded as though he understood.

And there it was. Perhaps it was just the thought of a thirteen-year-old with a deadly cutting implement at hand, but Testan’s defenses slipped enough that the worry began to pour through.

It was like the game in which children are told, “For the next hour, *do not think about banthas*.” Try as they might, they would, within minutes or even seconds, think about a bantha.

Testan’s control finally gave way and he thought about the banthas—or, rather, a place he wasn’t supposed to go, even to think about. Jacen could feel Testan try to clamp down on the thought. Something in the increased potency of that worry told Jacen that they must be nearer to the source of his concern than during previous parts of their factory tour.

When Testan turned back, Jacen looked directly at him and said, “There is something here. Something wrong.” They were the first words he’d spoken in Testan’s presence.

Testan shook his head. “No. Evrything is fan.”

Jacen looked past him, toward the wall to the far right of the chamber. It was gray and regular, a series of metal panels each the height of a man and twice as wide stacked like bricks. He began a slow, deliberate scrutiny, traversing right to left. His gaze swept the walls, the assembly lines, the elevated observation chamber directly opposite the turbo-lifts by which they had entered, and continued along the wall to the left.

As his attention reached the middle of the left wall, along the observation balcony, he felt another pulse of worry from Testan. Ben cleared his throat, a signal; the boy, though nowhere near as sensitive in the Force as Jacen, had gotten the same feeling.

Jacen set off along the balcony in that direction. This time the ringing of his boots and billowing of his cloak were a side effect of his speed rather than an act.

“You wish to see the observation chambar?” Testan hurried to keep up. His anxiety was growing, and there was something within it, like a shiny stone at the bottom of a murky pond.

Jacen reached into that pond to draw out the prize within.

It was a memory of a door. It was broad and gray, closing from above as men and women—in dark blue jumpsuits, the outfits of supervisors in this facility—scurried out ahead of its closing. When it settled in place, it was identical to the wall panels Jacen saw ahead of him in the here and now.

Jacen glanced over his shoulder at Testan. “Your thoughts betray you.”

Testan paled. “No, there is nothing to betray.”

Jacen rounded the observation balcony corner, took a few more steps, and

skidded to a halt in front of one of the wall sections.

It was here. He knew because he could feel something beyond.

Conflict. He himself was there, fighting. So was Ben. It was a faint glimpse of the future, and he and his apprentice would be in peril beyond.

He jerked his head toward the wall.

Ben brought out his lightsaber and switched it on. With a *snap-hiss* sound, its blue blade of coherent energy extended to full length.

Ben plunged the blade into the wall panel and began to drag it around in a large circle.

Testan, his voice pained, said, "He told us it was a practice weapon."

Jacen gave him an innocent look. "It's true from a certain point of view. He does practice with it." In his nervousness, Testan didn't seem to notice that Jacen was understanding him clearly now.

Ben completed his circle and gave the meter-and-a-half-high section he'd outlined a little kick. It fell away into a well-lit chamber, clanging on the floor beyond; the edges still glowed with the heat the lightsaber had poured into them.

Ben stepped through. Jacen ducked to follow. He heard Testan muttering—doubtless an alert into a comlink. Jacen didn't bother to interfere. They'd just been within clear sight of hundreds of workers and the observation chamber. Dealing with Testan wouldn't keep the alarm from being broadcast.

The room beyond Ben's improvised doorway was actually a corridor, four meters wide and eight high, every surface made up of the same dull gray metal rectangles found in the outer chamber, greenish white light pouring from the luminous ceiling. To the left, the corridor ended after a few meters, and that end was heavily packed with tall plasteel transport containers. They were marked DANGER, DO NOT DROP, and DAMMANT KILLER MODEL 16, QUANTITY 24.

To the right, the corridor extended another forty meters and then opened up; the rail and drop-off at the end suggested that it opened onto another observation balcony above another fabrication chamber.

Now making the turn from the balcony into the corridor and running toward them were half a dozen troops armed with blaster rifles. Their orange jumpsuits were reminiscent of X-wing pilot uniforms, but the green carapace armor over their lower legs, torsos, lower arms, and heads was more like stormtrooper speeder bike armor painted the wrong color.

And then behind the first six troops came another six, and then another eight ...

Jacen brought his lightsaber out and snapped it into life; the incandescent green of his blade was reflected as highlights against the walls and the armor of the oncoming troops. "Stay behind me," he said.

"Yes, sir." Ben's sigh was audible, and Jacen grinned.

The foremost trooper, who bore gold bars on his helmet and wrists, shouted, his voice mechanically amplified: "Stop whar you are! This saction is restricted!"

Jacen moved forward at a walk. He rotated his wrist, moving his lightsaber

blade around in front of him in a pattern vaguely reminiscent of butterfly wings. He shouted back, “Could you speak up? I’m a little deaf.”

Ben snickered. “Good one.”

“You may not enter this saction!”

They were now twenty meters from the ranks of troopers ahead.

Jacen continued twirling his blade in a practice form. “Fewer people will be hurt if you just get out of my way.” It was a sort of ritual thing to say. Massed enemy forces almost never backed down, despite the reputation of the Jedi—a reputation that became more widespread, more supernatural, with each year the Jedi prospered under Luke Skywalker’s leadership.

The phrase was ritual in another way, too. Once upon a time, Jacen would have felt tragedy surround him when his actions resulted in the deaths of common soldiers, common guards. But over time he’d lost that sense. There was a wearying inevitability to leaders sending their troops to die against more powerful enemies. It had been happening as long as there were violent leaders and obedient followers. In death, these people became one with the Force, and when Jacen had accepted that fact, his sense of tragedy had largely evaporated.

He took another two steps and the trooper commander called, “Fire!”

The troopers began firing. Jacen gave himself over to the Force, to his awareness of his surroundings, to his sudden oneness with the men and women trying to kill him.

He simply ignored most of the blaster bolts. When he felt them angling in toward him, he twirled his lightsaber blade in line and batted them away, usually back toward the crowd of troopers. In the first few seconds of their assault, four troopers fell to blasts launched by their friends. The smell of burned flesh began to fill the corridor.

Jacen felt danger from behind; felt Ben react to it. Jacen didn’t shift his attention; he continued his march forward. He’d prefer to be able to protect the inexperienced youth, but the boy was good at blaster defense practice. Hard as it was to trust a Jedi whose skills were just developing, he had to. To teach, to learn, he had to trust.

Jacen intercepted the next blaster shot that came his way and batted it toward the trooper commander. It struck the man in the helmet and caromed off, burning out against the ceiling; a portion four meters square of the ceiling’s illumination winked out, darkening the corridor. The commander fell. The shot was probably not fatal—protected by his helmet, the man would have forehead and scalp burns, probably a concussion, but he was unlikely to die.

The strategy had its desired effect. The troopers saw their commander fall. They continued firing but also exchanged looks. Jacen never broke pace, and a trooper with silver stripes on his helmet called “Back, back.” In good order, the troopers began a withdrawal.

Behind him, Jacen heard more blasterfire and the distinctive *zap* of a lightsaber blade intercepting it, deflecting it. Within the flow of the Force,

Jacen felt a shot coming in toward his back, felt it being slapped aside, saw and felt it as it hit the wall to his right. The heat from the shot warmed his right shoulder.

But the defenders continued their retreat, and soon the last of them was around the corner. Jacen's path to the railing was clear. He strode up to it.

Over the rail, a dozen meters down, was another assembly-line pit, where line after line of munitions components was being assembled—though at the moment all the lines were stopped, their anonymous jumpsuited workers staring up at Jacen.

Jacen's movement out of the corridor brought him within sight of the orange-and-green defenders, who were now arrayed in disciplined rows along the walkway to Jacen's left. As soon as he reached the railing they opened fire again. Their tighter formation allowed them to concentrate their fire, and Jacen found himself deflecting more shots than before.

He felt rather than saw Ben scoot into position behind him, but no blaster bolts came at him from that direction. "What now?" Ben asked.

"Finish the mission." Jacen caught a too-close bolt on his blade near the hilt; unable to aim the deflection, he saw the bolt flash down into the assembly area. It hit a monitor screen. The men and women near the screen dived for cover. Jacen winced; a fraction of a degree of arc difference and that bolt could have hit an explosives package. As inured as he was to causing death, he didn't want to cause it by accident.

"But you're in charge—"

"I'm busy." Jacen took a step forward to give himself more maneuvering and swinging space and concentrated on his attackers. He needed to protect himself and Ben now, to defend a broader area. He focused on batting bolt after bolt back into the ranks of the attackers, saw one, two, three of the soldiers fall.

There was a lull in the barrage of fire. Jacen took a moment to glance over his shoulder. Ben stood at the railing, staring down into the manufacturing line, and to his eye he held a small but expensive holocam unit—the sort carried by wealthy vacationers and holocam hobbyists all over the galaxy.

As Jacen returned his attention to the soldiers, Ben began talking: "Um, this is Ben Skywalker. Jedi Knight Jacen Solo and I are in a, I don't know, secret part of the Dammant Killers plant under the city of Cartann on the planet Adumar. You're looking at a missile manufacturing line. It's making missiles that are not being reported to the GA. They're selling to planets that aren't supposed to be getting them. Dammant is breaking the rules. Oh, and the noise you're hearing? Their guys are trying to kill us."

Jacen felt Ben's motion as the boy swung to record the blaster-versus-lightsaber conflict.

"Is that enough?" Ben asked.

Jacen shook his head. "Get the whole chamber. And while you're doing it, figure out what we're supposed to do next."

"I was kind of thinking we ought to get out of here."

With the tip of his lightsaber blade, Jacen caught a blast that was crackling in toward his right shin. He popped the blast back toward its firer. It hit the woman's blaster rifle, searing it into an unrecognizable lump, causing her green shoulder armor momentarily to catch fire. She retreated, one of her fellow soldiers patting out her flames. Now there were fewer than fifteen soldiers standing against the Jedi, and their temporary commander was obviously rethinking his *make-a-stand* orders.

"Good. How?"

"Well, the way we came in—no. They'd be waiting for us."

"Correct."

"And you never want to fight the enemy on ground he's chosen if you can avoid it."

Jacen grinned. Ben's words, so adult, were a quote from Han Solo, a man whose wisdom was often questionable—except on matters of personal survival. "Also correct."

"So ... the ends of those assembly lines?"

"Good. So go."

Jacen heard the scrape of a heel as Ben vaulted over the rail. Not waiting, Jacen leapt laterally, clearing the rail by half a meter, and spun as he fell. Ahead of and below him, Ben was just landing in a crouch on the nearest assembly line, which was loaded with opalescent shell casings. As Jacen landed, bent knees and a little upward push from the Force easing the impact, Ben raced forward, reflexively swatting aside the grasping hand of a too-bold line worker, and crouched as he lunged through the diminutive portal at the end of the line.

Jacen followed. He heard and felt the heat of blaster bolts hitting the assembly line behind him. He swung his lightsaber back over his shoulder, intercepting one bolt, taking the full force of the impact rather than deflecting the bolt into a neighboring line.

No line workers tried to grab him, and in seconds he was squeezing through the portal.

chapter two

In the next chamber, racing between and across assembly lines while workers ducked to get out of their way or, occasionally and more foolishly, lunged at them, Jacen and Ben spotted turbolift doors. It took a moment to get to them, and another moment to realize that the sensors indicated no movement of the turbolift beyond even when they'd pressed the SUMMON button multiple times. With a sigh of exasperation, Jacen cut his way into the turbolift shaft and he and his apprentice leapt through the hole, its edges still glowing, to grasp the diagonal support spars on the far side of the shaft. Clinging there, they could see the turbolift car roof about ten meters below ... but this shaft was side by side with another, and the car in that shaft was only a few meters down and rising fast.

Jacen swung over the second shaft and readied himself for the shock of impact when the turbolift car reached him. He could feel Ben following his motion, could even feel it as Ben also began focusing on aspects of the Force that would allow for the absorption of kinetic energy ...

Then the rising car hit them. They absorbed the shock with their knees and with control over the Force, and suddenly they were hurtling upward along the darkened shaft.

Jacen estimated that they'd risen three hundred meters or more before the car executed a rapid deceleration and locked into place a mere three meters before the top of the shaft. Jacen and Ben both grabbed at support spars at the shaft's side. After a moment's noise from beneath—hissing of opening doors, tramping of feet, conversation, closing doors—the car dropped away out of sight, leaving them alone in comparative silence at the top of the shaft.

"I think we're aboveground," Ben said.

"Well aboveground." Jacen ignited his lightsaber and plunged it into what he assumed was the back wall of the shaft—the direction opposite that of the turbolift doors lining the shaft below them. He dragged the blade around in a circle, and just before the end of the burning circuit met the beginning, the plug he was cutting was yanked violently away into daylight brightness, spinning out into open space. A tug of air nearly yanked Jacen after it, and more air roared up the shaft to flee through the hole he'd cut.

Outside the hole was a skyscraper vista of the city of Cartann, part of the

nation of Cartann and government capital of the planet of Adumar. The Jedi could see forty-story apartment buildings thickly lined with balconies, many of those balconies serving as small landing pads for personal fighter craft, as well as taller business spires, circular defensive towers whose featureless exteriors hid gun emplacements, and tall flagpoles from which streamed government, neighborhood, sports team, and advertising banners dozens of meters in length.

Jacen leaned out. The building wall beneath them sloped away at an angle rather than straight down. Far below, he could see skyspeeder traffic in tightly regulated streams through the air.

Ben stuck his head out just under Jacen's. "Lubed. I know how to do this."

"Don't say *lubed*."

"Why not?"

"It's generational slang, invented to distinguish between your generation and every other one by making use of superfluous and irritatingly precious vocabulary, and I'm not from your generation."

Ben turned up to look at him. His mouth worked as he sought to come up with a cutting reply.

Jacen continued, "Do you have a grapnel and line in your utility belt?"

"Sure, but I won't need it. I know how to do angle building drops like this."

"Get it ready anyway."

Ben grumbled but pulled the grapnel from his belt and dragged out a few meters of slender, strong cord.

"All right, Ben. You first."

Ben grinned and leapt outward. Jacen clipped his lightsaber back onto his belt and followed.

They fell a few meters, but Jedi acrobatic training and their control over the Force allowed them to come down with their heels against the angled building wall. From that point, it was a simple matter of reducing their inertia, keeping friction maximized between heel and wall surface.

They ran and occasionally slid down the side of the skyscraper along duracrete strips set between broad, high transparisteel viewports. On the other side of those viewports, they saw faces with mouths open in surprise or disbelief.

Jacen sensed the wind gust a moment before he felt it. He braced himself against it with foot placement and the Force before it hit.

Ben, less experienced, didn't. Jacen saw the boy's cape flap, then Ben was whirled away from the building face, yelling.

Jacen reached out for him, but the boy, still mostly clearheaded, was already hurling the grapnel hook toward him. Jacen snatched it out of the air and wrapped the cord several times around his wrist before the cord hit its maximum length. Jacen braced his arm against the shock of the impact and withstood it without being dragged off the building front.

With cord control and an extra tug against Ben himself through the Force, he dragged Ben back to the building face. Now Jacen was in front on the

descent, Ben meters above and behind. He heard Ben shout, “You can let go now.” The boy’s voice sounded appropriately abashed.

Jacen released the grapnel. “You know how to do angle building drops like this, huh?”

“What?”

“I said—”

“Can’t hear you. Too much wind.”

Jacen grinned.

“Up ninety degrees!”

Jacen looked up in the direction Ben indicated. Above, just over skyscraper level, a blue-green flying vehicle was banking at them over a tower dome. It wasn’t shaped like the split-tail Blade series of starfighters produced on this world and flown recreationally, and for duels, by so many Adumari—this was shaped roughly like a starfruit, one central body and five arms protruding from it. The arms ended in stubby housings that, Jacen could see, held thrusters, repulsor vents, and weapons muzzles. He decided that the vehicle would be slow but highly maneuverable—and capable of attacking in any direction, perhaps several directions at once. The arms rotated as a unit, but independent of the vehicle’s central body, where Jacen could see a darkened transparisteel canopy protecting the pilot’s seat.

Not that this was likely to be a threat to the Jedi. Unless the vehicle was armed with antipersonnel weapons systems, something capable of piercing flesh but not penetrating typical building construction material, the odds of it making an actual attack were low—

The vehicle’s foremost pod fired. Jacen saw the smoke trail of a missile headed their way.

He felt an exertion in the Force from Ben, the boy leaping laterally. He added some kinetic energy to his own downward motion, reduced friction to his heels and buttocks—he sat down and slid faster.

The missile impacted dozens of meters above his head. He heard the explosion, felt the building shake beneath him, but was not hit by any heat or debris. The warhead must have penetrated into the building before detonating. A little part of him went cold, infuriated at his enemy’s callous willingness to risk and kill civilians to bag the targets, but the rest of Jacen remained analytical. He put on the brakes, stepping up heel friction and coming more upright again.

The enemy fighter spun closer, then dived past him and out of sight.

Out of sight? Jacen leaned forward. Yes, the building surface did seem to come to an end only a few dozen meters below him, but still well above street level. That meant the angle had to change at that point, becoming a vertical drop. The attacker was below the drop point, waiting.

Jacen turned his attention to reflections in the spacescrapers in the distance ahead of him. There, he could see the enemy fighter. It was flush against this building, its central body still and its legs rotating, four stories below the drop-off point, several meters to the right of where Jacen would go over the

edge.

If he kept his current angle of descent, of course.

As the distance to the drop-off point shortened, he bounced across one bank of viewports, then another, ending up on a duracrete strip headed straight for a point above the enemy fighter. Then he reached the lip.

He was now only about twenty stories above the ground. Below, he could see a main avenue thick with traffic and, for the first four or five stories above street level, heavily crisscrossed with cables—private communications cables strung across streets all over Adumar to give neighbors secure communications access with one another.

Directly below Jacen was the fighter craft. Jacen somersaulted as he went over the lip, then came down straddling one of the fighter's arms just beside the vehicle's main body. The fighter jolted from the impact and dropped a couple of meters. Through the transparisteel canopy, Jacen could see a helmeted pilot, her body language showing alarm at the sudden proximity of her enemy.

She jerked the control yoke. The fighter spun away from the building. In his peripheral vision Jacen saw a grapnel and white cord wrap around another of the vehicle's arms.

They angled away from the building, roaring out high above the avenue—then dived straight toward the ground.

Jacen grinned. It was a smart enough tactic. All those cables crossing the street would cut an average attacker—assuming an average attacker could end up in this situation—to pieces without doing significant harm to the fighter.

But Jedi weren't average attackers.

Ben pulled himself onto the arm his grapnel had grabbed. His face looked flushed with windburn, and his red hair had been whipped into an unruly mess.

"Cut your way in," Jacen invited.

Ben perked up. Holding the vehicle arm with both legs and one arm, he got his lightsaber into his hand and ignited it.

Jacen leaned over and looked at the ground, so much closer than it had been just seconds before. He gestured toward it, fingers flexing ... and the comm cables directly beneath him suddenly wavered like alarmed serpents. He exerted himself more and they parted, some separating completely from one side of the street or the other. The fighter craft plunged into their midst but hit none of them. Just before hitting the street, and below where the cable layer ended, the fighter angled to join the groundspeeder traffic.

The pilot looked at the Jedi, obviously expecting to see limbless torsos or mere gouts of blood remaining. She had just enough time to register alarm before Ben plunged his lightsaber blade into the side of the canopy. As he dug around, trying to find the release catch or hinges, the blade almost grazed the woman's thigh.

She panicked. That was the only explanation Jacen could come up with.