



Star Wars: Dark Nest, Volume 1: The Joiner King

By Troy Denning

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Seven years after their daring assault deep inside enemy territory (Star Wars: The New Jedi Order: Star by Star), Jaina Solo and her fellow survivors answer a mysterious call for help and vanish into the Unknown Regions. Soon, the Jedi Council learns that the group has undertaken a mission that will drive a wedge between the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances and its skittish ally, the Chiss Ascendancy. The investigation leads Luke Skywalker and his companions (Mara Jade Skywalker and Han and Leia Solo) on a perilous journey into the uncharted void that lies between what is right and what is wrong.

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Editorial Review

Review

"An interesting read" Watt's On

About the Author

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

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One

Evening had come to Unity Green, and the first hawk-bats were already out, dipping down to pluck yammal-jells and coufee eels from the rolling whitecaps on Liberation Lake. On the far shore, the yorik coral bluffs that marked the edge of the park had grown purple and shadowed. Beyond them, the durasteel skeletons of the rising skytowers gleamed crimson in the setting sun. The planet remained as much Yuuzhan'tar as Coruscant, and in many ways that would never change. But it was at peace. For the first time in Luke Skywalker's life, the galaxy was truly not at war—and that counted for everything.

There were still problems, of course. There always would be, and today several senior Masters were struggling to address the chaos that Jaina and four other young Jedi Knights had caused by abruptly abandoning their duties and departing for the Unknown Regions.

"Lowbacca was the only one who completely understood the biomechanics of the Maledoth," Corran Horn was saying in his throaty voice. "So, as you can see, the Ramoan relocation project has ground to a complete standstill."

Luke reluctantly shifted his gaze from the viewport to the council room's speaking circle, where Corran stood using a laser-wand to highlight the holographic projection of a huge Yuuzhan Vong slaveship. The Jedi order had been hoping to use the vessel to evacuate the population of a dying world.

Corran flicked the laserwand, and the holograph switched to the image of blast-pocked asteroid miner. "The situation in the Maltorian mining belt is deteriorating as well. Without Zekk there to lead the hunt, Three-Eye's pirates have the run of the system. Raw material shipments have fallen by fifty percent, and RePlanetHab is trying to buy them off."

"That's one circuit we need to kill now," Mara said. Seated in the chair next to Luke's, she was—as usual—the first to cut to the heart of the matter. That was one of the things Luke most admired about her; in a time when the smallest decision carried ramifications that even a Columi dejarik champion could not predict, his wife's instincts remained steady and true. "If rehab conglomerates start buying off pirates, we'll have marauders popping up all over the Core."

The other Masters voiced their agreement.

"Fine," Corran said. "Where do we find a replacement for Zekk?"

No one rushed to answer. The Jedi were spread too thin already, with most Jedi Knights—and even some apprentices—already assigned three tasks. And as the ranks of the greedy and the selfish grew ever more adept at manipulating the Galactic Alliance Senate, the situation seemed increasingly desperate.

Finally, Kyp Durren said, “The Solos should be finished on Borao soon.” Dressed in threadbare cape and tunic, wearing his brown hair long and shaggy, Kyp looked as though he had just come in from a long mission. He always looked like that. “Maybe RePlanetHab will be patient if they know they’re the Solos’ next assignment.”

The silence this time was even longer than the last. Strictly speaking, the Solos were not available for assignments. Han wasn’t even a Jedi, and Leia’s status was completely informal. The council just kept asking them to help out, they just kept doing it, and every Master in the room knew the order had been exploiting the Solos’ selfless natures for far too long.

“Someone else needs to contact them,” Mara finally said. “It’s getting so bad that Leia cringes whenever she sees Luke’s face on the holocomm.”

“I can do it,” Kyp offered. “I’m used to making Leia cringe.”

“That takes care of Maltoria,” Corran said. “Now, what about the Bothan ar’krai? Alema’s last report suggested that Reh’mwa and his fundamentalists had a line on Zonama Sekot’s location. They were provisioning the Avengeance for a scouting mission into the Unknown Regions.”

A subtle eddy in the Force drew Luke’s attention toward the entrance. He raised a hand to stop the discussion.

“Excuse me.” He turned toward the foyer and immersed his mind completely in the Force until he recognized one of the presences coming toward them, then said, “Perhaps we should continue this later. We don’t want Chief Omas to know how concerned we are about Jaina’s departure.”

“We don’t?”

“No.” Luke rose and started toward the door. “Especially not when he’s bringing Chiss.”

Luke stopped in the foyer area, where a simple wooden bench and two empty stone vases sat opposite the door, arranged to subtly calm visitors and make them feel welcome. Barely a moment passed before the door hissed open and a young apprentice came to a surprised halt directly in front of Luke.

“M-master S-skywalker!” the young Rodian stammered. He turned and raised a spindly-fingered hand toward the door. “Chief Omas and—”

“I know, Twool. Thank you.”

Luke nudged the youth back into the corridor with the other apprentice, then stepped into the doorway and found himself looking at Chief of State Cal Omas and a trio of blue-skinned Chiss. With a wrinkled face and sagging jowls, the Chiss in front was probably the oldest Luke had ever seen. The two in the rear were clearly bodyguards—tall, strong, alert, and dressed in the black uniforms of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet.

“Chief Omas,” Luke said. The strains of Omas’s office showed in his hollow cheeks and ashen complexion. “Welcome.”

“You’re expecting us.” Omas cast a pointed glance into the conference room. “Good.”

Luke ignored the hint and bowed to the elderly Chiss.

“And Aristocra . . .” It took a moment for the name to rise to the top of Omas’s mind, where Luke could sense it without being overly intrusive. “Mitt’swe’kleoni. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

The Chiss’s red eyes narrowed to crimson lines. “Very impressive. It’s not easy to gather identity files on Chiss aristocracy.”

“We haven’t,” Luke smiled and continued to block the door. “You and your bodyguards are welcome to come inside, once you have removed your hidden weapons.”

Omas cringed visibly, but Luke did not move. Even had he not perceived the concealed weapons through the Force, he still would have made the request. These were Chiss, after all.

“As you know,” Luke continued, “the only weapons allowed in the Jedi Temple are lightsabers.”

Mitt’swe’kleoni smiled like an old man caught sipping something against his doctor’s orders, then pulled a small hold-out blaster from his boot and passed it to a bodyguard.

“My bodyguards will wait in the corridor,” he said. “I can see they wouldn’t be of much use in a room full of Jedi.”

“There would be no need.” Luke stepped aside and waved the two statesmen toward the conference circle. “Please join us.”

As they crossed the room, Mitt’swe’kleoni kept sneaking glances at its appointments—the automated service kitchen, the small forest of rare trebala plants, the flowform chairs—and the arrogance vanished from his demeanor. It was not a reaction Luke liked to see. The new Temple had been a gift from the Galactic Alliance, pressed on the Jedi when—in a desperate attempt to manufacture a symbol of progress—the faltering Reconstruction Authority had moved the seat of government back to Coruscant. In most regards, the relocation had failed as spectacularly as it had deserved. But the Temple, a stone-and-transparisteel pyramid designed to harmonize with the new face of postwar Coruscant, never failed to impress with its regal scale and Rebirth architecture. It also served as a constant reminder to Luke of his greatest fear, that the Jedi would start to perceive themselves through the eyes of others and become little more than the guardians of a grateful Galactic Alliance.

At the conference area, the Jedi Masters rose to greet their guests.

“Everyone knows Chief Omas, I think,” Luke motioned Omas into a chair, then took Mitt’swe’kleoni by the elbow and guided him into the sunken speaking circle. “This is Aristocra Mitt’swe’kleoni from the Chiss empire.”

“Please use my core name, Tswek,” the Aristocra instructed. “It will be much easier for you to pronounce correctly.”

“Of course,” Luke said, continuing to look at the council. “Tswек has some disturbing news for us, I believe.”

Tswек’s wrinkled brow rose, but he no longer seemed surprised by Luke’s “intuition.” “Then you know the purpose of my visit?”

“We can sense your apprehension through the Force,” Luke said, avoiding a direct answer. “I assume it concerns our Jedi in the Unknown Regions.”

“Indeed it does,” he said. “The Chiss Ascendancy requires an explanation.”

“An explanation?” Corran was not quite able to conceal his indignation. “Of what?”

Tswек pointedly ignored Corran and continued to stare at Luke.

“The Jedi have many voices, Aristocra,” Luke said. “But we speak as one.”

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